

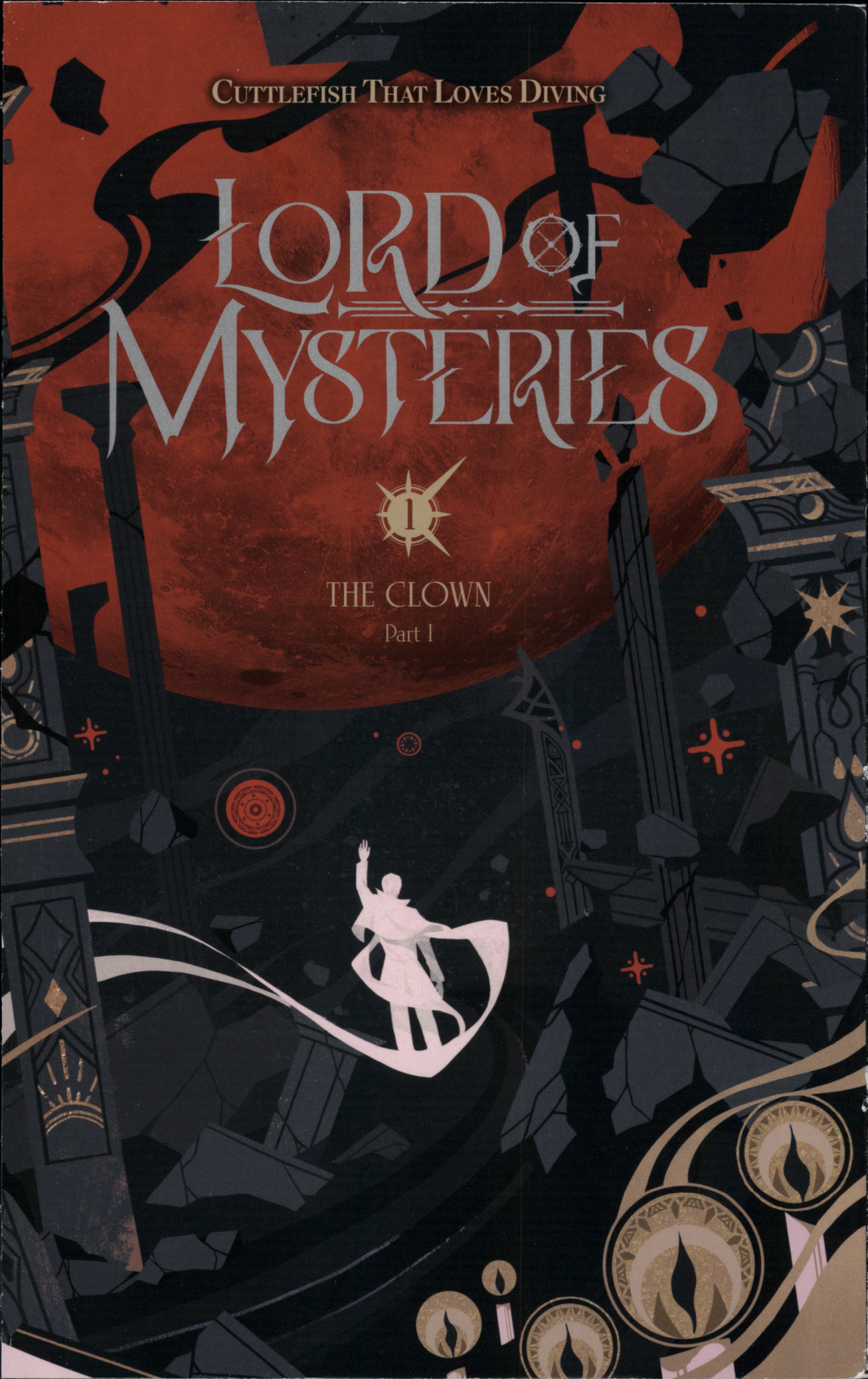
CUTTLEFISH THAT LOVES DIVING

LORD OF MYSTERIES



THE CLOWN

Part I



US \$20.00

CAN \$26.00



In the storm of steam and machinery, who can achieve the extraordinary? In the fog of history and darkness, who whispers? When Zhou Mingrui wakes up bloody and dazed, he finds himself in a world of guns, factories, airships, and difference engines. But underneath the surface of all this industry, there exists a secret society revolving around potions, divination, scaled artifacts, and much more. As Zhou Mingrui tries to find out what brought him to this place, he quickly learns that mystery is lurking around every corner—and danger is never far behind! This is the legend of the Fool...

LORD OF MYSTERIES

THE CLOWN Part I



LORD OF MYSTERIES



Everything begins with playing, so welcome to the journey of the Fool.

Let's start from zero, return to the initial state, and restart life.

Don't be serious, and don't be afraid of the unknown. Experience is the only purpose of life. You already know this is acting, so let yourself go, and sing with the Fool.



O

Nothing has yet begun.

The Fool breaks free from the tapestry of fate and sets out on his journey.

He will continue until the world reaches completion.

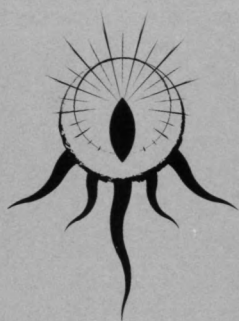
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NEW YORK

LORD OF MYSTERIES

CUTTLEFISH THAT LOVES DIVING

TRANSLATION BY WEBNOVEL * COVER ART BY OSSS

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

《诡秘之主》 <Lord of Mysteries>

Volume 1

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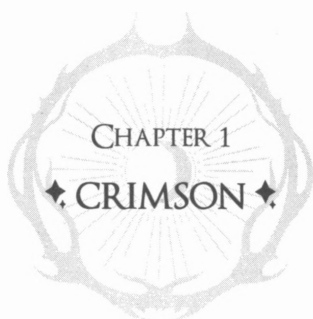
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LORD OF MYSTERIES



THE CLOWN

Part I



Ouch!

This hurts!

My head is killing me!

The bizarre, murmur-filled dream shattered at once. Zhou Mingrui, still asleep, felt a throbbing pain in his head as if someone had whacked him with a club—no, it was more like a sharp object had punctured his temple and scrambled the insides of his skull!

Ugh... Mind in a daze, Zhou Mingrui wanted to turn over, hold his head, or sit up, but he couldn't move his limbs at all. He seemed to have lost control of his body.

Seems like I'm still dreaming... It won't be long before I think I'm awake when I'm actually still sleeping...

Zhou Mingrui, while used to such disorienting experiences, struggled to focus and break free from the shackles of darkness and confusion.

But in this half-awake state, it was hard to focus. His mind felt as insubstantial as a wisp of fog—there one moment and gone the next. It refused to be reined in. No matter how hard he tried, his focus kept slipping away as random thoughts and intrusive notions bubbled up to the surface.

Why did I get such a terrible headache in the middle of the night?

It's so painful, too!

It better not be a hemorrhage or something...

Shit, am I going to die young, in the prime of my life?

Wake up, me! Come on!

Huh? It doesn't seem to hurt as much as before, but it still feels like a blunt knife is slowly sawing through my brain...

I probably can't go back to sleep now. How am I supposed to go to work tomorrow?

Why am I even thinking about work? My head is absolutely killing me. I should definitely take the day off! That way, I won't have to worry about my manager nagging me!

Now that I think about it, that's really not a bad idea. Hee-hee, I can finally have some free time!

Amid the waves of throbbing pain, Zhou Mingrui managed to gather himself slowly. Finally, he straightened up and opened his eyes, breaking free from his reverie.

His vision, blurry at first, soon took on a faint crimson tinge. As his sight cleared, he saw a wooden desk with an open notebook on it. Its paper was coarse and yellowed. An eye-catching sentence was written in a strange script across the top of the page in jet-black ink.

To the left of the notebook sat a stack of neatly arranged books, about seven or eight of them. To the right of the desk, grayish-white pipes embedded in the wall led to a lamp. The lamp's design was classically European, about half the size of an adult's head, and its transparent glass housing was encased in a black metal lattice.

Off to one side, underneath the extinguished wall lamp, sat a black ink bottle bathed in a pale red glow. It was embossed with what seemed like an approximation of an angel. In front of the ink bottle and right by the notebook lay a fountain pen with a dark, rounded body. Its tip shimmered faintly, and its cap rested next to what seemed to be a brass revolver.

A gun? Zhou Mingrui was stunned. He had never seen any of these things before, and this definitely wasn't his room.

In his shock and confusion, he noticed that a thin layer of crimson

had been draped over everything: the desk, notebook, ink bottle, and revolver. This “veil” was the light spilling through the window.

He lifted his head instinctively, his gaze slowly inching upward.

High in the sky, against a night as dark as black velvet curtains, hung a crimson moon, shining silently.

Wha—?

An inexplicable terror seized him. Zhou Mingrui sprang to his feet, but before he could fully straighten his legs, another throbbing headache overwhelmed him. In a brief moment of weakness, he fell hard on the hard wooden chair behind him.

Thud!

It smarted, but there didn’t seem to be any serious damage. Zhou Mingrui placed his hands on the table and pushed himself up, then turned around in a panic to examine his surroundings.

It was a small room with brown doors on the walls to either side of him and a wooden bunk bed sitting against the far wall.

Between the bed and the door on the left sat a cabinet with double doors on top and five drawers below.

On the wall next to the cabinet, at about the height of a person, was another grayish-white pipe connected to a strange mechanical contraption with gears and bearings peeking out in places.

Piled in the corner of the room near the desk was what looked like a coal stove and kitchenware, specifically a soup pot and an iron pan.

On the right-hand side of the wall, past the door, stood a full-length mirror with two cracks in it. Its wooden base was adorned with simple, plain patterns. A quick glance at the mirror revealed his reflection—black hair, brown eyes, a linen shirt over a thin build, with average but deep-set features...

I...

Zhou Mingrui drew in a sharp breath as a host of jumbled conjectures flooded his mind, rendering him helpless and confused.

The revolver, the classical European decor, and the crimson moon that clearly wasn’t the Earth’s moon all pointed to one thing!

C-could I have transmigrated? Zhou Mingrui's mouth slowly dropped open.

He had grown up reading web novels and often fantasized about such scenarios. But now that it may have actually happened, he found it hard to accept at face value.

Almost a full minute later, Zhou Mingrui, trying to find some humor in his situation, muttered to himself, "Maybe this is what people mean when they say to be careful what you wish for..."

If it weren't for the persistent headache keeping his thoughts sharp, he would have suspected he was still dreaming.

Calm down, calm down... Zhou Mingrui took a few deep breaths, trying hard to suppress his panic.

Right as he managed to regain a semblance of calm, unfamiliar memories started bubbling to the surface.

Klein Moretti—a citizen of the Northern Continent's Loen Kingdom who lived in the city of Tingen in Awashire. He had recently graduated from the history department at Khoy University...

His father was a sergeant in the Imperial Army who died in a colonial conflict on the Southern Continent. The bereavement benefits his family received allowed Klein the chance to attend a private grammar school, laying the foundation for his eventual admission to a university...

His mother was a follower of the Evernight Goddess. She passed away the year Klein took the entrance examination for Khoy University and got in...

He also had an older brother and a younger sister who lived with him in a two-bedroom flat...

They were not well off—struggling, in fact. His brother, who worked as a desk clerk at a trading company, was their household's sole breadwinner...

As a student of history, Klein had learned Ancient Feysac—considered the source of all languages on the Northern Continent—and Hermes, a language associated with rituals and prayers and often found scrawled in ancient mausoleums...

Hermes? Something stirred in Zhou Mingrui's mind. Pressing a hand against his throbbing temple, he turned his attention toward the open notebook on the desk. The text on the yellowed paper gradually underwent a change from bizarre to unfamiliar, then from unfamiliar to recognizable, until it eventually became decipherable.

That line of text was written in *Hermes*!

In jet-black ink, it read:

Everyone will die, including me.

Gasping in inexplicable horror, Zhou Mingrui leaned back as he reflexively tried to distance himself from the notebook and the text on it.

His body was so weak he nearly fell over, but he managed to grab the edge of the table to support himself. The air seemed to hum restlessly. He thought he could hear faint whispers all around him. It reminded Zhou Mingrui of how he felt listening to grown-ups tell horror stories when he was young.

He shook his head, telling himself it was only an illusion, and tore his eyes away from the notebook. He took deep breaths and tried to steady himself.

Then his gaze landed on the shiny brass revolver. A new question popped into his mind: Given the Moretti family's financial situation, how had he managed to get his hands on a revolver? They certainly couldn't afford to buy one.

Zhou Mingrui frowned.

While deep in thought, his eyes were drawn to half of a red handprint on the edge of the table—it hadn't been there before. It was darker and more substantial than the crimson moonlight.

A bloody handprint!

Zhou Mingrui subconsciously turned over his right hand—the one that had been gripping the edge of the table. Looking down, he realized his palm and fingers were slick with blood.

The throbbing pain in his head persisted, though it was weaker than before.

Did I hit my head? Zhou Mingrui wondered as he turned around

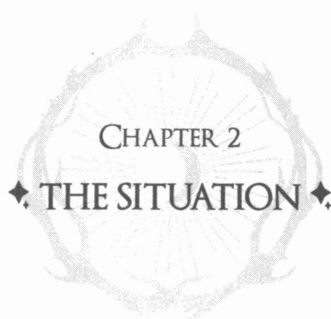
and walked toward the mirror. It only took a few steps for a man of medium build with black hair and brown eyes to come into view. The person in the mirror had a distinctly scholarly air.

Is this me? Klein Moretti?

Zhou Mingrui paused. There wasn't enough light at this late hour for him to see clearly, so he moved forward until he was just a step away from the mirror.

Under the hazy, crimson light of the moon, he turned his head to one side to get a look at his temple.

His reflection showed a grotesque wound at the corner of his forehead, its edges visibly burnt and caked with blood.



Thump! Thump! Thump!

Zhou Mingrui stumbled back several steps in fear. It was almost like the person in the mirror was not himself but a desiccated corpse.

How could anyone with such a horrific injury still be alive?!

He turned his head in disbelief as he checked the other side. Despite the distance and the poor lighting, he could still make out the exit wound and dark blood residue.

"I..."

Zhou Mingrui drew in a deep breath as he tried hard to calm himself.

He pressed his hand against the left side of his chest, feeling his racing heart—pounding vigorously and full of life—through his shirt. Then he touched his bare skin. Unmistakable warmth flowed beneath the surface that was slightly cool to the touch. After he briefly squatted down and verified that his knees worked, Zhou Mingrui stood up again, much calmer now.

"What is this?" he muttered with a frown. He wanted to inspect his head injury more thoroughly.

He took two steps forward before pausing in his tracks—the weak light of the blood moon was insufficient for a "thorough inspection."

This thought triggered a memory fragment, compelling Zhou

Mingrui to turn to the grayish-white pipes and the latticed lamp on the wall right by the desk.

It was a modern gas lamp, with a stable flame and excellent illumination capabilities.

Given what he knew of Klein Moretti's family situation, even a kerosene lamp was a dream, much less a gas lamp. Using candles would be more befitting of their socioeconomic standing. However, back when he burned the midnight oil four years ago to be admitted into Khoy University, Benson, his older brother, insisted on providing a conducive studying environment for Klein even if it meant taking on debt. He fully believed it was an important matter that would decide their family's future.

Of course, Benson, who was both literate and had been working for several years, was not one to act rashly without thinking ahead. He had quite a few tricks up his sleeve. That was how he cajoled the landlord into paying for basic renovations, using the argument that "installing gas pipes would raise the flat's property value and help secure future rentals." Then, taking advantage of his job at a trading company, Benson purchased the newest model of gas lamp at nearly cost price. In the end, he only dipped into his savings and didn't need to take out any loans.

After that memory flashed in his mind, Zhou Mingrui went over to the desk and proceeded to open the pipe's valve and twist the knob on the gas lamp to turn it on.

Click, click, click.

The igniter made a sound, but the light did not bloom as Zhou Mingrui had expected.

Click, click, click.

He twisted the knob a few more times, but the gas lamp remained dark.

"Hmm..." Retracting his hand and pressing it against his left temple, Zhou Mingrui attempted to find another memory fragment that would reveal the root of the problem.

A few seconds later, he turned around and walked over to the main

door. Beside it was a mechanical contraption embedded in the wall and connected to the grayish-white pipes.

A gas meter!

Glancing at the exposed gears and bearings, Zhou Mingrui fished out a coin from a pocket in his trousers. It was dark yellow in color, with a bronze shimmer to it. The front of the coin was engraved with a portrait of a man wearing a crown, and on the back was a *1* surrounded by stalks of wheat.

Zhou Mingrui knew this was the most basic unit of currency in the Loen Kingdom—a copper penny. The purchasing power of one penny roughly equaled three to four yuan in his original world. Such copper coins also came in other denominations, such as the farthing, the halfpenny, and the fivence. An unfortunate reality was that these denominations were not granular enough. In everyday life, one often had to buy several different things just to spend a single coin.

This particular coin had only been put into circulation after King George III ascended to the throne. Zhou Mingrui rolled it between his fingers a few times before inserting it into the thin slit on the gas meter.

Tink! Tink!

The sound of the penny tumbling to the bottom of the meter was followed by the clanks of turning gears, producing a short but melodious mechanical rhythm.

Zhou Mingrui stared at the meter for a few seconds before returning to the wooden desk. He reached out to twist the knob on the gas lamp again.

Click, click, click, pop!

A spark rapidly grew into a flame. The bright light it produced permeated the interior of the lamp and shot through the transparent glass, filling the room with a warm glow.

As darkness quickly receded and the crimson retreated out the window, Zhou Mingrui somehow felt more at ease. He quickly walked over to the full-length mirror again.

This time, he carefully inspected his temple.

After checking every detail he could think of, Zhou Mingrui realized that apart from the already present patches of blood, there was no liquid seeping out of the grotesque wound, as if it had received the best first aid treatment. The slowly squirming grayish-white brain matter, the discernible growth of flesh, and the gleam of fresh blood around the wound also seemed to indicate that in the next thirty to forty minutes, or maybe two to three hours, a light scar would be all that remained.

"The restorative effect of transmigration?" Zhou Mingrui muttered to himself, smirking slightly.

He let out a long sigh. There was still so much he didn't know, but at least he was still alive!

After settling his mind, he pulled open a drawer and took out a small piece of soap. Then he grabbed one of the old and tattered towels hanging by the side of the cabinet and opened the door before walking to the communal bathroom for tenants on the second floor.

I should clean up so I don't go around looking like a crime scene. I don't mind scaring myself, but it would be awful if I scared my sister, Melissa. She usually gets up early in the morning.

The corridor outside was pitch-black. The crimson moonlight spilling inside through the window at the end of the hallway gave only enough light to make out the vaguest of shapes in the darkness, making it seem like a pair of monster eyes silently observed the living late into the night.

With his heart in his throat, Zhou Mingrui tried to stay perfectly quiet as he walked toward the communal bathroom.

The moonlight was brighter inside, allowing him to see everything clearly. Zhou Mingrui stood in front of a washbasin and turned on the tap. The gushing sound of water reminded him suddenly of his landlord, Mr. Franky.

Water was included in the rent, but the short and skinny landlord, who wore a top hat, a vest, and a black suit, often inspected the handful of bathrooms keenly, listening for the sounds of flowing water inside. If the water gushed too loudly, Mr. Franky would set aside

any gentlemanly manners by flailing his walking stick and striking the bathroom door while shouting a variety of phrases. "Darn thief!" "Wastage is a shameful thing." "I'll remember you." "If I hear this one more time, you better scam with your filthy luggage!" One of his favorites was, "Mark my words, this is the best flat in Tingen for what you lot are paying. You'll not find a more generous landlord anywhere else!"

Putting away these thoughts, Zhou Mingrui wet his towel and began to wipe away the blood on his face, rubbing the same spot over and over.

After checking himself in the bathroom's grimy mirror and verifying that all that was left was the hideous wound and his pale face, Zhou Mingrui relaxed considerably. Then he took off his linen shirt and used the bar of soap to scrub away the bloodstains on it.

Suddenly, he knitted his brows as another problem occurred to him.

The wound was too severe, and there was too much blood. Apart from his body, his room likely still had evidence of his injury!

A few minutes later, after Zhou Mingrui was done with his linen shirt, he briskly walked back to his apartment with his towel. He first wiped up the bloody handprint on the desk, and then, by the light of the gas lamp, he searched for any spots he might've missed.

He immediately discovered a number of blood splatters on the floor beneath the desk. Moreover, there was a yellow bullet sunken into the wall on his left-hand side.

"...The revolver fired while pointed at my temple?" Piecing together the clues from before, Zhou Mingrui began to get a rough idea of how Klein had died.

He was in no hurry to verify his theory. Instead, he diligently wiped away the blood evidence and cleaned up the scene. Only then did he extract the bullet from the wall and return to his desk, where he opened the revolver's cylinder and emptied the chambers.

There were a total of five rounds and an empty casing, all with a brass luster to them.

“Just as I thought...” Zhou Mingrui looked at the empty casing in front of him and stuffed the rounds back into the cylinder, nodding to himself.

His gaze shifted to the left and landed on the words on the notebook: *Everyone will die, including me.* Even more questions arose in him.

Where did the gun come from?

Was it suicide or a faked suicide?

What kind of trouble could someone of humble origins with a history degree get himself into?

How could such a suicide method leave behind so little blood? Was it because my timely transmigration came with healing benefits?

After a moment of contemplation, Zhou Mingrui changed into another linen shirt. He sat on the chair and began mulling over more important matters.

Klein's experience was not his main source of concern at the moment. The real problem was figuring out the reason behind his transmigration and if he could return!

His parents, relatives, best buddies, and friends. The colorful and fascinating internet and all sorts of delicious food... These were all compelling reasons to return home!

Click. Click. Click...

With his right hand, Zhou Mingrui absentmindedly swung open the revolver's cylinder and flicked it back into place. Over and over.

Hmm. I don't remember doing anything out of the ordinary. All I can think of is that I've been a little unlucky lately—that's all. What could possibly explain waking up in a different world?

Unlucky... Right, I remember now! I tried a luck-enhancement ritual before dinner today!

That thought flashed across Zhou Mingrui's mind, illuminating the memories concealed behind a fog of confusion.

As a qualified keyboard politician, keyboard historian, keyboard economist, keyboard biologist, and keyboard folklorist, he had

always proclaimed to “know a bit of everything.” Of course, his best buddies would often use the same words to mock him.

And included in that everything was Chinese Divination.

When he visited his hometown last year, he discovered a thread-bound book with a vertical layout titled *The Quintessential Secret Divinations of the Qin and Han Dynasty* at an old sidewalk bookstand. It had looked pretty interesting, so he bought it, thinking it could aid him in future online discussions. Unfortunately, his interest was short-lived. The vertical layout it used made the reading experience horrible. All he did was flip through the beginning pages before he tossed it into a corner and forgot about it.

It wasn't until he'd experienced a spate of bad luck in the past month, including losing his cell phone, losing his clients, and making mistakes at work, that he suddenly recalled the luck-enhancement ritual at the beginning of *The Quintessential Secret Divinations of the Qin and Han Dynasty*. Furthermore, the requirements of the ritual were extremely simple and needed no basic foundational knowledge.

All he needed was four portions of a regional staple food and to place them in the four corners of his room. They could be placed on furniture such as tables and cupboards. Then, standing in the middle of the room, he had to take four steps in a counterclockwise direction to make a square.

The first step required him to chant “The Immortal Lord of Heaven and Earth for Blessings.”

The second step was to silently chant “The Sky Lord of Heaven and Earth for Blessings.”

The third step was “The Exalted Thearch of Heaven and Earth for Blessings.”

And the fourth step was “The Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings.”

After these four steps were taken, he needed to close his eyes and wait five minutes in his original spot. Only then would the ritual be considered complete.

Thinking that it couldn't hurt, he retrieved the book, followed the instructions, and performed the ritual before dinner. And then...

And then nothing.

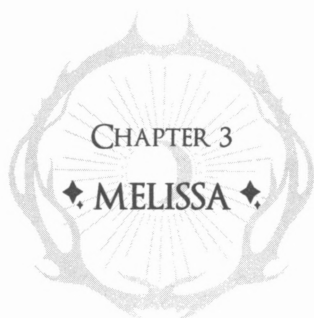
Who would have guessed that he would actually transmigrate in the middle of the night?

Transmigration!

There is a distinct possibility it's due to that luck-enhancement ritual... Yes, I should give it a try here tomorrow. If that's really the key, then there's a chance of transmigrating back!

Zhou Mingrui stopped flicking the revolver's cylinder and bolted up in his seat.

No matter how impossible it seemed, he had to give it a try!



Now that he had a plan, Zhou Mingrui immediately felt much better. All of his fear and unease were swept away.

Only then did he have the mental wherewithal to examine the fragments of Klein's memory in detail.

As he ruminated, Zhou Mingrui stood up out of habit and closed the valve on the pipe. He watched the wall lamp gradually dim until its flame extinguished before sitting back down. As he absent-mindedly fiddled with the revolver's brass cylinder, he pressed a hand to the side of his head, slowly flipping through his memories in the crimson-dyed darkness as though he were the most attentive viewer in a movie theater.

Perhaps as a result of a bullet passing through his head, Klein's memories were like countless shards of shattered glass. Not only were the memories disconnected, but many spots were clearly missing. For example, where had the exquisitely crafted revolver come from? Did he commit suicide, or was he killed? What was the meaning of the words in the notebook: *Everyone will die, including me*? And did he engage in any strange business in the days leading up to the incident?

Not only were these particular memories fragmented and incomplete, but the knowledge he should have had was similarly affected. Zhou Mingrui believed that if Klein were to return to university in

his current state, he was unlikely to graduate. This was despite him having left school only days ago without relaxing one bit.

A job interview for Tingen University's history department in two days...

The universities in the Loen Kingdom do not customarily hand out offers to their graduating students automatically... My mentor wrote me a recommendation letter for Tingen University and Backlund University...

...

As he silently flipped through the reels of his memory, the crimson moon outside the window descended slowly in the western sky. A faint light glowed from the east, dyeing the horizon golden.

Just then, he heard shuffling sounds coming from the adjoining room. Soon, the sound of footsteps approached the door.

Melissa is awake... She really is as punctual as always. He smiled with a warmth influenced by Klein's memories. He felt as though Melissa really was his younger sister.

Of course, I don't have a younger sister... he mused to himself.

Unlike Benson and Klein, Melissa never attended the Sunday school classes offered by the Church of Evernight during her elementary education. When she reached schooling age, the Loen Kingdom enacted the Basic Education Law, which established a primary and secondary education committee and dedicated funding for the program, increasing the kingdom's investment in education.

In less than three years, after co-opting numerous church schools, the kingdom established many public primary schools. They strictly maintained a secular curriculum, distancing themselves from any conflicts between the churches of the Lord of Storms, the Evernight Goddess, and the God of Steam and Machinery.

Compared to Sunday school, which cost one copper penny a week, a public primary school's tuition of three pence a week seemed rather expensive. However, the former provided education only on Sundays, whereas the latter held classes six days a week. As a result, the price was so low that it was almost free.

Melissa were different from most girls. From a young age, she had

enjoyed things like gears, springs, and bearings. Her ambition was to be a steam mechanic.

Benson, having suffered from his own lack of education and understanding its importance, supported his sister's dreams just as he had supported Klein's university education. After all, Tingen Technical School only counted as secondary education. There was no need for her to attend grammar school or a public middle school as a prerequisite.

In July last year, fifteen-year-old Melissa passed her entrance examinations and fulfilled her dream of studying at in Tingen Technical School's steam and machinery department. Accordingly, her weekly tuition had increased to nine pence.

Meanwhile, Benson's company, affected by the political situation on the Southern Continent, experienced a drastic drop in both profit and business. More than a third of the employees had been laid off. In order to keep his job and maintain their livelihood, Benson had no choice but to accept more arduous tasks, frequently working overtime or going on business trips to places with harsh climates. That was where he had spent the past few days.

Of course, Klein had wanted to share his elder brother's burden, but as a commoner who had attended only an average grammar school, he felt a strong sense of inadequacy once he entered university. For example, as the origin of all languages on the Northern Continent, the ancient language of Feysac was something that all children of nobles and the wealthy learned from a young age. Meanwhile, his first contact with it was in university.

He faced many similar concerns throughout his schooling. Klein had devoted himself to his studies, often staying up late into the night and waking up early to keep up with his peers, and eventually graduated with average performance.

Memories of his older brother and younger sister flashed through Zhou Mingrui's mind until he heard the doorknob turn and the door begin to creak open. Only then did he jolt awake and remember that he held a revolver in his hand.

This is technically a regulated item!

And something that's guaranteed to scare children!

Plus, there's still the wound on my head!

With Melissa arriving at any moment, Zhou Mingrui kept a hand on his temple and hurriedly pulled open a desk drawer. He threw the revolver into it before slamming it shut.

"What's going on?" Melissa glanced over curiously when she heard the commotion. She was in the prime of her youth. Even though a lack of nutrition made her face thin and pale, her skin was glowing, exuding the spirit of a youthful girl.

When Zhou Mingrui saw his sister's brown eyes on him, he forced himself to remain composed as he picked something up before calmly closing the drawer to hide the revolver. His other hand on his temple confirmed that the wound had already healed!

What he had taken from the drawer was a silver pocket watch embellished with a vine-leaf motif. He gently pressed the dial at the top, flipping its cover open. It was the most valuable item left behind by their late father, a sergeant in the Imperial Army. But as it had been purchased secondhand, the timepiece often malfunctioned in recent years, even though they'd taken it to a watchmaker for repairs. After its poor reliability repeatedly embarrassed Benson, who enjoyed carrying it to elevate his status, it was finally cast aside at home.

It was worth mentioning that Melissa did have something of a talent for machinery. After figuring out how the timepiece's mechanisms worked, she borrowed tools from her technical school and started to fiddle with the pocket watch. Recently, she even claimed to have fixed it.

Zhou Mingrui looked at the watch's open cover and saw that the second hand wasn't moving. Instinctively, he twisted the top dial to wind it up. However, despite turning it several times, he didn't hear the sound of springs tightening; the second hand remained motionless.

"Looks like it's broken again." He glanced at his sister, trying to find something to say.

Melissa shot him an impassive glance and briskly walked over to take the pocket watch.

She pulled on the dial at the top of the watch. With a few simple turns, the *ticktock* of the second hand started up.

But isn't pulling the button up usually done to adjust the time?

Zhou Mingrui's expression froze.

At that moment, a bell in a distant cathedral chimed six times, sounding faraway and ethereal. Melissa tilted her head as she listened, then pulled the dial up once again. Now she twisted it to synchronize the time.

"All better," she said simply before pressing the top dial down and handing the watch back to Zhou Mingrui. He returned an awkward yet polite smile.

Melissa gave her brother a long look before turning to walk to the cabinet, where she picked up her toiletries before leaving for the communal bathroom.

Why did her expression seem to contain a look of disparagement and resignation? Is it a look of love and concern for her dunce of a brother?

Zhou Mingrui lowered his head and chuckled. He snapped the pocket watch shut before opening it again. Repeating this movement, his thoughts wandered until one question struck him. Without a silencer, Klein's suicide—well, presumed suicide—should have made quite the noise. Yet Melissa, who was just a wall away, hadn't noticed it at all. Was she sleeping too deeply? Or was Klein's suicide shrouded in mystery from the start?

Click! The pocket watch opened. *Clack!* The pocket watch closed... Melissa returned from washing up to see her brother's idle act of repeatedly opening and closing the watch. Her gaze once again filled with exasperation as she said in a sweet voice, "Klein, take out all the bread we have left. Remember to buy a fresh loaf today. And meat and peas, too. Your interview is coming up. I'll make you lamb and pea stew."

As she spoke, she moved the stove from the corner. She started a fire with some leftover charcoal and placed a pot of water on it.

Before the water boiled, she opened the lowest drawer of the cabinet and carefully took out a can of low-grade tea leaves as if it were a treasure. She tossed about ten leaves into the pot and treated it like the genuine article. Then she poured two large cups for each of them and shared two hunks of rye bread with Zhou Mingrui over tea.

Though the bread was free of sawdust and had minimal gluten additives, the taste wasn't particularly good. However, Zhou Mingrui was positively famished in his weakened state. He kept his complaints to himself as he forced the bread down his throat with the help of the tea.

Melissa finished eating a few minutes later. Brushing her waist-length, black hair back, she turned toward Zhou Mingrui and said, "Remember to buy more bread. We only need eight pounds. It's getting warmer now, so it'll spoil if we buy too much. Lamb and peas, too—don't forget!" Repeating herself to drive the point home was a special provision for her bookish older brother, who apparently lacked common sense... Zhou Mingrui smiled and nodded. "All right."

And as for what one pound meant in the Kingdom of Loen... Zhou Mingrui compared the memory stored in Klein's body with his own and concluded that it was close to one catty—a unit he was more familiar with—equal to half a kilogram.

With that, Melissa got up and started to collect her things. Before heading out, she packed the last loaf of rye as her lunch, put on the old, shabby cap that belonged to their late mother, and grabbed the briefcase she'd sewn herself to carry her books and writing supplies. It wasn't a Sunday, which meant she had a whole day of class ahead of her.

The walk from their home to Tingen Technical School took about fifty minutes. Though horse-drawn coaches were available at one penny per half mile (with a four-pence cap within the city bounds and a six-pence cap outside them) Melissa always set off early and walked to school. As she opened the door, she paused and half-turned to say, "Remember, Klein, don't buy too much lamb and peas.

Benson might not be back until Sunday. Oh, and don't forget—only eight pounds of bread.”

“Yes. All right,” Zhou Mingrui answered in resignation. At the same time, he repeated the word “Sunday” to himself a few times in his mind.

On the Northern Continent, as in his own world, one year was split into twelve months for a total of 365 or 366 days per year. Likewise, one week contained seven days. The former was a result of astronomy, which led Zhou Mingrui to think that this must be a parallel universe; the latter had its roots in religion, owing to the seven orthodox gods of the Northern Continent: the Eternal Blazing Sun, Lord of Storms, God of Knowledge and Wisdom, Evernight Goddess, Earth Mother, God of Combat, and God of Steam and Machinery.

After seeing Melissa off, Zhou Mingrui abruptly let out a breath of relief. His thoughts quickly shifted to the luck-enhancement ritual.

Sorry, but I really do want to go home...



He sat back in his chair and remained there until the bell in the distant church tolled seven times in a row. Only then did he stand up leisurely and walk to the cabinet.

After a change of clothes, the reflection in the mirror showed a young man sporting a black vest with a matching suit jacket, trousers that were a little tight around the ankles, and a short top hat. Paired with his faint bookish air, Zhou Mingrui thought his reflection resembled a character in a British TV show set in the Victorian era.

"I'm not going to a job interview, though. I'm only running an errand to get some groceries and ingredients for the luck-enhancement ritual..." he muttered quietly to himself, laughing and shaking his head. So concerned was Klein Moretti about the upcoming interview that it had become muscle memory. While Zhou Mingrui didn't give it much thought, he'd instinctively put on his only respectable outfit.

Exhaling, Zhou Mingrui removed his jacket and vest, switching them for an old brown coat. He topped it off with a matching bowler hat. Having made himself look presentable, he walked over to the bunk bed and lifted the mattress on the top bunk, reaching his hand into the inconspicuous tear on its underside. After some rummaging, he found its hidden compartment.

When he pulled his hand out again, there was a roll of banknotes

in it—about seven or eight with their inky green colors already fading to white. This was the entirety of Benson's life savings, including what they needed to cover their living expenses for the next three days. There were only two five-soli notes, with the rest being one-soli notes. In Loen, the soli was the second-highest currency, its origin in ancient silver coins. One soli was equal to twelve copper pennies and circulated in denominations of one and five. At the top of the currency system was the gold pound, which also came in banknotes and was backed by the eponymous precious metal. One gold pound was worth twenty soli and came in denominations of one, five, and ten.

Spreading out the notes in his hand, Zhou Mingrui took in the very faint whiff of oil and ink—the smell of *money*. It might have been the influence of Klein's memory fragments or even his own unwavering desire for money, but he instantly fell in love with these little bits of paper.

How exquisite their motifs that even King George III, with his little handlebar mustache and stern countenance, appeared so lovely; how alluring the watermark in the sunlight and the painstakingly designed anti-counterfeiting marks, which looked nothing like the tawdry forgeries!

He admired them for almost a minute, then took a pair of one-soli notes out of the stack before rolling up the rest and stuffing them back into the hiding place inside the mattress. After smoothing out the fraying edges of the tear in the mattress, he neatly folded the two bills and placed them inside the left pocket of his coat, separate from the copper pennies in his pants pocket. Once that was done, he slipped his keys into his right coat pocket, grabbed a large brown paper bag, and headed briskly for the door.

Clack, clack... Clack.

His footsteps slowed as he neared the door before finally coming to a stop. Zhou Mingrui stood there, his brow creased in a frown. With so many questions surrounding Klein's suicide still unanswered, if he simply went out like this without taking any precautions, would he get into an "accident"?

He pondered for a moment before returning to the desk and opening the drawer. Inside was the brass revolver, glistening in the light. It was certainly powerful...and it was the only means of self-defense he could think of. Sure, he'd never learned how to shoot a firearm before, but he figured the mere sight of this handgun would be a potent deterrent.

After running his fingers down the cold, metallic barrel, Zhou Mingrui put the gun in the same pocket as the banknotes. He instantly felt much safer with the notes pressed tightly in his palm and the grip of the revolver snug in his grasp. But as someone who had dabbled in a little bit of everything, another thought immediately surfaced: *What if it accidentally goes off?*

Among the number of ideas running through his mind, Zhou Mingrui quickly devised a solution. He pulled the gun back out, snapped it to the left to open the cylinder, and spun it until the chamber that had been emptied during his "suicide" was now aligned with the barrel. He snapped it closed again. This way, even if there was an accident, it wouldn't fire.

Stowing the gun away once more, Zhou Mingrui tucked his left hand into his pocket. With his right hand, he adjusted his hat before opening the door and marching out.

The hallway was dim even in the daytime, as only a meager amount of sunlight could make its way through the window at the end of the corridor. Zhou Mingrui kept a brisk pace as he walked down the stairs and out of the building. Only then did he feel the radiance and warmth of the sun.

It was almost July, which meant it was the height of summer. However, Tingen was situated on the northern end of the Kingdom of Loen and had its own unique climate. The highest annual temperature here wouldn't even reach the equivalent of eighty-six degrees Fahrenheit on Earth; mornings here were especially cool and crisp.

Parts of the street were overrun with fetid water and refuse. In Klein's memory, such sights were not rare in low-income neighborhoods—even those with functional sewer systems—due to the dense population and the necessities of life.

“Delicious fried tilapia—get it right here!”

“Steaming hot bowls of oyster stew! One in the morning will keep you going all day!”

“Fresh fish from the port—only five pence each!”

“Scones and eel soup with ginger ale!”

“Whelks! Come get your whelks!”

“Cheap farm produce, fresh from the countryside!”

...

Peddlers of vegetables, fruits, and ready-made food walked up and down the street, hollering and hawking their wares at the passersby hurrying past. Some would stop and carefully consider a purchase, while others impatiently waved the sellers off because they hadn't yet found a job to get them through the day.

A foul stench mingled with enticing aromas wafting through the air. Zhou Mingrui hunched over slightly as he crept his way down the crowded street. He kept his left hand pressed tightly against the revolver and the banknotes while his right hand held down his bowler hat. Thieves were an inevitable byproduct of such densely populated areas—especially on streets teeming with impoverished temporary workers in constant need of employment and hungry children lured into a life of pickpocketing.

Zhou Mingrui trudged on until the crowd around him thinned to a normal density. He straightened his back and raised his head again. Looking ahead, he saw an accordion player busking on the street, the music alternating between melodious and jaunty. Around the musician, a circle of children in tattered clothes had gathered, their faces sallow from malnutrition. They listened intently and moved their bodies in time to the tune, making up their own dance moves. Their faces lit up in joy, as if each were a little angel or prince.

A woman passed by; her face was devoid of expression, her skin dehydrated, and the hem of her skirt spattered with mud. Her eyes were similarly dull and lifeless, but when her gaze swept over the group of children, the faintest spark seemed to glimmer there as though she saw herself in them, only thirty years younger. Zhou

Mingrui walked past her and turned onto another street before stopping in front of Smyrin Bakery.

The owner of the bakery was Wendy Smyrin, an old woman in her seventies with a head of gray hair and a perpetually warm smile. From as far back as Klein could remember, she'd been selling bread and pastries here. She always made the best Tingen pies and lemon cakes... Zhou Mingrui salivated at the memory.

Smiling, he said to her, "Good day, Mrs. Smyrin. Eight pounds of rye bread, please."

"Ah, little Klein! But where is Benson? Is he not back yet?" she asked with a smile.

"He'll be back in a few days," he replied vaguely, avoiding any specifics.

"What a hardworking young man," Mrs. Smyrin remarked as she started measuring out loaves of rye. "He'll no doubt find himself a good wife." She grinned mischievously at him and continued, "Fortunately, you've finished school now—our very own graduate of Khoy University's history program! Yes, you'll be making money soon enough, and then you won't have to live in the kind of flat you're in now. At the very least, you'll need your own bathroom."

"How youthful and full of energy you are today, Mrs. Smyrin," Zhou Mingrui replied with an awkward smile.

"Bah! I've always been this young," she replied with good humor.

Mrs. Smyrin was right, though. If Klein could successfully pass his interview and become a lecturer at Tingen University, he and his siblings would be on the path to a more comfortable life.

In the fragments of his memory, there existed a fantasy of renting a detached house in the suburbs of the city. There would be five to six rooms upstairs, with two bathrooms and a large balcony. The ground floor would contain two more rooms, separate dining and living rooms, a kitchen, another bathroom, and an underground cellar.

It wasn't a pipe dream. Lecturers at Tingen University—even those on probation—started at two gold pounds a week. Once officially hired, their salary would be raised to three gold pounds and

ten soli. In comparison, Benson made only one gold pound and ten soli a week, even after years of working, whereas the weekly wage of a regular factory worker hovered around one pound. Meanwhile, the rent for the kind of detached house Klein dreamed of cost anywhere from nineteen soli to one pound and eighteen soli per month.

“It’s the difference between a monthly salary of four thousand yuan and fourteen thousand yuan...,” Zhou Mingrui muttered to himself.

Of course, all of that was predicated on him successfully passing the interview at either Tingen University or Backlund University. As for other options, people with no connections could never get recommended for government employment, and the opportunities afforded to history majors were even more limited. It wasn’t as if there was a great demand for private consultants for aristocrats, bankers, or industrial tycoons. Considering that Klein’s memories were not only fragmented but his wealth of knowledge had gotten scrambled as well, Zhou Mingrui felt sheepish and embarrassed in the face of Mrs. Smyrin’s high expectations.

After weighing them, Mrs. Smyrin placed sixteen loaves of rye bread into the paper bag Zhou Mingrui had brought and held out her hand. “Nine pence, please.”

Since each loaf weighed around half a pound, a small discrepancy in the price was to be expected.

“Ah, nine? Wasn’t it eleven pence a few days ago?” Zhou Mingrui blurted. And it cost fifteen the month before last.

“You’ve got the repeal of the Grain Act and those who marched for it to thank.” Mrs. Smyrin shrugged, smiling.

Zhou Mingrui nodded, though he didn’t quite understand. Klein’s memory of this was incomplete. He only knew that the Grain Act was enacted to protect domestic agricultural products, prohibiting the import of grain from southern nations like Feynapotter, Masin, and Lenburg until domestic prices inflated to a certain point. Why would people march against it?

But he didn’t pursue the matter. Afraid of accidentally pulling out the revolver, Zhou Mingrui carefully extracted the banknotes from

his trousers and handed one of them to Mrs. Smyrin. He stuffed his change of three pennies into his pocket before picking up his paper bag. Then he set off for the produce and meat markets the next street over, working hard for the lamb and peas his sister had ordered.

At the corner of Ironcross Street and Daffodil Street stood a town square. A number of tents had been erected there, with clowns in funny attire walking about and handing out flyers.

"Tomorrow evening... A circus performance?" Zhou Mingrui peered at a flyer in someone else's hand and read the gist of its content quietly to himself.

Melissa would love it, though he wondered how much the tickets cost. As the thought occurred to him, Zhou Mingrui stepped closer. He was about to ask one of the red-and-yellow painted clowns when he heard a raspy female voice nearby ask, "Would you like to try divination?"

Turning toward the voice, Zhou Mingrui saw a woman standing in front of a low tent. She wore a pointy hat and a long black dress. Her face, painted brightly in yellows and reds, featured deep blue-gray eyes.

"No," Zhou Mingrui said, shaking his head. He had no money to spare for fortune-telling.

The woman grinned. "My tarot cards are very accurate."

"Tarot..." Zhou Mingrui blinked. The pronunciation sounded surprisingly similar to the tarot cards back on Earth! Furthermore, the tarot cards in his old world were also tools for divination—pictographic cards, each imbued with symbolic significance.

But wait... He suddenly recalled the origin of tarot divination in this world. It didn't hail from the seven orthodox gods, nor was it a vestige of the ancient past. It was invented by one Roselle Gustav, then consul of the Intis Republic, over 170 years ago.

The same Mr. Gustav had invented the steam engine, improved the design of sailboats, and overthrown the monarchic rule of the Intis Kingdom. As such, he was recognized by the Church of the God of Craftsmanship and became the very first consul of the new republic.

After that, he initiated a series of wars across the land, bringing Lenburg and other surrounding states under his protection while forcing stronger nations in the Northern Continent—such as the Kingdom of Loen, the Feynapotter Empire, and the Feysac Empire—to bow at his feet. Thereafter, the republic became an empire, and Mr. Gustav crowned himself “Emperor Caesar.”

During Roselle Gustav’s rule, the Church of the God of Craftsmanship received its first publicized divine revelation since the fifth epoch, commanding that their deity be worshipped as the “God of Steam and Machinery.” Emperor Roselle also invented tarot card divination and established the arrangements and rules for various contemporary paper playing cards. Several of these games were familiar to Zhou Mingrui, such as Tractor, Fight the Landlord, Texas Hold’em, and Quint, to name a few. In addition, he sent fleets into the tempestuous sea that later discovered the passage to the Southern Continent, thus beginning the era of colonialism.

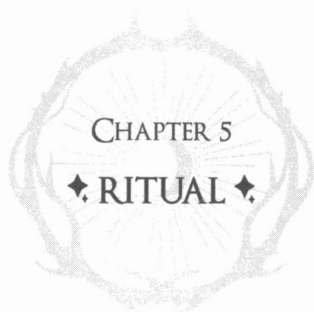
Unfortunately, he was betrayed in his old age. In the year 1198 of the fifth epoch, he was assassinated through an alliance between the Church of the Eternal Blazing Sun, the Soren royal family of the Intis Kingdom, and other aristocrats. He died in his White Maple Palace.

This...recollection of common knowledge made Zhou Mingrui a little uneasy.

Don’t tell me this great forefather was a transmigrator.

Zhou Mingrui felt a sudden urge to see what exactly these tarot cards looked like. Nodding to the painted woman in the pointy hat, he said, “Sure, I’ll give it a try if... Well, only if the price is right.”

The woman laughed. “Sir, you’re my first customer of the day. It’s on the house.”



Free? There's nothing more expensive than free! Zhou Mingrui bemoaned silently to himself, already composing his staunch refusals for any extraneous costs that might be tacked on later.

Go ahead and divine where I came from if you're so good!

With this in mind, Zhou Mingrui followed the woman with a painted face and ducked into the low tent.

The tent's interior was extremely dark, illuminated only by several beams of light that managed to seep inside. A table covered with paper cards could faintly be made out in the dimness.

The woman, who was wearing a pointy hat, was not at all affected by the darkness. She circled around the table, her long black dress moving as though it were gliding over water. She sat on the opposite side and lit a candle.

The dim yellow light flickered, causing the inside of the tent to appear both bright and dark at the same time, instantly creating a mysterious atmosphere.

Zhou Mingrui sat down quietly, his gaze sweeping over the tarot cards on the table. There he found familiar cards like "The Magician," "The Emperor," "The Hanged Man," and "Temperance."

Could Roselle have really been a forerunner from Earth...? I wonder if he hailed from the same place I did...the country of food lovers...

The corner of Zhou Mingrui's mouth twitched as he lost himself in thought.

Before he could get a closer look, the woman who claimed to deliver accurate divinations had already reached out to gather all the cards on the table. She stacked them into a deck and pushed the stack in front of him.

"Shuffle the cards and cut the deck," croaked the circus fortune teller.

"You want me to shuffle it?" Zhou Mingrui asked reflexively.

The yellow and red paint on the fortune teller's face seemed to squirm into a slight smile as she replied, "Of course. Everyone's destiny can only be unraveled by themselves. I simply serve as an interpreter."

Wary, Zhou Mingrui immediately questioned her, "The interpreting doesn't require additional fees, does it?"

As a keyboard folklorist, I've seen too many of these tricks!

The fortune teller was visibly taken aback before answering, her voice muffled, "It's free."

Relieved, Zhou Mingrui stuffed the revolver further down into his pocket. Then he calmly reached out with both hands to shuffle and cut the deck skillfully.

"Done." He placed the shuffled cards in the middle of the table.

The fortune teller clasped her hands together and carefully examined the cards for a moment. Then she suddenly said, "I'm sorry. I forgot to ask, but what would you like to inquire about?"

Back when he was pursuing his first love and failing, Zhou Mingrui had also done research on tarot cards. Without hesitation, he answered, "Past, present, and future."

It was a type of tarot card spread—three cards drawn sequentially respectively symbolized one's past, present, and future.

The fortune teller nodded, then donned a smile and said, "Then please reshuffle the deck. You can only truly get the cards you want if you know what you would like to ask about."

So you were fooling me just now...? Do you have to be this petty just because I insisted it had to be free?

A muscle in Zhou Mingrui's cheek twitched. He took a deep breath and retrieved the tarot deck to reshuffle and cut it once more.

"Is this okay now?" he asked, placing the cut deck back on the table.

"No problem." The fortune teller reached out and picked up a card from the top of the deck. She placed it to Zhou Mingrui's left. Her voice deepened as she said, "This card symbolizes the past."

Then she placed a second card in front of him. "This card symbolizes the present."

Finally, she picked up the third card and placed it to his right.

"This card symbolizes the future."

"All right, which card would you like to see first?" Having done all that, the fortune teller raised her head and gazed deeply at Zhou Mingrui with her gray-blue eyes.

"I'll have a look at the 'present' first," Zhou Mingrui said after a moment of thought.

The fortune teller nodded slowly and flipped over the tarot card directly in front of him.

The card depicted a finely dressed young figure wearing splendid headgear and carrying a stick over his shoulder. Hanging from the end of the stick was a bundle, and behind him trotted a puppy, tugging on his pants. The card was numbered "0."

"The Fool," the fortune teller quietly read, her gray-blue eyes fixed on Zhou Mingrui.

The Fool? The "0" card of tarot—a start, a fresh beginning brimming with possibilities? Zhou Mingrui, not even an amateur enthusiast of tarot, could only offer a rough interpretation based on his own vague impressions.

Just as the fortune teller was about to say something, the tent flap suddenly opened. The sunlight was so blinding that Zhou Mingrui instinctively narrowed his eyes, even though he was facing away from the opening.

"Why are you impersonating me again?! Divination is my job!" a woman's voice growled. "Go back to your own post! You're just an animal trainer, remember?!"

An animal trainer? By now, Zhou Mingrui's eyes had adjusted to the light. He saw a woman wearing a sharp pointy hat and a black dress, her face also painted in red and yellow. The only differences were that she was taller and had a slimmer physique.

The woman seated in front of him hurried over and said disgruntledly, "Don't mind this. It's just my hobby. But I have to say, my divination and interpretation can be really accurate sometimes. I'm serious..."

As she spoke, she lifted the hem of her dress to go around the side of the table before hurrying out of the tent.

"Sir, would you like me to interpret your cards for you?" the real fortune teller asked with a smile as she looked at Zhou Mingrui.

Zhou Mingrui's lips twitched as he asked sincerely, "Is it free?"

"...No," the real fortune teller answered.

"Then forget it." Zhou Mingrui withdrew his hands and placed them into his pockets. Clutching his revolver and money, he stooped to exit the tent.

Dammit! He'd just had an animal trainer posing as his fortune teller!

Did this mean that animal trainers who didn't want to be fortune tellers were unqualified clowns?

Zhou Mingrui quickly put the matter behind him. He spent seven pence at the produce and meat markets for a pound of not-so-great lamb and then bought some peas, cabbage, onions, potatoes, and other ingredients. Along with the bread he had purchased earlier, he spent a total of twenty-five copper pennies, equivalent to two *solis* and one pence.

"There really isn't enough to go around. Poor Benson..." Not only had Zhou Mingrui spent the two notes he had brought with him, but he had even used the one penny he already had in his pocket.

He simply sighed and tried not to dwell on it as he hurried back home.

Now that he had secured their staples, he could get back to the luck-enhancement ritual!

...

Zhou Mingrui waited until all the second-floor tenants had left, but he was still in no hurry to perform the ritual. Instead, he translated "The Immortal Lord of Heaven and Earth for Blessings" and related phrases into the ancient Feysac language and the Loen language. He was already planning to try the ritual again the next day in these local languages if the original incantation didn't work.

After all, he had to take into consideration the differences between the two worlds. When in Rome, do as the Romans do!

As for translating it into Hermes, the language dedicated to ancient ritual prayers, Zhou Mingrui couldn't do it due to his lack of vocabulary.

After getting everything ready, he finally took out four loaves of rye bread. He placed one in the corner where the coal stove was stored, one under the full-length mirror in the inner corner, one at the top of the cabinet where two walls met, and the last one on the right side of the desk where miscellaneous items were kept.

With a deep breath, Zhou Mingrui came to the center of the room and spent a few minutes composing himself. Then he took a solemn step forward and began tracing the shape of a square with his feet, walking counterclockwise.

When he took the first step, he chanted in a low whisper:

"The Immortal Lord of Heaven and Earth for Blessings."

With the second step, he chanted sincerely:

"The Sky Lord of Heaven and Earth for Blessings."

On the third step, Zhou Mingrui held his breath and murmured:

"The Exalted Thearch of Heaven and Earth for Blessings."

At the fourth step, he exhaled and silently said to himself:

"The Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings."

When he returned to his original spot, Zhou Mingrui closed his eyes and waited for the outcome. He felt a mix of anticipation, unease, hope, and fear.

Could he go back?

Would it work?

Would anything unexpected happen?

The darkness in front of him was tinged with a bright crimson. Zhou Mingrui's thoughts swirled in his head, making them hard to control. It was then that he suddenly felt the air around him seem to hold in place, growing thick and mysterious.

Immediately afterward, echoes of low chanting filled his ears—sometimes sounding real, sometimes sharp, sometimes imaginary. They were tempting, maniacal, and maybe mad. Zhou Mingrui clearly didn't understand what the murmurings meant, yet he couldn't help but listen and try to decipher them.

His head hurt again, the pain like someone had driven a steel rod into it. He felt as if his head were about to explode, with his thoughts now tainted by psychedelic colors. Realizing that something was wrong, he struggled to open his eyes, yet even that simple act was beyond him.

His entire body grew tighter and tighter until it felt as though he would break apart at any second. Somehow, a self-mocking thought emerged in his mind:

You wouldn't die if you didn't court death...

He could bear it no longer. Just as the thread in his mind was about to snap, the murmuring of countless overlapping voices faded. His surroundings grew very quiet, and the atmosphere became increasingly ethereal. It wasn't just the atmosphere. Zhou Mingrui felt his own body grow increasingly airy as well.

He tried once more to open his eyes, and this time, they obeyed with surprising ease. An expanse of gray fog lay before him—hazy, vague, and endless.

“What's happening?”

Zhou Mingrui looked around, then lowered his head to discover

that he was floating at the edge of boundless fog. The fog flowed like water and was dotted with specks that resembled crimson stars. Some were enormous, while others were impossibly tiny; some were hidden in the depths, while others floated on the surface.

Looking at this sight that could only be described as holographic, Zhou Mingrui reached out his right hand in a half-confused, half-exploratory manner to try to touch the crimson star seemingly floating on the surface. He was trying to find a way to leave this place.

Just as his hand touched the surface of that star, ripples of water suddenly spread out from within it, agitating the star until it burst into a flare of crimson flame.

Zhou Mingrui jumped in fright, retracting his hand. But in his panic, he accidentally touched yet another crimson star.

As a result, that star burst in a spectacular cascade of light as well.

In turn, Zhou Mingrui felt his mind empty and his spirit dissipate.

...

In the Loen Kingdom's capital, Backlund, inside a luxurious mansion in Empress Borough, Audrey Hall sat in front of her vanity. She caressed the cracked bronze mirror before her, its antiquated motif evident in every detail.

"Mirror, mirror, awaken..."

"In the name of the Hall family, I command you to awaken!"

...

She cycled through various commands, but the mirror remained unresponsive. After more than ten minutes, she finally gave up and pursed her lips in grievance. Softly, she murmured, "Papa really did lie to me. He always tells me that this mirror was the treasure of the Solomon Empire's Black Emperor and that it's an extraordinary artifact..."

But before she finished her sentence, the bronze mirror suddenly emitted a crimson light that enveloped her in an instant.

...

In the Sonia Sea, a three-masted sailboat that looked like a relic of the past was navigating a violent storm.

Alger Wilson stood on its deck, his body rocking with the currents, yet he maintained his balance with ease.

He wore a robe embroidered with lightning patterns, and in his hand was an oddly shaped glass bottle. Bubbles roiled inside the container, turning into frost and snow one moment and coalescing into a visible gust of wind the next.

“Still short on Ghost Shark blood...,” Alger murmured.

Just then, a flash of crimson erupted from the space between the glass bottle and his palm. In an instant, it enveloped everything around him.

...

Above the gray fog, Audrey Hall regained her sight. She glanced left and right, trying to comprehend the situation in a state of horror and confusion. It was then that she noticed the blurry image of a man on the opposite side of her doing the same.

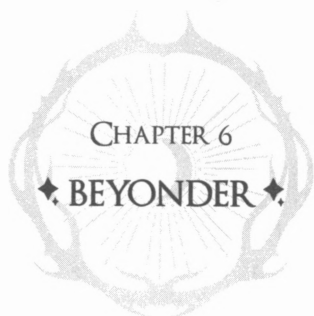
Immediately after, the two of them discovered yet another mysterious figure standing not far from them, also shrouded in gray mist.

The mysterious figure was none other than Zhou Mingrui, who looked equally dumbfounded.

After the initial bewilderment, Audrey and Alger both fell silent. Then they spoke up at the same time.

“Sir, where are we?”

“What exactly are you doing?”



Not only did the two of them speak the same Loen language, but they also shared the same grim foreboding and tension.

Where are we? What am I doing here? I'd like to know, too...

Calming himself down, Zhou Mingrui silently mulled over the questions posed by the other two. What left the deepest impression on him was neither the words themselves nor their meanings but the display of bewilderment, wariness, panic, and reverence on their faces. For some unfathomable reason, they had been mysteriously dragged into this world of gray fog.

As the perpetrator, Zhou Mingrui felt unusually dumbfounded and startled himself. He could only imagine how it felt to be pulled into this mess without any warning! For them, such events and encounters might already have exceeded their wildest imaginations.

In that moment, Zhou Mingrui considered two options. The first was to feign victimhood to hide his true identity, thereby gaining a certain level of trust from the others and taking a wait-and-see approach to exploit his circumstances when necessary. The second was to maintain his mysterious identity in their eyes, actively guiding any subsequent development while gleaning valuable information from them. Without the luxury of time for lengthy deliberation, he grasped the fleeting thought that flashed through his mind and made

an instantaneous decision to try the second approach. Exploit the psychological state of the others to leverage his greatest strength!

After a few seconds of silence in the fog, Zhou Mingrui let out a quiet chuckle. In a low yet steady tone, as if replying to polite greetings from visitors, he calmly said, "An attempt."

"An attempt... an *attempt*?" Audrey Hall regarded the mysterious man veiled in the grayish-white fog, finding the unfolding events simultaneously absurd, funny, horrifying, and bizarre. Moments ago, she had been seated at the vanity in her bedroom; in the blink of an eye, she had been transported to this endless expanse of gray fog! *How inconceivable!*

Audrey took a deep breath, revealing an impeccably courteous smile. Apprehensively, she asked, "Sir, is the attempt over? Might you allow us to return?"

Alger Wilson, too, intended to probe Zhou Mingrui in a similar fashion, but his wealth of experience made him more composed. He held back his impulse and observed silently.

Zhou Mingrui studied the questioner. Through the hazy mist, he could roughly make out the silhouette of a person—a tall girl with soft blond hair, though her exact features remained unclear. He didn't rush to reply to her question; instead, he turned to look at the man on the other side, who had a head of dark blue hair as messy as seaweed and a medium build that was far from stout.

Suddenly, Zhou Mingrui realized something: Once he grew stronger or developed a deeper understanding of this misty world, perhaps he would be able to see through the fog and discern the faces of the girl and the man. *In this situation, they are the visitors, and I'm the host!*

With this mental shift, Zhou Mingrui instantly noticed details he had previously overlooked. The girl with the melodious voice and the mature, reserved man both appeared considerably incorporeal. Colored by a faint crimson hue, they looked as if they were images projected onto the gray fog by the two crimson stars.

These projections seemed to be based on the connections between the crimson and himself, intangible links that only he could truly

grasp. Once those connections were severed, the projections would vanish, and the two people would return from whence they came...

Zhou Mingrui nodded imperceptibly and looked toward the blond girl, chuckling. "Of course, if you make a formal request, I can send you back right now."

When she detected no ill intention in his tone, Audrey heaved a sigh of relief. She believed that since a gentleman capable of such miraculous feats had given his word, she could probably trust him to keep it.

With her worries somewhat mollified, she was surprisingly in no hurry to request her departure. She scanned the area with her emerald eyes, which sparkled with an unusual radiance.

Anxious, expectant, and eager all at once, she said, "What a wonderful experience this is... Yes, I always hoped something like this would happen. I mean—I love mysteries and supernatural miracles. No, my point is—what I mean by that, sir, is how do I become a Beyonder?"

Her excitement grew to the point that she began fumbling her words. The dream kindled by the thrilling fantasies her elders once told her suddenly seemed within reach. With just a few words, she had already forgotten all her previous fears and concerns.

Good question! I'd also like to know the answer...

Zhou Mingrui grumbled to himself. He began to ponder an answer that would preserve his mysterious, inscrutable image. At the same time, he felt it was unbecoming to continue speaking while standing. A situation like this surely called for a palace and a long table surrounded by mysterious, high-backed chairs engraved with ancient sigils, with him seated at the head, silently observing his visitors.

As soon as this thought surfaced, the gray fog began to churn, startling both Audrey and Alger. In an instant, towering stone pillars materialized around them, and above, a vast dome appeared. The entire edifice looked magnificent, grand, and lofty, just like a legendary palace built for giants.

Directly beneath the dome, where the gray fog gathered, stood a long, green-bronze table flanked by ten high-backed chairs on each side and an additional chair at each end. The backs of the chairs glittered and glowed with a faint crimson, forming outlines of strange constellations that Zhou Mingrui had never seen before.

Audrey and Alger sat facing each other across the table, positioned adjacent to the seat of honor at the head. The tall blond girl scanned her surroundings and murmured, “How fascinating...”

Indeed, it is fascinating...

Zhou Mingrui surreptitiously caressed the edge of the bronze table with his right hand while maintaining an unperturbed expression. Alger also inspected his surroundings, and after a few seconds of silence, he suddenly spoke up and answered Audrey’s question on Zhou Mingrui’s behalf:

“You’re from Loen, right? If you want to become a Beyonder, just join the churches of either the Evernight Goddess, the Lord of Storms, or the God of Steam and Machinery.

“The majority of us will not meet a Beyonder in our entire lives. This has led people to think that churches are quite ordinary. Even clergymen in some of the largest churches suspect the same. Well, I can tell you for certain that Beyonders still exist in courts, tribunals, and execution agencies. They continue to fight against the dangers that grow in the dark, though their numbers are far fewer than before and during the early days of the Iron Age.”

Zhou Mingrui listened attentively but did his best to appear indifferent, as though he were hearing a child’s tale. Drawing on Klein’s fragmented general knowledge of history, he recalled that the Iron Age referred to the current epoch—the Fifth Epoch, which began 1,349 years ago.

Audrey listened quietly as Alger finished speaking, then sighed. “Mister, I know all about what you just said. I even know more than that, including the Nighthawks, the Mandated Punishers, and the Machinery Hivemind...but I don’t want to lose my freedom.”

Alger gave a low laugh and said vaguely, “You can’t become

a Beyonder without paying a price. If you're not willing to join a church and accept their challenges, your only options are to seek out the royal families or the few nobles with a lineage more than a thousand years long. Otherwise, you can try your luck with one of those occult organizations that always hide in the shadows."

Audrey puffed her cheeks without realizing it, then glanced around furtively. After confirming that neither the mysterious gentleman nor Alger seemed to have noticed her tic, she pressed on. "Are there no other ways?"

Alger fell silent for about half a minute before turning to look at the mysterious gentleman, who had been watching them in silence. Realizing that Zhou Mingrui had no plans to comment, Alger looked back at Audrey and said deliberately, "I have two Sequence Nine potion formulas in my possession."

"Sequence Nine?" Zhou Mingrui muttered under his breath.

"Really? Which two?" Audrey asked, clearly familiar with the significance of Sequence Nine potion formulas.

Alger leaned back slightly and replied steadily, "As you know, humans can only truly become Beyonders by relying on potions. The names of these potions come from the Blasphemy Slate. After constant translations into Elvish, ancient and modern Hermes, Ancient Feysac, and Jotun, the language of giants, their names have long been modified to suit each era. The key isn't in the name itself but in whether it represents the core characteristic of the potion.

"I have a Sequence Nine potion named 'Sailor.' It grants excellent balancing capabilities. Even in a rainstorm on a boat, you'll be able to walk as if you were on land. It also bestows immense strength and produces illusory scales under your skin, enabling you to swim like a fish and making you just as difficult to catch on land. Even without equipment, you'd be able to submerge underwater for at least ten minutes."

"Sounds great... Is it the one known as 'Keepers of the Seas' from the Lord of Storms?" Audrey inquired.

"It was called that in the past," Alger continued without pause.

“The second Sequence Nine potion is called ‘Spectator,’ though I’m not sure what its name was in the old days. This potion sharpens your mind and grants acute observational abilities. I’m sure you understand what ‘spectator’ means from watching operas and plays—like an audience that discerns the true nature of the ‘actors’ in the secular world by noticing even the smallest details in their expressions, conduct, and speech.”

At that point, Alger emphasized, “Remember, whether you’re at an extravagant banquet or a crowded street, a spectator can only ever remain a spectator.”

Audrey’s eyes shined with excitement. After a long pause, she asked, “Why? All right. That’s a follow-up question. I...I think I’ve fallen in love with this feeling of being a ‘spectator.’ How can I get the formula for this potion? What can I trade you for it?”

Alger appeared prepared with an answer as he said solemnly, “Ghost Shark blood. At least one hundred milliliters.”

Audrey nodded excitedly, though her glee soon gave way to worry. “If I can get it—and I’m saying *if*—how do I give it to you? And how can I be sure you’ll give me the formula in return and that the formula is genuine?”

Alger replied calmly, “I’ll give you an address. Once I receive the Ghost Shark blood, I’ll mail you the formula or explain it in person right here. As for guarantees, we can both rest easy with this mysterious gentleman as our witness.”

At that moment, he swept his eyes toward Zhou Mingrui, who sat at the head of the table.

“Sir, the fact that you brought us here shows that you possess a strength unimaginable to us. Neither of us would dare break a promise with you as our guarantor.”

“That’s right!” Audrey’s eyes sparkled. From her perspective, the mysterious gentleman, with his formidable abilities, was a figure of unquestionable authority.

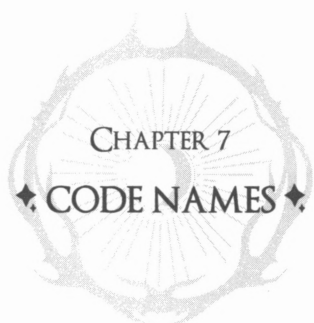
Neither of us would dare to try and trick him!

Audrey turned slightly and gazed earnestly at Zhou Mingrui. "Sir, please be the witness to our trade."

Then, suddenly realizing she'd been too forward and gotten ahead of herself, she hurriedly added, "Sir, how should we address you?"

Alger nodded slightly and echoed her respectful inquiry, "Sir, how should we address you?"

Taken aback, Zhou Mingrui gently rapped his fingers on the bronze table. The contents of his earlier divination flashed through his mind. He leaned back, withdrew his right hand, and steepled all ten fingers below his chin. Offering the two a faint smile, he said, "You can call me..." He paused for a moment, then continued calmly, "The Fool."



“You can call me The Fool.”

The simple answer echoed through the great hall before dissolving into the fog. Yet in Audrey’s and Alger’s hearts, his words resonated, stirring one ripple after another. This unexpected name felt entirely fitting—mysterious, powerful, and strange.

After a few seconds of silence, Audrey stood up, lifted her skirt slightly, and curtsied.

“Mr. Fool, Your Honor, please allow me to take the liberty of requesting that you be the witness to our trade.”

“Of course,” Zhou Mingrui replied, his mind whirring as he answered in a manner befitting his status.

“It’s our honor, Mr. Fool,” Alger added as he also rose, bowing slightly and placing his right palm over his chest.

Zhou Mingrui raised his right hand in a placating gesture and smiled.

“You may continue.”

Alger nodded and took his seat before turning back to Audrey.

“If you can obtain Ghost Shark blood, have someone deliver it to the Warrior and the Sea bar on Pelican Street in the White Rose Borough of Pritz Harbor. Tell the boss, Williams, that it’s for the captain.

“Once I verify it, will you be giving me an address where I can send the potion formula, or would you prefer that I tell it to you here in person?”

Audrey thought for a moment, then said with a smile, “I will choose the more secure method. Let’s do it here, although that will be a test of my memory.”

Since The Fool had agreed to bear witness to the trade, it meant that another gathering of this nature would follow.

With that in mind, she turned her head and looked at Zhou Mingrui with sparkling eyes. Excitedly, she suggested, “Mr. Fool, would you mind making a few more ‘attempts’ like this?”

Alger listened to her suggestion as calmly as he could, his own excitement evident as he quickly echoed, “Mr. Fool, don’t you find such gatherings interesting? Although your powers far exceed our imaginations, there must be certain domains you do not fully understand or excel in. The person across from me is obviously a young lady of noble descent, whereas I have my own unique experiences, insights, and resources. Perhaps, one day, the two of us can help you complete tasks that might be inconvenient for you.”

From Alger’s perspective, being pulled into this space without warning or means of resistance meant that the mysterious Mr. Fool was in control. Participating in these ‘gatherings’ was not something he could refuse; rather, it was better to reap the benefits of the encounter to offset his passive, disadvantaged state. The trio at the long table came from different backgrounds and possessed varied resources, channels of information, and understandings of the mystical realm. If they could exchange information and cooperate, even in a limited capacity. Alger believed it could yield unpredictable and immeasurable benefits.

The resource trade he’d just negotiated was one example. Another possibility was that if he wished to kill someone, he could enlist the help of others from the gathering who were not obviously related to him, thereby perfectly misdirecting any investigators.

A young lady of noble descent... Were my behavior and accent that obvious?

Audrey stared at him blankly, her mouth slightly agape. But she soon snapped back to her senses and nodded without hesitation.

"I think that's a great idea, Mr. Fool. If these gatherings become a regular occurrence, you can delegate certain tasks to us that might otherwise be inconvenient for you. Of course, it has to be things within our power."

From the moment he heard her suggestion, Zhou Mingrui began weighing the pros and cons. More gatherings would certainly allow him to obtain more information on the secrets of the Beyonders and other mysteries—a boon for his transmigration back home. For example, it was likely that the Spectator potion formula would surface at the next gathering. Similarly, the information he gained here would prove invaluable in his present life. However, more gatherings also meant a higher risk of exposing himself!

Regardless of the world, there is no such thing as a free lunch...

Zhou Mingrui reached for his right hand and gently rapped the side of the long table with his finger.

Being in control of the gathering's summoning and dismissal, any threat of exposure was within his control. The pros clearly outweighed the cons, so he quickly made his decision.

He stilled his hand and smiled at the apprehensive faces filled with anticipation.

"I am someone who prefers a fair and equal exchange. Your assistance will not go unrewarded. Every Monday, at three o'clock in the afternoon, try your best to be alone. After I make a few more attempts and figure out certain things, perhaps you can apply for a leave of absence in advance so you won't have to worry about being caught in inopportune situations."

He was agreeing to Alger's and Audrey's suggestions. Audrey had just turned seventeen. Having been pampered all her life, she possessed the disposition of a youthful girl. Hearing The Fool's reply, she

couldn't help but clench her fist and gently pump it in front of her chest.

"Then shall we give ourselves code names?" Audrey blurted out in excitement, her eyes positively glowing, without waiting for Alger to speak. "After all, we can't converse here using our real names."

Although she might not be able to deceive Mr. Fool about her true identity, the fellow across from her still posed a certain level of danger. She must not let him know who she really was.

"Good idea," Zhou Mingrui replied simply.

Audrey's mind immediately began whirring. "You are Mr. Fool, a name derived from tarot cards. As this is a fixed, long-term, and secretive gathering, our designations should be uniform. Yes, I'll also choose a name from the tarot deck." Her tone lightened as she continued, "I've decided. I shall be Justice!"

It was one of the twenty-two Major Arcana tarot cards.

"And what about you, Mister?" Audrey grinned at her "associate" sitting across the table.

Alger's brow furrowed briefly before he said, "The Hanged Man." Another Major Arcana card.

"Then we are the founding members of the Tarot Club!" Audrey exclaimed happily, then nervously turned to Zhou Mingrui behind the fog and asked, "Will that be all right, Mr. Fool?"

Zhou Mingrui shook his head in amusement.

"You may decide such trivial matters on your own."

"Thank you!" Audrey beamed with delight.

Next, she turned to Alger.

"Mr. Hanged Man, can you repeat the address again? I'm afraid my memory might fail me."

"No problem." Pleased with Audrey's earnestness, Alger repeated the address once more.

After silently repeating it thrice to herself, Audrey gleefully said, "I heard that our tarot cards were invented by Emperor Roselle as a mere game and that they don't actually have the power of divinity."

"No. Most of the time, divination stems from within. Everyone has

a spiritual nature that allows them to attune to the spiritual world and access higher-level information about themselves. However, ordinary folks cannot detect this, much less interpret the signs they receive. With the help of divination tools, though, this information can be brought to light. Let me offer a simple example: dreams and their interpretations.” Alger glanced at Zhou Mingrui and, seeing no reaction, continued, “Tarot cards are, in fact, such a tool. With rich symbolism and logical elements, they help us conveniently and accurately interpret any given signs.”

Although Zhou Mingrui appeared indifferent, he was listening with rapt attention. Unfortunately, his mental strength was waning, and he was becoming increasingly aware of a throbbing pain in his head.

“I understand,” Audrey said, nodding in agreement. Then she emphasized, “But that’s not what I meant. I’m not doubting the power of tarot cards; rather, I heard that Emperor Roselle actually created another set of cards—secret ones that represented some unknown power. He created a total of twenty-two paper cards and later used them as a reference to develop the twenty-two Major Arcana tarot cards used in games today. Is that correct?”

She looked at Zhou Mingrui as if seeking an answer from the mysterious Mr. Fool.

All he did was smile silently, then cast his gaze at The Hanged Man, as though testing him.

Alger subconsciously straightened his back and said in a deep voice, “That’s right. It is said that Emperor Roselle once beheld the Blasphemy Slate and that the original set of paper cards contained the profound mysteries of the twenty-two paths of the divine.”

“Twenty-two paths of the divine...,” Audrey repeated, her voice filled with longing.

At that moment, Zhou Mingrui’s headache intensified. He felt his invisible connection with the crimson stars and the gray fog beginning to falter.

“All right. That will be all for today’s gathering,” he said in a low voice, having quickly made his decision.

“As you wish,” Alger replied, bowing his head respectfully.

“As you wish,” Audrey echoed.

Reluctant to see the gathering end, she still had many questions and thoughts swirling in her mind.

As Zhou Mingrui severed the connection, he smiled, “Let us look forward to the next meeting.”

The stars brightened as the crimson light receded like water. Just as Audrey and Alger heard The Fool’s words, their figures blurred and faded away. In a moment, the “projection” shattered, and silence returned to the world above the gray fog.

Zhou Mingrui felt himself rapidly growing heavier as his surroundings, so fleeting and ephemeral, dissolved around him. Darkness descended, then changed into dazzling sunlight.

He was still in his flat, standing in the middle of the room.

“Like a dream... What the heck was that world of fog? And who or what power created that transformation just now...?” Zhou Mingrui sighed softly, filled with more questions than answers. He walked slowly toward the desk, his legs leaden. Picking up the pocket watch he’d left out, he tried to discern how much time had passed.

“It seems to be a one-to-one rate,” he roughly judged.

He set the pocket watch down and sank into a chair, unable to endure the splitting headache any longer. Lowering his head, he massaged his temples with his thumb and middle finger.

After a long while, he sighed and spoke to himself in Mandarin. “Looks like I won’t be able to return any time soon...”

Only the ignorant could be fearless. After witnessing such a fantastical event and learning about Beyonders and the mystical world, Zhou Mingrui no longer dared to rashly try the luck-enhancement ritual again using Ancient Feysac or Loen.

Who knew what else might happen? Perhaps something even more horrifying or bizarre, or even something that would make him wish he were dead!

At the very least, I should attempt it only once I have a deeper mastery of mysticism, Zhou Mingrui thought helplessly.

Thankfully, the so-called “gathering” should help him.

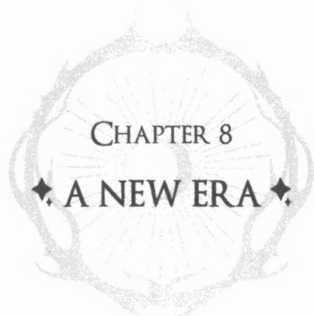
After another stretch of silence, he muttered to himself with dismay, disappointment, agony, and grief, “From now on, I am Klein.”

...

Klein tried his best to focus on solutions and plans to purge the negative emotions within him. Perhaps he would overhear the Spectator potion formula next week...

The gathering was fascinating indeed. People from different places across the world could reduce hundreds of kilometers to mere centimeters in a face-to-face discussion while supplementing each other's needs. Huh, but why does that sound so familiar?

Klein was stunned for a few seconds before he burst out laughing. Pressing his hands to his temples, he jested under his breath, “Sounds just like social media.”



Whoosh!

Howling wind accompanied the downpour. The three-masted sailboat rose and fell on the crests and troughs of the incoming waves as if it were a giant's toy.

The crimson glow in Alger Wilson's eyes faded. He found himself still standing on the deck of the ship, apparently no different from before.

Almost immediately, the oddly shaped glass bottle in his palm shattered into a million pieces; the frost within melted into the rain. In mere seconds, there were no traces left of the ancient artifact.

A hexagonal crystalline snowflake appeared on Alger's palm for a moment before rapidly fading, as if wholly absorbed into his skin, vanishing completely from sight. Alger nodded his head inconspicuously, as if brooding over something. For the next five minutes, he remained still and silent.

Then he turned around and headed for the cabin. As he was about to enter, a man in a robe similarly embroidered with lightning patterns emerged from within.

This man, sporting soft blond hair, paused when he saw Alger. He held his right fist to his chest and said, "May the Storm be with you."

"May the Storm be with you," Alger replied, returning the gesture. There was no trace of emotion on his rough-hewn, well-defined face.

Alger entered the cabin after the greeting and proceeded to the captain's cabin at the far end of the corridor.

Surprisingly, he didn't encounter any sailors along the way; the whole place was as quiet as a graveyard.

Opening the door to the captain's cabin, he saw a soft brown carpet covering the floor, with a bookshelf and a wine rack standing against either side of the room. The flickering candlelight lent a peculiar hue to the books with their yellowish covers and to the bottles of deep red wine.

On the desk near the candle lay a bottle of ink, a quill, a black metallic telescope, and a brass sextant.

Behind the desk sat a middle-aged man with a pale face. The captain's hat on his head was adorned with a skull. As Alger approached him, the man bellowed, "I will not give in!"

"I believe you," Alger said calmly—so calmly that it seemed as if he were merely commenting on the weather.

"You..." The man appeared stunned by the unexpected response.

Just then, Alger hunched forward slightly and dashed across the room. In an instant, the desk was all that separated them.

Pa!

Alger's right hand had shot forward without warning and wrapped around the man's throat, giving the man no time to respond. Illusory fish scales appeared on the back of Alger's hand as his grip tightened, his fingers frantically flexing with increasing force.

Crack!

Following the crisp snapping sound, the man's eyes widened as his body was lifted. His legs twitched violently for a moment, then fell still. His pupils dilated as his gaze faded. A foul stench arose from between his legs as wetness spread from the crotch of his pants.

Still holding the man aloft, Alger bent over and stepped up to the wall beside him.

Bang!

Using the body as a battering ram, he bludgeoned the man against the wall. Alger's muscular arm appeared almost monstrous. A hole cracked open in the wooden wall, and the violent storm burst in with the rain accompanied by the smell of the ocean.

Twisting his hips, Alger flung the man out of the boat and into the towering waves outside.

The wind continued to howl in the dark as almighty nature devoured everything.

Alger took out a white handkerchief and carefully wiped his right hand before tossing it into the sea as well.

He stepped back and waited patiently for his companions to come.

In less than ten seconds, the blond man from before rushed in and asked, "What happened?"

"The captain has escaped," Alger answered, annoyance in his voice as he panted. "I didn't know he still had some of his Beyonder powers."

"Dammit!" the blond man muttered. He went up to the opening in the wall and stared out into the distance, but aside from the crashing waves and pounding rain, he could see nothing.

"Forget it. He was just extra loot anyway," the blond man said, waving his arm dismissively. "We will still be rewarded for finding this phantom ship from the Tudor Era."

Even if he were a Keeper of the Sea, he wouldn't have hastily dived into the ocean in weather like this.

"Besides, the captain wouldn't have survived much longer if the storm continued," Alger added, nodding in agreement. The wooden wall was visibly repairing itself at a discernible rate. He took a long look at it before subconsciously turning his head to check the rudder and the sail. Even behind the layers of wooden boards, he knew perfectly well what was going on there.

There was no first mate, no second mate, no crew—no living soul onboard!

Even with no one manning the boat, the rudder and the sail moved eerily on their own.

The image of The Fool shrouded in gray fog flashed again in Alger's mind. He sighed and turned back to the mighty waves, speaking as though in a reverie, his voice filled with anticipation and awe. "A new era has begun..."

...

In Empress Borough, Backlund—capital of the Loen Kingdom—Audrey Hall pinched her cheeks in disbelief over her recent encounter. On the dressing table before her, the ancient bronze mirror lay shattered into pieces.

Lowering her gaze, Audrey noticed a swirling crimson mark on the back of her hand, like a tattoo of a star. The crimson gradually faded, eventually disappearing into her skin. Only then did she know with certainty that she hadn't been dreaming.

Her eyes twinkled as the corners of her lips lifted into a grin. Unable to contain her joy, she rose to her feet. Bending down to lift the hem of her dress, she curtsied toward thin air and began to dance. Her steps were light and lively, her turns graceful. It was the Ancient Elf Dance, the most popular dance in the courts at the moment. A bright smile adorned her face as she danced about the room.

Knock! Knock!

Suddenly, someone knocked on her bedroom door.

"Who is it?" Audrey immediately ceased her dance and composed herself into a portrait of elegance.

"Miss, may I come in? You should start preparing for the ceremony," came the soft request from outside the door.

Audrey glanced into the mirror on her dressing table and quickly wiped the grin from her face, leaving only a tiny hint of a smile. After ensuring everything was presentable, she replied gently, "Come in."

The doorknob turned, and Annie, her lady's maid, pushed the door open.

"Oh, it's cracked..." Annie immediately spotted the broken mirror.

Audrey blinked and said slowly, "Erm, yes! It's because Susie was here just now. You know how she's always wreaking havoc!"

Susie was a golden retriever, though far from purebred. She had

been a gift to Audrey's father, Earl Hall, when he was purchasing foxhounds. Nevertheless, Audrey adored her.

"It needs to be disciplined, Miss," said Annie as she nimbly picked up the shards of the bronze mirror, lest it hurt her young lady.

After tidying up, Annie asked Audrey with a smile, "Which dress would you like to wear?"

After a brief consideration, Audrey answered, "I like the dress Mrs. Guinea designed for my seventeenth birthday."

"But, Miss, you can't wear the same dress twice to a formal ceremony. People will think the Hall family has run into financial trouble," Annie said, shaking her head.

"But I really like it!" Audrey insisted in her mild voice.

"You can wear it at home or when you attend an event that isn't so formal," Annie stated firmly. It was not negotiable.

"Then it will have to be the one with the ruffles on the sleeves that Mr. Sades brought two days ago," Audrey offered, drawing in an inconspicuous gasp while maintaining her sweet smile.

"You always have such good taste," Annie added as she stepped back and called down the hallway, "Dressing room number six! Ah, never mind that. I will fetch it myself."

The maidservants immediately got to work, each responsible for a different aspect of Audrey's outfit: the dress, accessories, shoes, hat, makeup, and hair.

When Audrey was almost ready, Earl Hall appeared at the door wearing a dark brown waistcoat. He had a hat matching the color of his suit and sported a delightful little mustache. His blue eyes twinkled with mirth even though his sagging muscles, bulging midsection, and conspicuous wrinkles had wreaked havoc on the handsomeness of his youth.

"The most dazzling jewel of Backlund, it's time for us to go," Earl Hall announced, gently rapping his knuckles on the open door.

"Papa! Do not call me that," Audrey protested as she rose with the assistance of her maidservants, deliberately putting on a troubled expression.

“Well, then it’s time to set off, my beautiful little princess,” Earl Hall said as he bent his left arm, offering it to his daughter.

Audrey shook her head slightly and said with a smile, “That spot is reserved for my dear mother, the countess, Lady Hall.”

“Then this side,” Earl Hall said with a smile, bending his right arm. “This is for you, your father’s greatest pride.”

...

Arriving at Pritz Harbor’s imperial naval base on Oak Island, Audrey stepped off the carriage with her hand around her father’s arm. Immediately, she was awed by the size of the juggernaut before her.

In the military port not far from them, a massive ship shimmered with a metallic sheen. Without sails, it sported two extra smokestacks that towered over the observation deck and an extra gun turret at both the bow and the stern. It was so majestic and immense that the fleet of sailing warships nearby looked like newborn dwarves clustering around a giant.

“Lord of Storms above...”

“Oh, milord.”

“An armored warship!”

...

Amid the gasps of surprise and marvel, Audrey felt an unprecedented shock—a miracle created by mankind. An ocean miracle never seen before!

It took a while for the nobles, ministers, and members of parliament to regain their composure. Then a black spot appeared above them, growing in size until it occupied a third of the sky, making itself known to all. The atmosphere suddenly turned solemn.

Hovering in midair was an enormous object with a beautifully streamlined design. Painted in deep blue, its alloy skeleton was light yet strong, supporting a cotton exterior with built-in airbags. Hanging from it was a cabin whose openings were equipped with quick-loading guns, torpedoes, and cannons. The larger-than-life humming noise from the steam engine mingled with the sound of

the frantically spinning tail blades, creating a symphony that left everyone amazed.

Arriving on their airship, the royal family exuded lofty, indisputable authority. On each side of the cabin, reflecting the brilliant rays of the sun, was the royal sigil: the Sword of Judgment, inlaid with a ruby crown at its hilt and pointing straight down. It was the symbol of the Augustus family, passed down through generations since as early as the last epoch.

Audrey was not yet eighteen, meaning she had not attended a debut ceremony in which the queen would officially introduce her to Backlund high society and announce her coming of age. Therefore, she could only watch from the sidelines, unable to approach the airship. Nevertheless, she did not mind. In fact, she was relieved not to have to deal with the princes.

The miracle that marked mankind's conquest of the skies touched down steadily. The first to emerge down the stairs were the handsome young guards in red ceremonial uniforms and white trousers. Decorated with medals and carrying long rifles, they formed lines on either side of the staircase as they awaited the appearances of King George III, his queen, the prince, and the princess.

Audrey was not new to meeting important people and showed no interest in them. Instead, her attention was drawn to the two statuesque knights in black armor flanking the king. In this era of iron, steam, and cannons, it surprised her to see someone insisting on wearing a full suit of armor. The cold metallic luster of their gear, next to their dull black helmets, conveyed a sense of solemnity and rigid authority.

"Could they be the High-Sequence Disciplinary Paladins...?" Audrey recalled snippets of a casual conversation among adults. Though curious, she didn't dare get too close.

The ceremony commenced with the arrival of the royal family. The incumbent prime minister, Lord Aguesid Negan, stepped to the very front. A member of the Conservative Party and the second

non-aristocrat ever to become the prime minister, he had been granted the title of a lord for his significant contributions. Of course, Audrey knew more than that. The main supporter of the Conservative Party was Pallas Negan, the current Duke Negan and older brother of Prime Minister Aguesid Negan.

Aguesid was tall and slender, a balding man over fifty with a sharp gaze. Sweeping his eyes over the crowd, he began:

“Ladies and gentlemen, I believe you’ve all seen this—an armored warship that will turn our era on its head. It is 101 meters long and 21 meters wide and boasts an extra-high freeboard design. The armor belt is 457 millimeters thick, and its displacement is 10,060 tonnes. It is armed with four 305-millimeter main cannons, six quick-loading guns, twelve 6-pound cannons, eighteen 6-barrel machine guns, and four torpedo launchers. It can reach a maximum speed of 16 knots!

“It will be the true hegemon that conquers the seas!”

The crowd was incredibly fired up. The prime minister’s description was already enough to convey the might of this armored ship. The fact that the real thing stood right before them only heightened their excitement.

Aguesid revealed a rare smile and spoke a few more lines before concluding his speech. Saluting the king, he beseeched, “Your Majesty, please bestow it with a name!”

“Since it will set sail from Pritz Harbor, let it be named the Pritz,” King George III responded, his expression one of delight.

“Pritz!”

“Pritz!”

...

The chant spread from the naval ministers and the admiral of the Imperial Navy to the soldiers and officers on the deck of the warship. They all exclaimed in unison, “Pritz!”

Amidst the gun salutes and the celebratory atmosphere, King George III ordered the *Pritz* to depart for sea trials and weapon tests.

Honk!

The chimneys belched thick smoke, and the noise of churning

machinery could be heard faintly beneath the blare of the ship's horn as the dreadnought departed from the harbor. When the two main cannons at the ship's bow fired at an uninhabited island in its path, the crowd shouted in surprise.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The ground seemed to shake as plumes of dust shot into the sky. Shockwaves rippled out from the impact points, generating high waves.

Satisfied, Aguesid turned back to the crowd and announced, "From now on, the seven pirates who call themselves admirals and the four who dare to call themselves kings will shiver in fear as they await their doom!"

"It is the end of an era. No matter what powers the Beyonders wield, no matter what ghost ships or cursed vessels they possess, this armored warship shall rule the waves!"

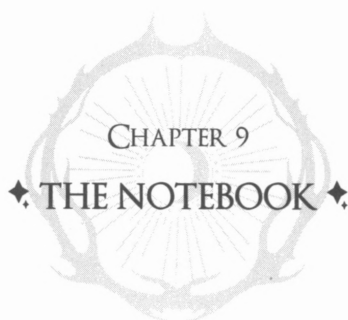
Taking his cue, Aguesid's chief secretary asked, "Can't they build their own armored vessels?" Some nobles and members of parliament nodded, feeling that such a possibility was not entirely out of the question.

Aguesid immediately smiled and slowly shook his head. "Impossible! Never! Launching an armored warship like this requires the coordinated efforts of three large coal and steel amalgamators, twenty steel mills that meet national standards, sixty scientists, even more senior engineers from Backlund Artillery School and Pritz Nautical Academy, two royal shipyards, almost one hundred factories for spare parts, an admiralty, a ship-building committee, a cabinet, a determined king with excellent foresight, and a great country that produces twelve million tonnes of steel every year!"

"Those pirates could never achieve something like this."

Having said all that, he paused and raised his arms before announcing with great fervor:

"Ladies and gentlemen, the era of ships and cannons is upon us!"



After half an hour of rest, Zhou Mingrui, who now considered himself to be Klein, finally regained some energy. In the meantime, he discovered four black dots arranged in the shape of a small square on the back of his hand. These four black spots soon faded and disappeared entirely, but Klein knew they still lingered within him, waiting to be awakened.

“Four spots forming a square... Could they correspond to the four staple foods placed at the four corners of the room? Does this mean that I can perform the ritual and chants without preparing the food in the future?” A theory began to take shape in Klein’s mind.

On the surface, this idea may have seemed promising, but the appearance of something of mystical origin and unknown nature on his body was still frightening.

He recalled many things: how Chinese divinations from Earth could inexplicably produce effects here, the strange transmigration that happened during his sleep, the mysterious and confounding world of gray fog, and the ceaseless murmurings that had almost driven him mad during the ritual. Klein couldn’t help but shiver despite the hot June weather.

He had once heard, “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the

unknown.” Now he was experiencing that fear of the unknown firsthand.

An unprecedented and irresistible urge to interact with the mysterious realm stirred within him. He wanted to learn more and tap into the unknown. At the same time, a contradictory impulse to run away tugged at him.

Intense sunlight streamed through the window onto the desk, highlighting a layer of golden dust. Klein stared at the desk, feeling as if he had come into contact with a hint of warmth and hope.

He relaxed a little, only to be immediately overwhelmed by a surge of fatigue. His eyelids were as heavy as lead and closed on their own, a combined effect of his sleepless night and the mentally draining encounter.

Klein shook his head and pushed himself up, using the desk for support. With no energy to retrieve the rye bread scattered around the room, he stumbled to the bunk bed and immediately fell asleep as soon as he lay down.

Grumble! Grumble!

Klein was soon awakened by hunger. Feeling completely rejuvenated, he opened his eyes.

“Unfortunately, I still have a bit of a headache,” he murmured while rubbing his temples. He was so hungry that he felt he could eat a horse!

Smoothing out his shirt, he returned to the desk and picked up the silver vine-leaf pocket watch.

Snap!

The lid sprang open, and the second hand ticked steadily within.

Half past twelve. I slept for more than three hours...

Swallowing, Klein placed the watch into the pocket of his linen shirt.

On the Northern Continent—as in his old world—there were twenty-four hours in a day, sixty minutes in an hour, and sixty seconds in a minute. Whether each second passed at the same rate here as on Earth was unknown to him.

At that moment, mysticism, rituals, and the gray world of fog slipped from his mind. His thoughts were occupied by one thing and one thing only—food! Only once he had filled his stomach would he have the energy to think and work.

Without hesitation, Klein gathered the loaves of rye bread from the four corners of the room and brushed off the specks of dust. He planned on making one of them his lunch. With only five pence left in his pockets, he figured it best to be frugal. Besides, back where he came from, there was a tradition of eating offerings after religious ceremonies were completed, and the bread didn't seem any different. The memories and penny-pinching habits left behind by the original Klein Moretti had also played a subtle role in his decision.

Since gas was expensive and it pained him even to use it to light up the room, Klein took out the stove and added some coal. While waiting for the water to boil, he paced around the room.

Anyone would choke eating those dry loaves of rye bread without some water.

He sighed.

Will I have to live my days eating rye bread for breakfast and rye bread for lunch and not getting any meat until dinner...? And if it weren't for Melissa's concern about my upcoming interview, we'd only have two meals with meat a week...

Klein looked around, bored and unable to think clearly because of his hunger. When he thought of the pound of lamb, he stared at the cabinet.

No, I need to wait for Melissa so we can eat it together, he thought to himself, shaking his head and rejecting the idea of cooking half of it right away.

Though he had often eaten out as a bachelor eking out a living in a big city, he had still developed some basic culinary skills. His cooking wasn't gourmet, but it was sufficient. Determined to avoid the temptation of the lamb, Klein turned away. Then he suddenly remembered that he had also bought peas and potatoes that morning.

Potatoes!

An idea sprang to mind. He quickly returned to the cabinet and took two potatoes from the meager pile. First, he scrubbed their surfaces clean in the sink of the communal bathroom, then added them to the kettle to boil with water. After a while, he retrieved a spice container from the cabinet and sprinkled in some coarse yellow salt.

Patiently, he waited a few minutes before lifting the kettle and dividing the "soup" into a few cups and a large bowl. Finally, he took the potatoes out with a fork and placed them on the desk.

Klein blew on one potato as he slowly peeled it bit by bit. The appetizing smell of boiled potato wafted into the air.

He salivated profusely. The heat couldn't deter him any longer. Klein took a big bite even though the potato was only half-peeled and still too hot to eat.

How soft! How fragrant! he thought, as the sweet taste filled his mouth. Overcome with emotion, he wolfed down both potatoes, unintentionally eating some of the skin.

Next, he picked up the bowl and enjoyed the "soup." The pinch of salt in the water proved to be the perfect remedy for the dryness in his mouth. *I've enjoyed eating potatoes this way since I was young...* Klein mused to himself with satisfaction.

Meanwhile, he tore off small pieces of bread and dipped them into the soup to soften them before eating. Klein managed to eat two loaves of bread by himself, totaling a whole pound, possibly because the ritual had been exhausting.

Once he finished the soup and cleaned up, Klein felt thoroughly revitalized. Yet again, he basked in the joy of being alive as he savored the brilliance of the sunlight. He sat back down at the desk and began planning his next steps.

I can't run away from the problem. I need to find a way to delve deeper into mysticism and become what Justice and The Hanged Man called a Beyonder.

I need to overcome the fear of the unknown.

The only option now is to wait for the next gathering. I need to see if I

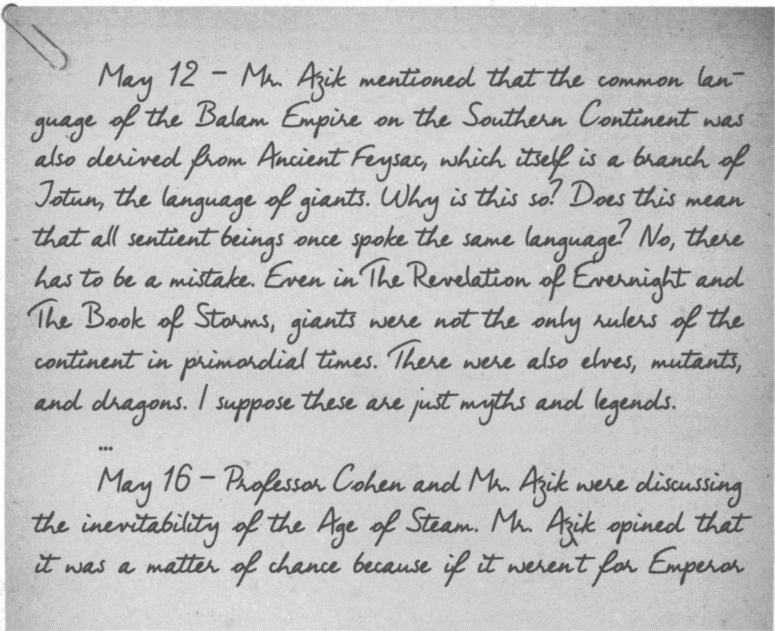
can learn the formula for the Spectator potion—or perhaps other secrets related to mysticism.

Monday is four days away. Before then, I should find out more about the original owner of this body. Why did he commit suicide? What truly happened to him...?

Unable to transmigrate back and wash his hands of everything, Klein picked up the notebook on the table. He wanted to flip through it to see if there were any hints that could help him regain his lost memory.

The original Klein clearly had a habit of keeping detailed notes, apparently even using his notebook as a diary. Klein was fully aware that the cabinet supporting the right side of the desk held a stack of filled notebooks.

The one he held began on May 10. Most of the early entries concerned his school, his mentor, and topics related to his academic field of study.



May 12 - Mr. Azik mentioned that the common language of the Balam Empire on the Southern Continent was also derived from Ancient Feysac, which itself is a branch of Totun, the language of giants. Why is this so? Does this mean that all sentient beings once spoke the same language? No, there has to be a mistake. Even in *The Revelation of Evernight* and *The Book of Storms*, giants were not the only rulers of the continent in primordial times. There were also elves, mutants, and dragons. I suppose these are just myths and legends.

...

May 16 - Professor Cohen and Mr. Azik were discussing the inevitability of the Age of Steam. Mr. Azik opined that it was a matter of chance because if it weren't for Emperor

Roselle, the Northern Continent would still be in the era of cold weapons just like the Southern Continent. Professor Cohen argued that Mr. Azik placed too much emphasis on the contribution of one individual. He believed that as time progressed, even if there wasn't an Emperor Roselle, there would be an Emperor Robert or someone else. Therefore, the Age of Steam might come late, but it is and always has been inevitable. I found little meaning in their debate. I prefer discovering new things and unraveling history obscured by the fog of the past. Perhaps I am more suited to the field of archaeology.

...

May 29 - Welch came to see me. He said he got his hands on a notebook from the Fourth Epoch. My Goddess! A notebook from the Fourth Epoch! He didn't want to go to the archaeology department's students for help, so he asked me and Narya to help him decode its contents. How can I refuse? Of course, I can only do it after my thesis defense. I can't afford to get distracted at this stage.

This entry caught Klein's attention. Compared to the notes and history debates, the appearance of a notebook from the Fourth Epoch was much more likely to be a lead on the mystery surrounding Klein's suicide.

The Fourth Epoch was the era immediately preceding the current one, which was known as the Age of Iron. Its history was shrouded in mystery and incomplete; very few tombs, ancient cities, and records from that time had ever been unearthed. Archaeologists and historians could only piece together a blurry image of the past from the ambiguous holy tomes provided by the seven major churches, which

largely focused on matters of theological importance. They knew of the existence of the Solomon Empire, the Tudor Dynasty, and the Trunsoest Empire.

Having dedicated himself to lifting the veils of mystery and shedding light on history, the original Klein Moretti had little interest in the first three eras, whose events were more legends than anything else. He was far more intrigued by the Fourth Epoch, sometimes known as the Age of Gods.

Hmm, so Klein valued his job interview and was concerned about his future job prospects, but it doesn't seem at all necessary...

Universities were still very scarce, and the majority of students were either of noble birth or came from wealthy families. Even if he was admitted to a school, and even if he wasn't accepted into the inner social circles—being looked down upon because of his class—as long as he wasn't deemed radical, a commoner could still build valuable social connections through social events and group discussions.

The very generous Welch McGovern was an example. He was the son of a banker from Constant, a city in Midseashire of the Loen Kingdom. He was used to asking Naya and Klein for help because they were always in the same group for classwork and projects.

Without thinking further, Klein continued reading the notebook.

June 18 - I have graduated. Farewell, Khoy University!

June 19 - I saw the notebook. By comparing sentence structures and root words, I've realized the writing is a divergent form of Ancient Feysac. More precisely, over the course of its thousand-year history, the Feysac language had been constantly changing, a little at a time.

June 20 - We have deciphered the contents of the first page. The author was a member of a family called Antigonus.

June 21 - He mentioned the Black Emperor. This seems anachronistic, given the time period the notebook was written, based on the first page. Is the professor wrong? Is "Black Emperor" actually a general title for every emperor of the Solomon Empire?

June 22 - The Antigonius family apparently had a very high standing in the Solomon Empire. The author mentions that he was conducting a secret transaction with a person named Tudor. Tudor? As in the Tudor Dynasty?

June 23 - I am trying to restrain myself from thinking about the notebook and going to Welch's place. I need to prepare for the interview! It's very important!

June 24 - Narya tells me that they have found something new. I think I need to check it out.

June 25 - Based on the newly deciphered content, the author had accepted a mission to visit the "Kingdom of the Night" situated at the summit of the highest peak of the Hornacis mountain range. Oh my Goddess! The peak is over 6,000 meters above sea level! How can a country exist up there? How do they survive?

June 26 - Could all of these strange things be real?

The record ended at this point. Zhou Mingrui transmigrated in the early hours of June 28.

And there was indeed an entry for June 27. It was that line: *Everyone will die, including me.* Klein flipped to the page he saw when he first arrived, feeling goosebumps emerge as he made the deduction.

In order to solve the mystery of the original Klein's suicide, he should visit Welch and take a look at the contents of that ancient

notebook. However, with a wealth of experience from novels, movies, and TV series, he suspected that if they were really related, then unknown dangers would likely await him on this visit. Those who went around investigating old castles that they knew full well were haunted were a warning for everyone who came after!

However, he had no choice since running away never solved anything. Evasion would only make matters worse. The problem would simply snowball until it rolled over and crushed him!

Call the police? But I can't exactly say I committed suicide...

Knock!

Knock, knock!

A series of urgent and forceful knocks came from the door.

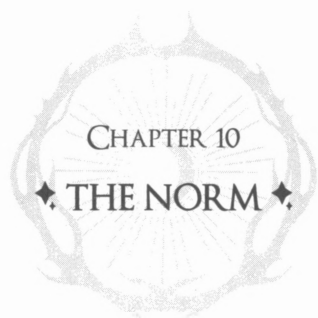
Klein sat straight up and listened.

Knock!

Knock, knock!

The knocks echoed through the empty hallway outside.





“Who is it?”

When Klein first heard the sudden knock at the door, his thoughts were still on the mysterious suicide of the original owner of his body and the unknown dangers that might lie ahead. Without thinking twice, he opened the drawer and grabbed his revolver before answering warily.

There was a brief silence outside for two seconds before a slightly shrill voice with an Awashire accent replied, “It’s me, Mountbatten. Beech Mountbatten.” The voice paused, then added, “The police.”

Beech Mountbatten... Hearing that name, Klein immediately recalled the man to whom it belonged—a policeman in charge of the street where the Morettis lived. He was known to be rude, brutish, and fond of roughing people up. Yet perhaps such a man was necessary as a deterrent for the alcoholics, thieves, part-time criminals, thugs, and perverts. His distinctive voice was one of his trademarks.

“Yes, I’ll be right there!” Klein responded loudly.

He had planned to return the revolver to the drawer, but unsure of why the police were at his door and fearing they might search the room, he cautiously ran to the stove where the flames had long extinguished and concealed the revolver inside it.

Then he picked up the coal basket, tossed a few pieces into the stove to cover the gun, and finally placed the kettle over the stove to complete the ruse.

After tidying up his clothes, he quickly approached the door and murmured, "Sorry, I was taking a nap."

Outside, four policemen in black-and-white checkered uniforms and peaked caps stood waiting. Beech Mountbatten, his brown beard framing his jaw, cleared his throat and said, "These three inspectors have some questions for you."

Inspectors? Reflexively, Klein glanced at the shoulder badges of the other three. Two were decorated with three silver six-pointed stars, and the third had two. All of them were apparently of higher rank than Beech Mountbatten, who sported only three chevrons. As a student of history, Klein knew little about police ranks and their insignia. What he did know was that Beech Mountbatten often boasted about being a senior sergeant.

These three are inspectors, huh?

Drawing on the influence of Benson, Welch, and his classmates, Klein deduced their rank with common sense. He stepped aside and gestured for them to enter the room.

"Please come in. What is this about?"

The leader of the three inspectors was a middle-aged man whose eyes were so sharp they seemed capable of piercing one's very soul and striking fear into one's heart. Wrinkles marked his face around his eyes, and light brown hair peeked from under the edge of his cap. Surveying the room, he asked in a deep baritone, "You are acquainted with Welch McGovern, yes?"

"What happened to him?" Klein blurted out, his heart sinking.

"I'm the one asking the questions," the imposing inspector replied sternly.

The inspector beside him, also wearing three silver six-pointed stars on his shoulders, offered Klein a gentle smile. "Don't be nervous. It's just a routine interview."

This officer was in his thirties, with a straight nose and gray eyes

so indescribably deep that it made him imagine a deserted lake in an ancient forest.

Quietly, Klein took a deep breath and organized his thoughts. "If you mean Welch McGovern, a graduate of Khoy University from Constant, then I'm sure I know him. We were classmates under the same mentor, Senior Associate Professor Quentin Cohen."

In the Loen Kingdom, "professor" signified not only a professional qualification but also a position, much like a combination of professors and department chairs on Earth. There could only be one professor in a university department. If an associate professor wished to become a professor, they had to wait for their superior to retire or force them out somehow.

After years of observation, the kingdom's Higher Education Commission added the title "senior associate professor" to the original three-tier system of lecturers, associate professors, and professors to better retain talent. This title was awarded to anyone with high academic achievements or sufficient seniority who, for some reason, hadn't been able to secure the position of a professor.

Klein met the middle-aged police inspector's gaze and thought for a second before replying, "We have a pretty good relationship. Recently, he, Naya, and I have frequently met to decipher and discuss a notebook from the Fourth Epoch that he'd obtained. Inspectors, did something happen?"

Instead of answering, the middle-aged inspector glanced sideways at his gray-eyed colleague. The inspector with gray eyes and average features replied gently, "I'm very sorry, but Mr. Welch has passed away."

"What?" Klein blurted out in astonishment. Welch had died just like the original owner of this body?

Now that's a little scary!

"What about Naya?" Klein immediately asked.

"Ms. Naya has passed away, too," the gray-eyed inspector said rather calmly. "Both of them died in Mr. Welch's house."

"Were they killed?" Klein asked, though he had a vague guess.

Perhaps it was suicide...

The gray-eyed inspector shook his head.

"No, the evidence at the scene suggests that they committed suicide. Mr. Welch repeatedly hit his head against the wall, smearing it with blood. Ms. Naya drowned herself in a washbasin. The kind used to wash your face."

"That's impossible..." Klein's hair stood on end as if the strange scene were unfolding before his eyes. He could imagine the girl kneeling on a chair with her face buried in a basin of water, her soft brown hair hanging limply from the sides of her head, swaying in the wind, while the rest of her body remained motionless, then Welch collapsing to the ground, his eyes fixed intently on the ceiling, his forehead a gory mess with streaks of blood marking his numerous impacts against the wall, dripping crimson...

The gray-eyed inspector continued, the corner of his mouth twitching, "We believe so, too, but the autopsy results and the signs at the scene ruled out factors such as drugs and external forces. There were no signs of a struggle."

Before Klein could speak again, he stepped forward and casually asked, "When was the last time you saw Mr. Welch or Ms. Naya?" As he spoke, he signaled to his two-star colleague with his eyes—a young man, about Klein's age, with black hair and green eyes. He was good-looking and carried himself with the romantic air of a poet.

Klein's mind spun rapidly while he answered with consideration, "That would have been June 26. We deciphered a new chapter in the notebook together. Then I went home to prepare for my interview on June 30. Uh, the interview is for the history department at Tingen University."

Tingen was known as a university town since it was home to two universities (Tingen and Khoy) as well as technical schools and colleges of law and business. It was second only to Backlund, the kingdom's capital.

As soon as he finished, Klein caught sight of the young police inspector walking toward his desk, where the notebook—more accurately, a diary—rested.

Oh no! I forgot to hide it!

"Hey!" Klein cried out.

The young inspector smiled in response but didn't stop flipping through his notes. The gray-eyed inspector explained, "This is a necessary procedure."

All the while, Beech Mountbatten and the middle-aged inspector with the imposing air stood by and watched without interjecting or assisting in the search.

Where are your search warrants? Klein wanted to ask, but on second thought, the Loen Kingdom's judicial system hadn't developed such a procedure—at least, he wasn't sure if it existed. After all, the police force itself had only been established less than sixteen years ago. When the original owner of this body was still a child, they were called sheriffs.

Unable to stop them, Klein could only watch as the young inspector quickly flipped through his notes. Meanwhile, the gray-eyed inspector asked no further questions.

"What 'strange thing'?" the young police inspector asked abruptly as he reached the end of the notebook. "And what does this mean? 'Everyone will die, including me'...?"

Isn't it common sense that, aside from the gods, everyone eventually dies? Klein was tempted to quibble, but it suddenly occurred to him that reaching out to the police had been part of his contingency plan in case of danger. He'd just been deterred by the lack of a reasonable excuse.

In a split-second decision, he placed his hand over his forehead and answered in a pained voice, "I don't know. I really don't know... I've been feeling that something isn't quite right ever since I woke up this morning. I think I've forgotten some things, especially the events of the past few days. I don't even know what compelled me to write such a sentence."

Sometimes honesty was the best policy. Of course, it required tact—knowing not only what to say but how to arrange the words.

As a seasoned keyboard warrior, Klein had dabbled in sophistry.

"That's absurd! Do you take us for fools?" Beech Mountbatten interjected angrily. He couldn't help himself. This lie was so poor it insulted the intelligence of him and his colleagues. No doubt he believed that it would be better to feign madness than pretend to be an amnesiac.

"I'm speaking the truth," Klein said frankly as he gazed into Mountbatten's and the middle-aged inspector's eyes. It really could not be more true.

"Perhaps that is a possibility," the gray-eyed inspector said slowly.

What? Did he believe it just like that? Even Klein was surprised.

The gray-eyed inspector smiled and added, "An expert will arrive here in two days. Believe me, she should be able to help you recall your lost memories."

An expert? Help me recall my memories? An expert in psychology?

Klein frowned, troubled. What if his memories of Earth were recovered as well? He felt ill.

The young police inspector then set the notebook down and searched the rest of Klein's desk and room. Fortunately, he focused on the books and didn't lift the kettle for a look.

"Well, Mr. Klein, thank you for your cooperation. It would be wise for you not to leave Tingen in the next few days. If you must, please notify Inspector Mountbatten, or you will become a fugitive," the gray-eyed inspector warned before leaving.

That's it? No further questions or deeper investigation? No attempt to take me back to the station and torture me for information?

Klein was at a loss. Still, he desperately needed an answer to the bizarre events surrounding Welch, so he nodded and said, "Of course."

As the inspectors exited one by one, the younger inspector was the last to leave. Before he walked out, he patted Klein on the shoulder. "This is good. You're very lucky."

"What?" Klein asked, puzzled.

The green-eyed inspector, with the romantic air of a poet, smiled and said, "Generally speaking, in incidents like this, it's normal for all involved parties to have died. We're very glad and fortunate that you're still alive."

With that, he exited and politely closed the door behind him.

Normal for all involved parties to die? Fortunate that I'm still alive?!

Despite the warmth of the June afternoon, a chill crawled up Klein's spine.

CHAPTER 11

◆ REAL CULINARY SKILLS ◆

It's normal for all involved parties to die? Very glad I'm still alive? Fortunate?

Shivering with goosebumps, Klein quickly ran to the door, attempting to catch up with the police inspectors and ask them for protection.

But as soon as his hand reached the doorknob, he suddenly stopped.

If it's truly as horrifying as the inspector said, why wouldn't they protect me, an important witness and key lead in the case?

Isn't that a little too careless?

Could it be a test or maybe even bait?

Various thoughts rushed into Klein's mind, conflicting with one another and leading him to suspect that the police were secretly watching him, observing his reaction.

Once he reached this conclusion, he felt much calmer and was no longer consumed by fear and panic. He slowly opened the door and shouted into the staircase in a deliberately trembling voice, "You guys will protect me, right?"

Tap, tap, tap...

There was no response from the police nor a change in the rhythm of their leather shoes against the wooden stairs.

"You will! I'm sure of it!" Klein shouted again in a tone of feigned conviction, attempting to sound like an ordinary citizen who found themselves in danger.

The sound of footsteps gradually receded before fading entirely as they went down the stairs.

Klein scoffed to himself.

What an unbelievable reaction. They really need to brush up on their acting!

He didn't run after them. Instead, he returned to the apartment and closed the door behind him.

In the next few hours, Klein acted out to a range of emotions—restlessness, nervousness, agitation, and distraction. He didn't slack in his performance just because it seemed like no one was around.

Now that's what you call the self-discipline of an actor! he thought mockingly.

When the sun shifted to the west and the clouds on the horizon burned reddish orange, tenants in the building began arriving one after another. Only then did Klein shift his focus elsewhere.

"Melissa is almost home from school..." He looked at the stove, lifted the kettle, brushed aside the coal, and retrieved the revolver.

Without pause or delay, he reached his hand under the thin wooden board at the base of the top bunk, where a dozen or so wood strips crisscrossed to form a frame.

After sliding the revolver between a wood strip and the board, Klein straightened up and waited anxiously, fearing that the police might burst through the door with their guns in hand.

In a typical steampunk world, he was certain his actions wouldn't have been seen by anyone. However, extraordinary forces were at work in this world—ones he had experienced firsthand.

A few minutes later, he heard no movement at the door. There was only the chatter of two tenants discussing a visit to Heart of the Wild, a bar on Ironcross Street.

"Phew," Klein sighed, feeling assured.

All he needed to do now was wait for Melissa to come back and make the lamb and pea stew!

As that thought crossed his mind, Klein could almost taste the rich flavor of the gravy; he could also recall exactly how Melissa prepared her lamb and pea stew.

First, she boiled water to blanch the chunks of meat. Then she added onions, salt, a tiny sprinkle of black pepper, and water to the lamb, setting it to simmer. After a while, she would add the peas and potatoes and continue cooking it for another forty or fifty minutes with the lid on.

How simple and basic... This method relies purely on the natural flavors of the meat!

Klein shook his head.

But there was no other way. In a commoner's home, there were few seasonings and cooking methods to choose from. They could only rely on simple, practical, and economical options. As long as the meat wasn't burnt or spoiled, any method was acceptable for those who could treat themselves to it only a couple of times or even just once a week.

Klein was not a very good cook himself; he had a history of ordering takeout. But by cooking a modest three or four times a week and ever so slowly accumulating practice, he had achieved a passing level of skill, and he was fairly confident he wouldn't ruin the lamb.

Considering the time Melissa comes back, she won't be done until after seven thirty if she has to make herself food. She'll be starving by then... It's time for her to see what real cooking is!

Armed with this excuse, Klein restarted the fire and went to the bathroom to collect water and wash the lamb meat. Then he took out the cutting board and knife to chop the meat into small chunks.

To explain his suddenly acquired culinary skills, he decided to blame it on the deceased Mr. Welch McGovern, who had not only hired a chef specializing in Midseashire-style cuisine but also often created his own dishes and invited people to try them.

Well, dead men tell no tales!

Though there is a chance in a world with Beyonders that the dead are not necessarily unable to speak...

With that in mind, Klein felt a smidge of guilt about his idea.

In any case, he tossed aside his meandering thoughts and placed the meat into a soup bowl. Then he took out the seasoning tin and measured out one and a half spoonfuls of yellowing, coarse salt. Then he carefully extracted grains of black pepper from its dedicated jar and mixed them together before seasoning the meat with the blend.

He placed the stew pot on the stove and, while waiting for it to heat up, rummaged for the leftover carrots from yesterday, cutting them into pieces alongside the onions he had bought today.

When he finished his preparations, he retrieved a small jar from the cabinet and opened it. There wasn't much lard left.

Klein scooped out a spoonful and put it in the pot, letting it melt. Then he added the carrots and onions and stir-fried them for a while.

As the aroma began to fill the room, Klein added the seasoned lamb into the pot and spent some time carefully browning it.

He should have added cooking wine or, at the very least, red wine. However, the Moretti family didn't keep such luxuries at home. Even Benson would only drink one glass of beer a week, so Klein had to make do with what he had and poured in some boiled water instead.

After simmering for about twenty minutes, he opened the lid and added the peas and potatoes to the pot, along with another cup of hot water and two spoonfuls of salt.

He closed the lid and lowered the heat. Exhaling with satisfaction, he waited for his sister to come home.

As seconds turned into minutes, the fragrance in the room grew stronger. There was the alluring scent of the meat, the rich smell of potatoes, and the refreshing aroma of onions.

The smells gradually mingled together. Klein intermittently checked his pocket watch, glancing at the minute hand.

After more than forty minutes, he heard approaching footsteps,

not quite light but rhythmic nonetheless. A key was inserted into the lock, the handle turned, and the door opened.

"Smells good..." Melissa murmured quizzically before even stepping through the door.

Holding her briefcase, she entered and glanced at the stove. "*You* made this?" Her hands stilled in midair, halfway through removing her cap. The look she directed at Klein was filled with alarm.

After twitching her nose and inhaling more of the fragrance, her expression softened, and she seemed to gather some courage.

"You made this?" she asked again.

"Are you afraid I wasted the lamb meat?" Klein retorted with a question of his own and a smile. Without waiting for an answer, he continued, "Don't worry. I specifically consulted with Welch on the recipe for this dish. As you know, he has a good chef."

"Is it your first time?" Melissa's eyebrows furrowed subconsciously, though they soon relaxed in response to the aroma.

"Apparently, I have a knack for it," Klein laughed. "It's almost done. Put your books and cap down, wash your hands, and get ready for a taste. I'm feeling very confident."

When she heard her brother's calm, orderly instructions and saw his gentle smile, Melissa stood rooted at the door, dazed.

"Do you prefer the meat to simmer a little longer so it's soft?" Klein urged with a smile.

"Ah, yes, sure!" Melissa snapped back to her senses. With her briefcase in one hand and her cap in the other, she quickly rushed into the inner room.

When he lifted the lid of the stew pot, a blast of steam drifted upward before Klein's eyes. He had placed two loaves of rye bread on top of the lamb and peas, allowing them to be softened by the warmth while absorbing the aroma.

By the time Melissa had put away her belongings, washed her hands and face, and returned, a plate of lamb and pea stew garnished with potatoes, carrots, and onions was already set on the table. A loaf of rye bread rested on each plate, tinted by its brief dip in the gravy.

"Come on! Try it." Klein gestured toward the wooden fork and spoon next to the plate.

Melissa was still a little confused, but she didn't refuse. Picking up a chunk of potato with her fork, she lifted it to her lips and bit it lightly.

The taste of the starchy potato and the flavor of the gravy rushed into her mouth, flooding it with saliva as she gobbled down the potato in a few short bites.

"Try the meat." Klein motioned toward the plate with his chin.

He had just tasted it for seasoning and thought it was barely at a passing standard. But to a girl who had seen little of the world and only occasionally ate meat, it was more than enough.

Fresh anticipation appeared in Melissa's eyes as she carefully picked up a piece of lamb.

It had been stewed until it was very tender and practically melted as soon as it touched her tongue. The taste of the meat exploded in her mouth, filling it with flavorful juices. It was such an unprecedented sensation that Melissa couldn't stop eating. By the time she realized it, she had already eaten several pieces of lamb.

"I...I... Klein, this was supposed to be for you..." Melissa stammered, blushing.

"I already took a bite long before you. It was my privilege as the chef." Klein smiled, reassuring his sister. He also picked up his fork and spoon, alternating between eating a piece of meat and stuffing his mouth with peas. Occasionally, he set down his utensils, broke off a piece of rye bread, and dipped it in the gravy.

Seeing Klein's casual behavior, Melissa relaxed and savored the delicious food once again.

"It really is delicious. I can't believe it's your first time making it," Melissa praised him wholeheartedly as she looked at the emptied dish, with not a trace of gravy left.

"It's a long way from Welch's chef. When I'm rich, I'll take you and Benson out to a restaurant for an even better meal!" Klein said, beginning to look forward to it himself.

"Your interview will—*burp!*" Melissa started but didn't finish her sentence before an involuntary sound of contentment escaped her. Hastily, she placed her hand over her mouth, looking embarrassed.

It was all the fault of that delicious lamb and pea stew!

Klein laughed to himself and decided not to tease his sister. He pointed at the plate and said, "Now this is your job."

"All right!" Melissa quickly rose, grabbed a wash tub, and rushed out the door.

When she returned, she opened the cabinet out of habit to check the seasoning tin and other ingredients.

"You used these?" Melissa asked in surprise, holding up the bottle of black pepper and the jar of lard.

Klein shrugged and laughed. "Just a little. It's the price of flavor."

Melissa's eyes shifted, her expression changing several times before she finally said, "I'd better do the cooking from now on. Yes... You should concentrate on preparing for your interview. You have to think about your job."



“Sis, can you not rub it in...?” Klein muttered to himself. He felt his head begin to throb again.

The amount Klein had forgotten wasn’t much, but it wasn’t negligible either. With the interview in two days, how could he find time to make up for it...? Furthermore, he’d been swept up in such strange and horrifying events. How was he supposed to get in the mood to study?

Klein gave his sister a perfunctory response and began going through the motions. Melissa moved a chair over to sit beside him and started working on her assignments by the light of the gas lamp.

The atmosphere was serene. When it was almost eleven o’clock, the siblings bade each other good night and went to bed.

...

Knock!

Knock! Knock!

A series of knocks on the door roused Klein from his dreams.

He peered out the window to see the first glimmer of dawn. In a daze, he rolled over and sat up. “Who is it?”

Look at the time! Why didn’t Melissa wake me up?

“It’s me. Dunn Smith,” a steady male voice answered from outside the door.

Dunn Smith? Don't know him...

Klein got out of bed and shook his head as he walked toward the door. He opened it to see the gray-eyed police inspector he'd met the day before standing there.

"Is there something wrong?" Klein asked warily.

The policeman replied with a stern expression, "We spoke to a coachman. He testified that you visited Mr. Welch's residence on June 27—the day Mr. Welch and Ms. Naya died. Furthermore, Mr. Welch was the one who paid for your fare."

Klein was startled. He didn't feel the fear or guilt one might expect from having been caught in a lie. Of course, it was because he hadn't been lying. In fact, he wasn't surprised by the evidence presented by Inspector Dunn Smith.

Apparently, on June 27, the original Klein had indeed gone to Mr. Welch's residence. That same night, when he returned, he had killed himself—just as Welch and Naya had!

Klein forced a smile and said, "That's not sufficient evidence. It cannot directly prove that I am connected to the deaths of Welch and Naya. Honestly, I also want to know what happened to my poor friends. But... I really can't remember. I almost completely forgot what I did that day. You may find it hard to believe, but I only barely realized that I had gone to Welch's place on June 27 based on my own diary entry."

"You certainly have excellent resilience of mind." Dunn Smith nodded without a smile or any trace of anger.

"You should be able to sense my sincerity," Klein said, looking him straight in the eyes.

I haven't told any lies. I just haven't told the whole truth, either.

Dunn Smith didn't respond immediately. He swept his gaze around the room before slowly saying, "Mr. Welch has lost a revolver. I'm guessing...I should be able to find it here. Right, Mr. Klein?"

Indeed...

Klein finally understood where the revolver had come from. A thought flashed through his mind, and he made a decision in an

instant. He raised his hands halfway in the air and backed up one step at a time, leaving an opening before him. Then he gestured toward the bunk bed with his chin.

"It's under the mattress."

He didn't specify that it was the bottom bunk. No one would normally hide something under the top bunk, as any visitor would notice it at a glance.

Dunn Smith did not step forward. The corners of his mouth twitched as he asked, "Nothing else you want to add?"

"There's more!" Klein replied without hesitation. "Yesterday, I woke up in the middle of the night and found myself slumped forward on my desk with a revolver beside me. There was a bullet embedded in the wall. It looked as though I had committed suicide. But due to my inexperience with firearms, or perhaps because I lost my courage at the last moment, the bullet did not achieve its intended effect. My head is still intact, and I'm still alive now.

"And since then, I've lost some memories, including what I saw and did at the Welch residence on June 27. I'm not lying. I really can't remember."

For the sake of dispelling suspicion and distancing himself from all these strange events, Klein explained almost everything that had happened, except for the transmigration and his "gathering."

In addition, Klein had carefully embellished his account so that every sentence could withstand scrutiny. For example, he didn't simply say that the bullet missed his head—he mentioned that it did not achieve the expected result and that his head was still fine.

To others, these two statements might seem to convey the same meaning, but in reality, they were completely different.

Dunn Smith listened quietly, then said, "This corresponds with what I had surmised. It also fits with the hidden logic of similar incidents in the past. Of course, I have no idea how you managed to survive the incident."

"I'm glad you believe me. I have no idea how I survived, either," Klein replied, letting out a small sigh of relief.

"However," Dunn added, "there's no point in me believing you

further. At the moment, you are highly suspicious. You must pass an 'expert' assessment to prove that you've indeed forgotten what you went through and that you did not directly cause the deaths of Mr. Welch and Ms. Naya."

He cleared his throat, his expression growing serious. "Mr. Klein, I'll need you to come with me to the police station. This should take a few days, provided there are no issues with you."

"The expert has arrived?" Klein asked blankly.

Didn't they say it would take another two days?

"She came earlier than expected." Dunn turned aside, gesturing for Klein to step through the door.

"Please allow me to leave a note," Klein requested.

Benson was still away, and Melissa had gone to school. All he could think of was leaving a note to inform them that he was involved in an incident related to Welch and to tell them not to worry about him.

Dunn nodded, not very concerned. "Sure."

Klein returned to the desk. As he searched for paper, he began pondering what would happen next. To be honest, he would much rather not meet the "expert." After all, he had a much bigger secret he was trying to hide.

In a place with seven major churches and under the premise that Emperor Roselle—who Klein suspected to be a forerunner in transmigration—had been assassinated, something like "transmigration" would probably land him in court or even before a tribunal!

But without weapons, combat skills, or supernatural powers, he was no match for a seasoned enforcer of the law. What was more, a handful of Dunn's subordinates stood outside in the dark corridor.

If they draw their guns and shoot at me, I'm done for!

Klein exhaled.

One step at a time.

He left the note, grabbed his keys, and followed Dunn out of the flat.

Four policemen in black-and-white checkered uniforms stood on high alert on either side of the dark corridor.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Their shoes rapped against the wooden stairs as Klein followed alongside Dunn downstairs, the steps creaking in protest.

Outside the building was a parked four-wheel carriage. On its side was the police emblem, featuring two crossed swords and a crown. The street around them was as crowded and bustling as it was every morning.

"Go on," Dunn signaled for Klein to go first.

Klein was just about to step forward when an oyster seller abruptly grabbed a customer, accusing him of being a thief. The disagreement quickly became physical, spooking the horse and creating a scene of utter chaos.

An opportunity!

There wasn't much time for Klein to think; he leaned forward and dashed into the crowd. Shoving and dodging, he raced frantically toward the other end of the street.

To avoid meeting the expert, his only option was to head to the pier outside the city, catch a boat down Tussock River, and escape to the capital, Backlund. It would be easier to hide in the more densely populated city. Of course, he could also take a steam train eastward to Enmat Harbor nearby, board a boat to Pritz Harbor, and then proceed to Backlund from there.

Soon, Klein reached the intersection and turned onto Ironcross Street, where several carriages for hire were parked.

"To the pier outside the city," Klein declared as he hoisted himself onto one of the carriages.

He already had a plan in mind: First, he would mislead the police pursuing him, and once the carriage was a safe distance away, he would jump off.

"All right." The carriage driver tugged at the reins.

Clop! Clop! Clop!

The carriage rolled down Ironcross Street.

Just as Klein was about to jump off, he noticed that the carriage had turned onto another road, one that didn't lead out of the city!

"Where are you going?" Klein blurted, freezing in confusion.

"To the Welch residence..." the carriage driver replied flatly.

What?!

In shock, Klein watched as the carriage driver turned around, revealing his deep gray eyes. It was Dunn Smith, the police inspector!

"You!" Klein exclaimed in horror. Suddenly, the world seemed to spin as he sat up abruptly.

Sat up?

Klein looked around, bewildered. He saw the bright crimson moon outside the window and noticed his room was shrouded in a crimson veil. He felt his forehead with his hand and discovered it was moist and clammy. His back felt the same.

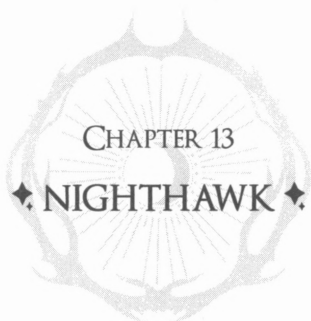
"A nightmare..." Klein slowly sighed. "Thank goodness... Thank goodness..."

He found it strange that he'd been so lucid in his dream. After calming down, Klein checked his pocket watch and saw that it was only two in the morning. He got out of bed quietly, intending to head to the bathroom to wash his face and deal with his burgeoning bladder.

After opening the door, he walked along the dark corridor. With the help of the dim moonlight spilling in, he quietly approached the communal bathroom. It was then that he suddenly noticed a silhouette next to the window at the end of the hallway.

The figure wore what appeared to be a black trench coat, shorter than a cloak but longer than a suit jacket. The silhouette was partly submerged in darkness and partly bathed in the cold light of the crimson moon. Slowly, the figure turned around, revealing eyes that were deep, cold, and gray.

It's Dunn Smith!



Shuffle.

Klein couldn't help but step back. For a moment, he was unsure if he was awake or still in his dreams.

The figure removed his black top hat and bowed very slightly. Smiling, he said in a deep voice, "Let me introduce myself again. Dunn Smith, Nighthawk."

Nighthawk? The name of the Beyonder organization belonging to the Church of Evernight? Klein remembered that Justice and The Hanged Man had mentioned it before. Realizing this, but before he could dwell on the implications, he blurted, "You can control dreams? You made me dream that just now?"

Nighthawk Dunn Smith replaced his hat, concealing his mildly receding hairline. His deep gray eyes held a hint of a smile as he said, "No, I only entered your dream and provided the necessary guidance."

His voice was deep and soothing, reverberating through the dimly lit corridor without disturbing the sweet dreams of others. "In dreams, many of your usually suppressed emotions and dark thoughts are amplified. It makes everything seem chaotic, absurd, and crazy. The truth still exists, even if it's concealed and obscured.

For veterans like me, it's as clear as day. Compared to your conscious self, I trust the 'you' in your dreams more."

What...? What normal person could possibly control his own dream? If I had dreamed of something on Earth, wouldn't I have been discovered?

Taken aback, Klein was belatedly horrified by what had happened in the dream.

Yet he quickly noticed another peculiar point: He remembered being remarkably aware and rational in his dream—knowing what to say and what not to say.

To put it simply, it didn't seem like he was dreaming at all!

Does that mean Dunn Smith only "saw" what I wanted him to see?

Klein's mind whirled as he grasped a hint of enlightenment.

Was it a perk of transmigration that bestowed a special property on his soul? Or was it the effect of that luck-enhancement ritual?

"So, Mr. Smith, do you believe for a fact that I've really lost my memory?" Klein asked after organizing his thoughts.

Dunn Smith did not answer directly but instead gave him a long look. "You don't seem very surprised by all this. The people I met in the past refused to believe in the existence of supernatural powers, even after they'd just woken from their dreams. They'd rather believe that they hadn't really woken up."

Klein hummed his acknowledgment before saying, "Perhaps it's because I've been praying and hoping that such a power would be able to help me."

"An interesting way of thinking... Perhaps it wasn't just luck that enabled you to survive," Dunn replied, nodding expressionlessly. "I can now confirm that you have indeed lost parts of your memories due to the incident, especially those directly related to it."

"Then can I go back now?" Klein asked hesitantly, heaving a long sigh of relief in his mind.

Dunn placed a hand in his pocket and walked slowly toward Klein. The darkness around them turned tranquil and gentle.

"No, you still have to come with me to see the expert." The corners of his mouth curled into a polite smile.

"Why?" Klein blurted out, then added hastily, "You don't trust your own ability to influence my dream?"

You must be joking. If that "expert" specializes in hypnosis or mind reading, wouldn't that expose my biggest secret? The consequences would be unimaginable!

"I've always been modest about my abilities, though I remain quite confident in all things related to dreams," Dunn replied calmly. "However, for key matters, there is no harm in confirming them again. Besides, we specialize in very different things. Perhaps she can help you recover some of your memories."

Not waiting for Klein to reply, his voice deepened. "After all, you are the key to the whereabouts of the Antigonus family's notebook."

"What?" Klein blinked in surprise.

Dunn stopped in front of him, locking his gray eyes onto Klein's, and said, "That notebook from the Fourth Epoch was not found at the scene nor anywhere in the entire house. Welch is dead, and Naya is dead. You are our only lead."

"...All right, then." Klein went silent for a moment before exhaling. *The notebook is missing... Now that's strange indeed!*

How have I not thought about the whereabouts of that notebook from the Fourth Epoch?

Dunn nodded subtly as he walked past Klein. "Lock your door. Come with me to the Welch residence right now. The expert is waiting for us there."

Klein drew a silent breath. His heart was thumping wildly with unease.

He wanted to refuse or even run away. However, after what had happened in the dream, he was certain Dunn Smith would be on his guard more than ever. And with the power discrepancy between a normal human and a Beyonder, there was little chance that he'd be able to overpower the man.

He must have a gun on him, too... And he's probably gotten plenty of practice...

Many thoughts flashed through his mind, but in the end, Klein chose to accept reality.

"All right," he said with a sigh.

I can only take one step at a time and see how things unfold. Maybe the special property that helped me in my dream will take effect again...

"Let's go," Dunn said in his impassive tone.

Klein turned and followed, but after taking two steps, he suddenly stopped and said, "Mr. Smith, I... I would like to use the bathroom first."

That's the reason I got out of bed in the first place...

Dunn did not stop him. Instead, he gave him a long look and said, "No problem, Klein. Believe me, in the darkness of the night, I am far more powerful than you can imagine."

"In the darkness of the night," Klein silently repeated the phrase.

He relieved himself in the bathroom, making no further reckless attempts to escape. Then he washed his face with cold water, completely calming himself down.

After changing his clothes and locking the door to his apartment, Klein followed Dunn down the stairs, his footsteps soft against the worn wood.

In such serenity, Dunn Smith suddenly spoke. "At the end of the dream, why did you try to run away? What were you afraid of?"

Klein's mind raced, and he immediately came up with an answer. "I don't remember what I did at Welch's place, nor do I remember if I directly caused his and Naya's deaths. I was afraid it would be proven to be my doing, and I didn't want to take that gamble. I thought it would be better to escape and start anew on the Southern Continent."

"I would have done the same if I were you," Dunn said as he pushed open the door to the building, letting the cool midnight breeze disperse the stuffiness inside.

He climbed onto the carriage first, unconcerned that Klein might try to run away. It was the same carriage Klein had seen in his

dream—a four-wheel vehicle drawn by a single horse, driven by a carriage driver. The police emblem of two crossed swords beneath a crown was engraved onto its sides.

Klein climbed in after Dunn. A thick carpet was laid across the interior, and the air carried a soothing fragrance.

Once he was seated, he attempted to probe for more information. “Mr. Smith, what if—and I mean *if*—the expert confirms that I really have forgotten part of my memories and that there’s no further evidence proving I’m the perpetrator instead of the victim? Would this all be over then?”

“In theory, yes. We would search for the notebook through other means. As long as it exists, it can be found. Of course, before that, we’d need to ensure you haven’t been cursed or left with any lingering traces of evil spirits, that you don’t suffer from any psychological aftereffects, and that you can live the rest of your life peacefully and healthily.”

A slight smile appeared on Dunn Smith’s face—one that seemed rather unusual.

Klein caught on to that peculiarity keenly and pressed further. “In theory?”

“Yes, only in theory. In this line of work, there are always twisted, unorthodox, and inexplicable things happening.” Dunn looked Klein in the eye and said, “How these things progress or end is not always within our expectations or control.”

“For example?” Klein began to feel a tinge of fear.

The carriage sped through the almost empty streets. Dunn took out a pipe from his pocket and sniffed it before saying, “When we believe that things have come to an end, that everything has returned to normal, something might resurface in the most terrifying, bone-chilling way.

“A few years ago, we handled a case involving a cult. They convinced their followers to commit suicide as living sacrifices to please a wicked god. When one of the followers was chosen, his survival

instincts triumphed over his foolishness and twisted beliefs, and the psychedelic drugs he had been given. He escaped in secret and reported the cult to the police.

"The case was handed over to us. It was a minor mission since the cult had no Beyonders. The deity they worshipped was nothing more than a fabrication by their leader, who had traded his humanity and morality for wealth and personal gratification.

"We only sent two team members, along with police support, to successfully take down the cult. No one escaped justice. As for the whistleblower, we confirmed that he carried no lingering traces of evil spirits, was not cursed, and suffered no mental disorders. He had no personality issues or any other irregularities. Nothing.

"After that, his life went quite smoothly. He advanced in his career, married a wonderful woman, and fathered a son and a daughter. The shadows of his past seemed to be long behind him, and the horrors and bloodshed appeared to have vanished over the horizon."

At this point, Dunn Smith smiled faintly before continuing, "Yet, this March, despite being financially stable and having a loving wife and two adorable children...he strangled himself to death in his office. With his own bare hands."

The crimson moonlight shined through the carriage window, casting a glow upon Dunn Smith. In that instant, his seemingly self-mocking smile sent a chill up Klein's spine.

"Strangled himself to death...with his bare hands..." Klein silently inhaled a gasp of cool air, as if foreseeing his own tragic end.

Even if I escaped it once, is this just delaying the inevitable?

Is there a way to resolve this completely?

Do I have to become a Beyonder to fight against it?

Silence returned to the carriage. Countless thoughts flooded Klein's mind, then disappeared one by one.

In that eerie silence, the carriage traveled swiftly for a long time.

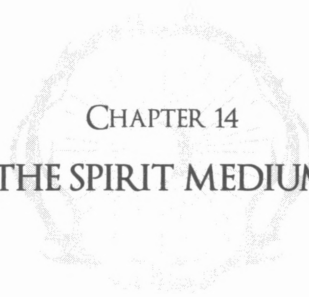
Just as Klein made up his mind to consult Dunn Smith for a possible solution, the carriage came to a halt.

"Mr. Smith, we have arrived at Mr. Welch's residence," the carriage driver announced.

"Let's go." Dunn straightened his black, knee-length trench coat. Then, as if remembering something, he added, "Oh, right, I should tell you ahead of time. Our expert's cover is that they're the most renowned spirit medium in Awashire."

Klein suppressed his other thoughts and asked curiously, "Then what is their actual identity?"

Dunn half-turned his body and looked at him with his deep gray eyes as he said, "A real spirit medium."



CHAPTER 14

◆ THE SPIRIT MEDIUM ◆

A real medium..., Klein thought and chose not to speak further. He followed Dunn Smith out of the carriage.

The Welch residence in Tingen was a standalone house with a garden. The road outside the metal fence was wide enough for four carriages to pass through at once. Streetlamps lined the sides of the road every fifty meters, looking different from the ones Klein had seen in his previous life. These were gas lamps as tall as an adult male, making it convenient for the lamplighters to reach them. The black metal frame around each one was pressed tightly against the glass, forming a grated pattern and giving them the appearance of classical lanterns. The coldness of the metal intertwined with the warmth of the flame, reflecting the coexistence of darkness and light.

Walking along the pathway bathed in a dim yellow glow, Klein and Dunn Smith passed through the half-open gate and entered the house Welch had rented.

Facing the main entrance was a cemented path, wide enough for two carriages, that led straight to a two-story house. To its left was a garden, and to its right a lawn. The pleasantly faint fragrance of the flowers mixed with the fresh scent of the grass, creating a sense of relaxation and ease.

As soon as he stepped through the gate, goosebumps spread across

Klein's body, prompting him to glance around. He felt as if in the garden, in the shadows of the front lawn, on the rooftop, behind the swing—in every dark corner—pairs of eyes were observing him!

There was clearly no one here, yet Klein felt as though he were on a crowded street.

A shiver shot up his spine as he tensed from the bizarre contrast between his perception and reality.

"Something's wrong!" he couldn't help but exclaim to Dunn.

Dunn's expression remained unchanged as he walked beside him. He replied calmly, "Just ignore them."

Since the Nighthawk had said so, Klein tolerated the chilling sensation of being followed, spied upon, and watched, despite being unable to see anyone. Step by step, he walked up to the main entrance of the house.

If this goes on any longer, I'll probably go mad...

As Dunn reached out to knock on the door, Klein swiftly turned around for another glance. The flowers swayed in the wind; there was not a single person in sight.

"Come in, gentlemen," a rather ethereal voice called from inside the house.

Dunn turned the doorknob and pushed the door open. He addressed a woman sitting on the sofa, "Daly, any results?"

The chandelier in the living room was unlit. A set of three leather couches surrounded a marble coffee table. On the table was a lit candle, but its flame emitted a cobalt blue glow, casting the half-enclosed living room, dining room, and kitchen with an eerie hue.

In the middle of the sofa sat a woman dressed in a hooded black robe. Blue eyeshadow and blush adorned her face. Wrapped around her exposed wrist was a silver bracelet with a white crystal pendant dangling from it.

At first glance, Klein was struck by an odd feeling: Her outfit was almost too fitting...

Is she dressing up as herself?

Daly, a medium with uncanny beauty, swept a glance over Klein

with her twinkling emerald eyes before turning back to Dunn Smith. She said, "The spirits that were originally here have all faded, including those of Welch and Naya. The little rascals hanging around now don't know anything."

Spirits? A spirit medium... All those invisible things spying on me just now were spirits? There were so many of them!

Klein removed his hat and placed it across his chest, bowing slightly as he said, "Good evening, madam."

"That certainly is tricky..." Dunn Smith replied with a sigh. "Daly, this is Klein Moretti. See if he's able to tell you anything."

The medium, Daly, shifted her gaze to Klein immediately. She pointed at the armchair beside her and said, "Please take a seat."

"Thank you." Klein nodded, took a few steps forward, and sat down obediently. His heart pounded uncontrollably.

Whether I survive and whether I get through this successfully or have my secrets exposed will all depend on whatever happens next!

And the most helpless part of it all was that he had nothing to rely on. His only hope was that his inherent specialness would protect him...

This feeling really sucks..., Klein thought wretchedly.

When Dunn sat down on the loveseat across from Klein, Daly took out two thumb-sized glass bottles from her waist pouch and smiled at Klein with her emerald eyes.

"I need a bit of help here. After all, you're not an enemy, so I shouldn't be too rough with you, as that would make you uncomfortable or even put you in pain. It could even leave behind some severe side effects. Instead, I'll provide you with some fragrances and give you sufficient tenderness and lubrication so you can gradually loosen up and truly immerse yourself in the sensations."

Why does that sound kind of wrong...?

Klein gaped, his eyes filled with shock.

Seated across from him, Dunn chuckled and said, "Don't mind her. We're different from those guys in the Church of Storms. Here, ladies can tease men, too. You should understand this all too well

since your mother was a devout believer in the Goddess. You and your brother even attended Sunday school at church.”

“I understand. I just never thought that she would be so...so...” Klein gestured vaguely, unable to find the right words. He almost blurted out the direct translation for *NSFW*.

Dunn’s mouth curled up at the corners. “Don’t worry. Daly seldom does this. She’s just trying to put you at ease. She much prefers corpses over men.”

“You make me sound like a pervert,” Daly interjected with a smile.

She opened one of the small bottles and dripped a few drops into the bright blue flame of the candle.

“Night vanilla, slumber flower, and chamomile, all distilled and extracted into this aromatic essence. I call it *Amantha*, which means ‘tranquility’ in *Hermes*. It smells really good.”

As they chatted, the candle flame flickered, evaporating the floral essence and filling the room with its scent.

A soothing fragrance curled into Klein’s nose. His body lost its tension, and an overwhelming sense of calm washed over him, as if he were gazing into the darkness of a tranquil night.

“This one is called the *Eye of the Spirit*. Barks and leaves of drago and poplar trees are sun-dried for seven days and decocted thrice. Then they’re immersed in liquor like lanch. Of course, a few lines of incantation are involved as well...”

As Daly spoke, she dripped the amber liquid onto the cobalt blue flame.

Upon smelling the ethereal aroma of the liquor, Klein noticed the candle flame began to dance wildly. Daly’s blue eyeshadow and blush seemed to glitter eerily in the light, making him see double.

“They’re great tools for reaching across the divide...and with a sufficiently enthralling essential oil...”

As Daly continued her unhurried explanation, Klein felt as if her voice was coming from all around him.

Dazed, he looked around and realized that everything was

swaying, dissolving into a blur. It was like he was shrouded in layers and layers of thick fog. Even his body felt weightless, untethered by gravity, as he floated in place.

Colors bled into each other like an impressionist painting—the reds grew redder, the blues bluer, the blacks blacker. Everything looked more vivid than usual but also dreamy and hazy. All around him, fragmented murmurs echoed like the whispering of hundreds, maybe thousands, of invisible voices.

This feels similar to the luck-enhancement ritual I did before...but without the kind of madness that makes my head feel like exploding...

Klein wondered as he took in his surroundings. Then his gaze locked onto a pair of eyes as bright as emeralds.

On a blurry “sofa” sat Daly, draped in her black robe. Her eerie gaze was fixed above Klein’s head. Smiling, she said in a gentle voice, “Let me properly introduce myself. I am Daly, a spirit medium.”

But...I can still think clearly and rationally...just like during the luck-enhancement ritual and the “gathering”...

As the thought crossed his mind, he feigned disorientation and said, “Hello...”

“The mental space of humans is extremely vast. Many secrets are hidden within the mind. Look at the ocean—what we know is only the island floating on the surface. In reality, a far larger portion of the island remains hidden beneath the waves. Beyond that, there is an entire ocean surrounding it and a boundless sky above, representing the spiritual world...”

“You are the spirit of your body. Not only do you know of the islands above, but you also know of the depths below and the vast ocean beyond...”

“Anything that exists leaves behind traces. The surface memories of the island may be wiped away, but what remains beneath the sea and within the great expanse of the ocean will surely leave behind a remnant, shadow, or projection of itself...”

Daly spoke in a slow, soothing voice as she guided Klein. The

blurry winds and shifting shadows around him changed, taking on indistinct forms. It was as though the ocean of Klein's spirit had been fully exposed, waiting for him to wade in and search its depths.

Klein watched calmly, occasionally "churning" the ocean as if he were looking for something. Then, in an airy voice, he replied, "No... I can't remember... I have forgotten..."

He expressed just the right amount of anguish.

Daly tried once more to guide him, but with his mind fully alert, Klein remained unaffected.

"Okay. We shall end here. You may go back."

"Go back."

"Go back..."

As the whispering voice echoed in his ears, Daly disappeared, and the winds and shadows settled. The ethereal scent of oils and the subtle aroma of liquor became more distinct.

The colors returned to normal, and he no longer felt untethered. With a quiver, Klein regained the weight of his body.

He opened his eyes—though he had no memory of closing them—and saw the candle with the bright blue flame still flickering before him. Dunn Smith remained comfortably seated on the love-seat across the room while Daly, in her black-hooded robe, sat beside him.

"Why were you using theories from those the Psychology Alchemists?" Dunn furrowed his brows at Daly.

As Daly put away the two small bottles, she replied calmly, "I think they're fairly accurate. At least, they correspond with some of my own experiences and what I've seen..."

Before Dunn could respond, Daly shrugged and said, "This tricky fellow didn't leave a single trace behind."

Hearing this, Klein heaved a long sigh of relief. He feigned ignorance and asked, "Oh, it's over? What happened? It felt like I just took a nap..."

That means I passed the test, right?

Thank goodness I had the luck-enhancement ritual as a rehearsal!

"Just think of it that way." Dunn cut him off and turned back to Daly. "Have you examined Welch's and Naya's bodies?"

"The corpses can tell us more than you'd imagine. It's a pity, but Welch and Naya did indeed commit suicide. I can only tell you that the force that drove them to it is something to be feared. It didn't leave behind a single trace."

Daly stood up and pointed at the candle. "I'm going to rest now."

The cobalt blue glow extinguished, and the house was instantly cast in a warm, crimson hue.

...

"Congratulations. You may go home now. But remember, you cannot tell your family or friends what happened here. You must swear it," Dunn said as he led Klein to the door.

Surprised, Klein asked, "Is there no need to examine me for curses or any traces that might have been left behind by evil spirits?"

"Daly didn't mention anything, so there's no need for it," Dunn answered simply.

Thus reassured, Klein's previous worries resurfaced, and he hurriedly asked, "How can I be certain that I will be free from trouble from now on?"

"You don't have to worry too much," Dunn said, his lips twitching slightly. "Based on statistics from similar incidents in the past, eighty percent of survivors don't experience any horrifying side effects. Well...I made that number up based on my anecdotal memory... It's roughly that...more or less..."

"So that means...the other twenty percent are unlucky bastards..." Klein muttered.

"If you're that worried, you can consider joining us as an office worker. That way, if there are any signs, we can detect them in time," Dunn said offhandedly as he approached the carriage. "Or you could just become a Beyonder. After all, we're not your nannies. No one is going to guard you day and night and watch what you get up to with women."

"Can I?" Klein asked, more out of curiosity than excitement. After all, how could it be so easy to become part of the Nighthawks and obtain supernatural power?

It's the power of the Beyonders!

Dunn paused mid-step, then turned his head to give Klein a side-long look.

"...Technically, yes... It depends..."

What?!

Klein was stunned. He stared at him blankly, standing beside the carriage, before responding, "Really?"

Who are you kidding? Is it really that easy to become a Beyonder?

Dunn chuckled, his gray eyes shadowed by the dim glow of the carriage lamp.

"You don't believe me? Frankly, to become a Nighthawk, you'd have to give up many things. Your freedom, for instance."

He let that sink in for a moment before continuing.

"Even if we set that aside, there's another issue. Firstly, you're not a member of the clergy nor a devoted parishioner. That means you won't get to pick your own path or choose the safest option."

Dunn placed a foot on the carriage step and hoisted himself inside as he went on.

"...And secondly, among the cases we, the Mandated Punishers, the Machinery Hivemind, and other judiciaries deal with annually, a quarter of them involve Beyonders who've lost control."

A quarter... Beyonders who've lost control...

Klein gaped at him, the weight of those words settling in.

Then Dunn half-turned toward him. His gray eyes were deep and unreadable, without a trace of a smile.

"And among those cases, a large portion of them are our own teammates."

CHAPTER 15

◆ THE INVITATION ◆

“Why?” Klein blurted out, a shocking wave of tumultuous emotions rising in his heart.

Were there really such serious hidden risks to being a Beyonder? So much so that even the church’s internal enforcers—the Beyonders responsible for dealing with heinous supernatural incidents—were also prone to problems?

Dunn settled into his seat. His expression and tone remained unchanged.

“This is not something you need to understand, nor is it something you *can* understand unless you become one of us.”

Klein was dumbstruck for a moment. After he sat down, he asked in a half-joking, half-dubious tone, “If I don’t understand it, how can I decide whether to join?”

And if not joining means never understanding, then isn’t this just an endless cycle?

Dunn Smith took out his pipe again, lifting it to his nose to take a whiff.

“You’ve misunderstood. Becoming one of us also includes our office workers.”

“In other words, if I become one of your clerks, I’ll gain access to these secrets and learn about the hidden dangers that plague

Beyonders and the risks they might face. Then I can decide whether I want to become a Beyonder later?" Klein reorganized his thoughts, summarizing Dunn's point.

Dunn smiled. "Yes, that's right, except for one thing. You cannot simply become a Beyonder just because you want to. All the major churches are strict about this."

It would be odder if they weren't..., Klein thought.

He pressed further, emphasizing his point with a subtle gesture. "Then what about your office workers? The selection process must be strict, too, right?"

"There shouldn't be any problems if it's you," Dunn replied, his eyes half-closed and his expression relaxed as he idly sniffed the pipe. However, he didn't light it.

"Why?" Klein asked again, confused. At the same time, he thought to himself mockingly, *Could it be that my uniqueness as a transmigrator shines like a firefly in the night—extraordinary and bright?*

Dunn opened one eye slightly, his gray irises reflecting the same depth and tranquility as before.

"First of all, you managed to survive this incident without our help, which suggests you possess certain exceptional qualities that set you apart from others. For instance, luck. Lucky people are always welcomed wherever they go."

Seeing Klein's dazed expression, Dunn chuckled.

"Fine, just think of that as a humorous way of putting it. Secondly, you're a graduate of Khoy University's history program. That's an area of expertise we urgently need.

"Although Leumi, as a follower of the Lord of Storms, holds despicable views on women, his opinions on society, humanities, economics, and politics remain incisive. He once said that talents are key to maintaining a competitive advantage and ensuring positive development—a sentiment I very much agree with."

Noticing Klein's slightly furrowed brows, Dunn elaborated offhandedly, "You should be able to imagine that we frequently come across documents and artifacts from the Fourth Epoch and even

earlier. Many cults and heretics attempt to gain power from these things. Sometimes, the objects themselves can lead to strange and terrifying events.

"Except for Beyonders in specialized fields, most of us aren't particularly scholarly. Or rather, we've long passed that age." At this, Dunn pointed to his own head, the corner of his mouth curving up slightly, as if mocking himself. "That dry, boring knowledge always puts us to sleep. Even a Sleepless can't resist it."

Klein listened attentively.

"In the past, we consulted historians and archaeologists, but that risked exposing our secrets and, worse, bringing misfortune upon these otherwise uninvolved academics. That's why adding a knowledgeable professional to our ranks is a golden opportunity we can't easily refuse."

Klein nodded lightly, accepting Dunn's explanation. His thoughts scattered in different directions, and after a brief pause, he asked:

"Then why don't you simply, um...acquire and train one?"

Dunn continued, "This brings me to the third point, which is also the final and most important one. You've already been through a supernatural incident, so inviting you is not a breach of confidentiality. Whereas if we actively recruited a new member and failed, I would bear the responsibility for exposing our secrets. Most of our team members and office staff come from within the church."

"Why are you so strict about maintaining confidentiality?" Klein asked curiously. "Wouldn't spreading the truth about certain matters and increasing public awareness lessen the chances of similar mistakes happening again? The greatest fear stems from the fear of the unknown. If we make the unknown known, wouldn't that help?"

Dunn Smith shook his head. "No. Humanity's foolishness is beyond your imagination. Publicizing certain cases would actually lead to more copycat behavior, more chaos, and even more severe incidents."

Klein understood his point and hummed in agreement. "I see. The only lesson humans have taken from history is that humans

cannot learn from their history. They're always repeating the same tragedies."

"Yes, that famous saying from Emperor Roselle is indeed very profound," Dunn agreed.

...Emperor Roselle said that? This forefather of a transmigrator really went out of his way to leave no chance for any latecomers to act cool...

For a moment, he didn't know what else to say.

Dunn turned his head and gazed out of the carriage window. The dim light from the streetlamps wove together, displaying the splendor of civilization against the night's darkness.

"...There's a similar saying within the judiciary of the major churches. This might be the real reason for the strict confidentiality in keeping the truth from the common people."

"What is it?" Klein's interest was piqued, excitement bubbling at the thought of peeking behind the curtain.

Dunn turned back to him, and for the first time, Klein noticed the subtle tension in his facial muscles.

"Faith and fear beget turmoil. More faith and more fear beget even greater turmoil until everything is destroyed."

Dunn let out a soft sigh. "Meanwhile, besides praying for the blessings and assistance of the gods, humans are unable to deal with actual great turmoil."

"Faith and fear beget turmoil. More faith and more fear beget even greater turmoil..."

Klein recited the words silently to himself, but their full meaning eluded him. That uncertainty in itself stirred a vague sense of unease.

It was as if, beyond the streetlamps' glow, in the darkness untouched by light, countless open mouths and malicious eyes lurked unseen.

The horse trotted nimbly, the carriage wheels rolling steadily along the cobbled streets. As Ironcross Street gradually came into view, Dunn suddenly broke the silence with a formal invitation.

"Well, would you like to join us as a clerk?"

Klein hesitated. His mind flooded with thoughts, weighing the

implications. After a moment, he asked, "Can I take some time to consider?"

It was not a decision to be made hastily or recklessly.

"Certainly. Just give me an answer before Sunday," Dunn said with a nod. "Of course, remember to keep this a secret. You must not tell anyone about what happened to Welch, including your brother and sister. If the secret gets out, it won't just bring them trouble. You might also find yourself summoned to a special court."

"I understand," Klein answered solemnly.

Silence returned to the carriage.

As they neared Ironcross Street and his home came into sight, a thought suddenly struck Klein. He hesitated for a few seconds before asking:

"Mr. Smith, what kind of salary and benefits do your office staff receive?"

This is a serious consideration...

Dunn was momentarily taken aback but soon answered with a smile.

"There's no need for you to worry about that. Our funding is guaranteed by both the church and the police department. For newly hired office staff, the weekly salary starts at two pounds and ten soli. On top of that, there's an additional ten soli subsidy for risk and confidentiality. That brings it to a total of three pounds a week, which is not too far from what a full-time university lecturer earns.

"Additionally, you will receive raises according to your experience and contributions. We typically sign five-year contracts with our office employees. After five years, you may resign normally if you don't wish to continue, though you'll need to sign a lifetime confidentiality agreement. You also won't be allowed to leave Tingen without an official request and prior approval. If you wish to move to another city, you must register with the local Nighthawks at your earliest convenience.

"By the way, you won't get every Sunday off, only every other Sunday. We must always have three office staff on duty at any given time.

If you plan to travel to the South or Desi Bay for a vacation, you'll need to switch shifts and coordinate with your colleagues."

Dunn finished speaking just as the carriage pulled to a stop outside Klein's flat.

"I understand," Klein said as he stepped off the carriage, then paused on the side of the street. "By the way, Mr. Smith, once I've made my decision, where should I go to find you?"

Dunn let out a deep, low-throated chuckle before replying, "Go to The Hound Pub on Besik Street and tell Wright, the owner, that you need to hire a small mercenary squad."

"Huh?" Klein was momentarily confused.

"Our address is also confidential. Until you officially join us, I can't tell you directly," Dunn said with a smile. "All right, Mr. Klein Moretti, I wish you a good dream tonight."

Klein removed his hat and gave a polite bow, watching as the departing carriage gradually picked up speed.

He took out his pocket watch and snapped it open. It was only a little past four in the morning. A cool breeze drifted through the street, carrying a quiet stillness. The dim glow of the streetlamps cast a soft yellow hue over the deserted road.

Klein took a deep breath, letting the tranquil night air fill his lungs.

To think that the busiest and noisiest district during the day could be so deserted and quiet at night—a stark contrast to the silent, invisible gazes at the Welch residence and the enchanting séance that had just taken place.

It was only then that Klein realized his back was drenched in sweat, his linen shirt clinging to his skin, cold and clammy.

CHAPTER 16

◆ DOGS AND MICE ◆

Phew, I passed the test with the medium...

Klein exhaled as he slowly turned around, savoring the cool breeze and the tranquility of the night as he approached the door of his building.

He took out his keys, inserted one into the lock, and turned it gently, allowing the darkness and crimson moonlight to mix and expand with the creak of the opening door.

Walking up the empty staircase and breathing in the crisp air, Klein was struck by the odd feeling that he had gained a few extra hours more than everyone else. The realization made his steps feel lighter.

Click.

Maintaining this mood, he opened the door to his flat. But before he could step inside, he saw a silhouette sitting silently at his desk.

Her black hair was bathed in crimson light, and her brown eyes were bright above her delicate features—Melissa Moretti!

“Klein, where did you go?” Melissa asked, her brows finally relaxing after furrowing in concern. Then, as if needing to justify her presence and clarify her reasoning, she quickly added, “Just now, I got up to go to the bathroom. That’s when I realized you weren’t home.”

With a wealth of experience in lying to his parents, Klein’s brain spun quickly before he put on a bitter smile and replied calmly, “I woke up and couldn’t fall back asleep. Instead of wasting time, I

figured I'd get some exercise, so I went out to run a few laps. Just look at all this sweat!"

He took off his jacket and half-turned, pointing at his damp back.

Melissa stood up, glanced at him half-heartedly, and deliberated for a moment before saying, "To be honest, Klein, you don't have to put so much pressure on yourself. I'm sure you'll pass the interview at Tingen University. Even if you can't—er, I mean *if*—you'll find a better opportunity."

I haven't even thought about the interview...

Klein nodded. "I know."

He didn't mention that he had already received an offer, mostly because he still hadn't decided whether he wanted to take it.

Melissa gave him a long look before suddenly turning around and trotting into the inner room. She emerged moments later holding an odd contraption that resembled a tortoise. It was made of gears, rusted iron, springs, and winding keys.

After quickly turning the winding key several times, Melissa placed the object on the desk.

Ka! Ka! Ka!

Tap! Tap! Tap!

The "tortoise" moved and hopped in a rhythmic manner, its motions oddly mesmerizing.

"Whenever you feel stressed, just watching it move like this will make you feel better. I've been doing this myself recently, and it's very effective! Give it a try, Klein!" Melissa offered, her eyes bright with enthusiasm.

Klein didn't refuse his sister's goodwill. He stepped closer to the "tortoise" and studied it up close, watching as it wound down and stopped.

After a brief pause, he chuckled. "Simplicity and rhythm can indeed be relaxing."

Without waiting for Melissa's reply, he pointed at the contraption and asked offhandedly, "Did you make this yourself? When did you make it? Why didn't I know about it?"

"I made it from scrap materials from school and things I picked up

from the street. I only finished it two days ago," Melissa said in her usual neutral tone, though the corners of her lips lifted ever so slightly.

"That's very impressive," Klein praised sincerely. As a boy who had struggled even to assemble a four-wheel toy car as a child, he could appreciate the effort and skill.

With her chin slightly raised and her eyes practically sparkling, Melissa calmly replied, "It's all right, I guess."

"Excessive modesty isn't a virtue," Klein teased, chuckling. "This is a tortoise, right?"

Instantly, the atmosphere in the room seemed to freeze.

The air felt thick and heavy.

Then Melissa's voice, airy and wistful like the crimson veil outside, sounded softly.

"...It's a person."

A person...

Klein smiled awkwardly, struggling to find a way to explain. "The problem must be in the materials. They're too rudimentary."

Quickly changing the topic, he asked, "Why were you going to the bathroom in the middle of the night? Don't you have a toilet in your room? Also, don't you usually sleep until dawn?"

Melissa froze for a few seconds. Just as she opened her mouth to explain, an aggressive gurgling sound erupted from her stomach.

"I-I better go get some more sleep!"

Bang!

She grabbed her tortoise-like puppet, scurried back to the inner room, and closed the door behind her.

...So last night's dinner was so good, she overate, and now her stomach is struggling to digest it...

Klein shook his head and laughed soundlessly. He slowly walked to his desk, sat down, and began silently pondering Dunn Smith's invitation under the glow of the crimson moon emerging from behind the clouds.

Being a Nighthawk office staff member had obvious disadvantages: *As a transmigrator and "The Fool"—the founder of the mysterious*

tarot gathering—I carry numerous secrets. Making my living right under the nose of the Church of Evernight's team, one that specializes in the supernatural, is inherently risky.

If I join Dunn Smith and his team, my goal would certainly be to become a Beyonder. This could serve as a cover for the benefits and knowledge I gain from the tarot gatherings.

Yet becoming a formal member comes with heavy restrictions on my freedom, like how an office staff member must report every time they leave Tingen. No longer will I be able to go wherever I want or act freely. I would miss many opportunities.

The Nighthawks is a strict organization. Once a mission is assigned, I can only obey orders. There is no room for negotiation or independent action.

And most importantly...Beyonders carry the risk of losing control.

...

Having all the disadvantages listed out one by one, Klein turned to considering its advantages and necessities:

Based on what happened with the luck-enhancement ritual, I'm not among the lucky 80% Dunn mentioned. In the future, more bizarre and dangerous events will likely befall me. Only by becoming a Beyonder or joining the Nighthawks can I equip myself with the means to resist such threats.

If I wish to become a Beyonder, I cannot rely solely on the tarot gathering. While obtaining potion formulas isn't a major issue, how will I find the necessary ingredients? How will I acquire them, concoct them, or gain the common knowledge needed for daily survival as a Beyonder? These are real obstacles. I can't ask Justice and The Hanged Man about every little thing and expect them to provide every ingredient I need. That would not only damage The Fool's image and arouse their suspicions, but there wouldn't even be enough time to communicate such granular details. Furthermore, I have nothing substantial to offer them in return.

More frequent exchanges of materials mean more chances to leave behind clues about my real identity. If "online disputes" escalate into "offline conflicts," it would no doubt spell immense trouble.

By joining the Nighthawks, I would gain direct access to the common

knowledge of the mystical world, as well as the necessary channels and resources to function as a Beyonder. Over time, these could accumulate into a useful network and leverage I can use to guide the tarot gatherings. In turn, the benefits from Justice and The Hanged Man could give me an edge in reality, creating a positive feedback loop.

Of course, I could also consider joining an organization suppressed and hunted by the major churches, such as the Psychology Alchemists, which Dunn mentioned. But that would mean losing my freedom and living in constant fear and anxiety. More importantly, I have no idea where to find them. Even if I somehow extract the information from The Hanged Man, contacting them so recklessly could put my life in grave danger.

Becoming an office staff member leaves an opportunity for a buffer and an exit.

The inferior recluse hides in the mountains; the middling, the crowd; and the superior, the court.

Perhaps the identity of a Nighthawk would make for the best cover.

In the future, when I become one of the top authorities of the church's judicial arm, who could imagine that I am actually a heretic or the behind-the-scenes master of a secret organization?

...

As the first rays of morning sunlight shined, the crimson of the moon faded away. Gazing at the golden light on the horizon, Klein made up his mind.

He would find Dunn Smith today and officially become a part of the Nighthawk's clerical staff!

At that moment, Melissa, who had gotten out of bed again, pushed open the door to the room. She was surprised to see her brother stretching rather inelegantly.

"You didn't sleep?"

"I was thinking through some things," Klein replied with a smile, feeling light and relaxed.

Melissa thought for a moment and then said, "Whenever I encounter problems, I list out the pros and cons one by one and compare them. That way, I get a sense of what I should do next."

"What a good habit. That's exactly what I did," Klein said, still smiling. Melissa's expression relaxed, and she didn't say anything more. Holding a large sheet of yellowish paper and her toiletries, she headed to the bathroom.

After breakfast, and following his sister's departure, Klein didn't rush out immediately. Instead, he took a good nap. From what he knew, nearly all pubs were closed before noon.

At two o'clock in the afternoon, he carefully cleaned and smoothed out his top hat with a handkerchief and a small brush. Then, dressed in a full suit as if heading for an interview, he left the flat.

Besik Street was a little far. Afraid of missing the "working hours" of the Nighthawks, he opted not to walk but instead waited for a coach at the end of Ironcross Street.

In the Loen Kingdom, coach carriages were categorized into two types: on-track and off-track.

The off-track coaches were traditional horse-drawn carriages, each pulled by two horses. They could seat about twenty passengers, including an upper deck. These coaches had no fixed routes or designated stops. They operated flexibly, allowing passengers to hail and board anywhere along their path unless they were full.

The on-track coaches, operated by the Rail Coach Company, required rails embedded into major streets. The horses moved within the inner lane, while the wheels ran along the tracks on either side. This design reduced labor costs and allowed for larger double-decker coaches that could carry nearly fifty passengers. However, their routes and stops were fixed, making them less flexible and limiting access to certain locations.

After ten minutes, the sound of wheels clanking against tracks reached his ears. A double-decker coach stopped at Ironcross Street station.

"To Besik Street," Klein told the driver.

"You'll need to transfer at Champagne Street. But from there, it's only about a ten-minute walk to Besik Street," the coach driver explained.

"I'll go to Champagne Street then," Klein nodded.

"That's over four kilometers, so the fare is four pence," said a young, fair-faced worker beside the driver, extending his hand.

He was the fare collector.

"Sure thing." Klein fished out four copper pennies from his pocket and handed them over. Boarding the carriage, he found plenty of empty seats, even on the first level.

I only have three pennies left on me now, so I'll have to walk back..., Klein thought, pressing his hat down on his head as he sat down.

On this level, most of the men and women were well-dressed and sitting properly. Some were in work clothes, leisurely reading newspapers. The atmosphere was quiet. Almost no one spoke.

Klein closed his eyes, choosing to meditate and conserve his energy. He remained oblivious to the comings and goings of passengers. Station after station passed until he finally heard the call.

"Champagne Street."

After alighting from the coach, he made a few inquiries before finally arriving at Besik Street.

There, he saw the pub with the brownish-yellow logo featuring a hound.

Klein reached out his right hand and gave the door a forceful push. It slowly swung open, allowing a wave of uproarious noise and an impetuous burst of heat to rush out.

Though it was still afternoon, the pub was already bustling with customers. Some were temporary workers seeking job opportunities, while others were simply idling away their time, numbing themselves with alcohol.

The pub was dimly lit. In the center, there were two large iron cages with their bottom third sunken deep into the ground without any gaps. Patrons holding wooden mugs surrounded them—sometimes talking loudly while laughing, and sometimes cursing just as loud.

After giving the space a curious glance, Klein found two dogs in separate cages. There was a black and white dog, similar to the huskies found on Earth. The other was wholly black, with sleek and shiny fur, looking healthy and fierce.

"Wanna place a bet?" A short man wearing a brown beret sidled up to Klein and gestured toward the black dog. "Doug's won eight games in a row!"

Klein was taken aback at first, but the realization dawned on him immediately.

"Dogfighting?"

Back at Khoy University, the students of noble and wealthy families would often ask him—half out of curiosity, half out of mockery—if the lower-class workers and unemployed hooligans entertained themselves with boxing, gambling, cockfighting, and dogfighting in pubs, alongside betting on card games and other crude spectacles.

The short man smirked. "Mister, we're civilized people. We don't engage in such undignified activities." Then, lowering his voice, he muttered, "Besides, they passed a law last year banning that kind of thing..."

"Then what are you betting on?" Klein asked, intrigued.

"The better hunter."

Just as the short man finished speaking, a loud commotion erupted from the gathered crowd. Turning to look, he excitedly waved his hands at Klein.

"This round's already started! You can't place a bet anymore. Better wait for the next one."

Hearing that, Klein stood on his tiptoes and craned his neck for a better view.

He saw two strong men dragging large sacks to the side of the cages. When they reached the doors, they unfastened the sacks and dumped their contents into the enclosures.

Countless gray vermin poured out.

Klein squinted, trying to make out the creatures. Then it clicked—mice. More than a hundred of them!

The iron cages were sunken deep into the ground and sealed on all sides, giving the frantic rodents no means of escape. Panicked, they scurried in all directions, seeking an exit that didn't exist.

Just as the cage doors clanked shut, the dogs were unchained.

Woof?

The black dog, Doug, lunged forward instantly, snapping up a mouse in one bite and killing it in an instant.

The black-and-white dog, on the other hand, froze in place, appearing dazed and confused. Then, rather than hunting, it began playing excitedly with the mice, batting them around like toys.

The crowd roared. Some clenched their mugs with intense concentration, while others shouted hoarsely:

“Bite it! Kill it!”

“Doug! Doug!”

...No way are these dogs actually expected to catch mice...¹

Klein belatedly realized what was happening, and the corner of his mouth twitched.

Where he came from, “dogs who catch mice” was an insult for those who wouldn’t mind their own business.

Yet here, people were gambling on which dog could catch the most mice.

Maybe *they* even bet on the *exact* number caught...

No wonder people were purchasing live rats on Ironcross Street...

What a unique pastime...

Klein shook his head, chuckling, as he backed away from the raucous crowd. He maneuvered along the edge of the drinking patrons until he reached the bar.

The bartender, who was wiping down a wooden mug, spared Klein a glance.

“New here?” he asked. “One penny for a mug of rye beer. Two for Enmat beer. Four for Southweir beer. Or maybe you’d like a glass of pure malt lanch?”

“I’m looking for Mr. Wright,” Klein said, not beating around the bush.

The bartender whistled and turned to the side.

“Old Man, someone’s looking for you.”

¹ Note: This is not an invention of the author but an actual legal blood sport known as rat-baiting back in the Victorian era.

"Mm-hmm... Who is it...?" A slurred voice responded as an intoxicated old man stood up from behind the bar.

He rubbed his eyes, squinting at Klein before grumbling, "Young lad, you looking for me?"

"Yes, Mr. Wright. I'd like to hire a small mercenary squad for a mission," Klein said, repeating Dunn's instructions.

The bartender chuckled. "Mercenaries? What, you think you're living in an adventure novel? That sort of thing hasn't existed for ages!"

Wright, however, went quiet for a few seconds before saying, "Who told you to come here looking for that?"

"Dunn. Dunn Smith."

At that, Wright immediately broke into laughter.

"I see... You know, mercenaries still exist, just in a different form, with a more contemporary name. You can find them on the second floor of No. 36 Jutland Street."

"Thank you very much," Klein said sincerely. He turned and squeezed his way out of the pub.

Just before he stepped outside, he heard the crowd around the cages suddenly fall silent, leaving only murmurs of disbelief.

"I can't believe Doug actually lost..."

"...Lost..."

Klein shook his head, amused.

He quickly strode off and, asking around, found his way to nearby Jutland Street.

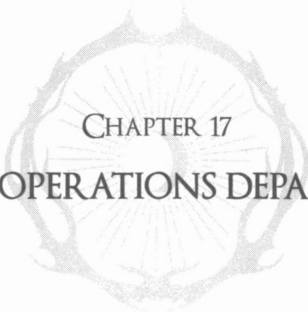
"Thirty... thirty-two... thirty-four... Here."

Klein counted the house numbers as he approached No. 36 Jutland Street and its front steps.

Ascending the next stairwell, he turned at the landing and slowly climbed farther.

Finally, his eyes fell on a vertical sign hanging outside the door.

BLACKTHORN SECURITY COMPANY



CHAPTER 17

◆ SPECIAL OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT ◆

BLACKTHORN SECURITY COMPANY

Upon seeing the signboard, Klein felt a little surprised yet found it completely reasonable.

It made perfect sense.

He shook his head with a laugh, then continued up the steps and knocked lightly on the half-closed door.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

The sound echoed slowly yet rhythmically.

No response.

Only a steady clicking sound could be heard from within.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Klein repeated his knocks, but the result remained the same.

Instead of waiting, he pushed the door open slightly, making the gap larger as he peered inside.

A set of classical-looking sofas for receiving guests was arranged neatly alongside a soft fabric armchair and a wooden coffee table.

Behind a desk sat a brown-haired girl, her head bowed, nodding off.

Even if the “security company” bit is just a front, this seems a little too unprofessional...

How long has this place been out of business?

Well, I guess you guys don't really need any business...

Klein sighed inwardly and walked closer before knocking lightly on the desk beside the girl's ear.

Knock! Knock!

The brown-haired girl shot up immediately, scrambling to grab the newspaper in front of her and covering her face with it.

"Tingen City Honest Paper"... Nice name.

Klein silently read the title on the front page.

"The Soaring Express steam train, put into service today, directly connects to Constant..."

The girl, pretending to read, murmured, "Seriously? Why can't they have one that goes straight to Desi Bay? I'd really rather not travel by ship again. It's absolutely dreadful... Oh, who might you be?"

Lowering the paper, she revealed a smooth forehead and a pair of light brown eyes. Her gaze landed on Klein with an ingratiating expression that quickly turned to surprise.

Klein removed his hat and held it to his chest as he gave a slight bow.

"Hello, my name is Klein Moretti. I'm here at the invitation of Mr. Dunn Smith."

The brown-haired girl looked to be in her early twenties, dressed in a Loen-style, light green dress adorned with lace at the sleeves, collar, and chest. Her pretty features were complemented by her delicate attire.

"The captain... All right, wait here for a moment. I'll go ask him."

She scurried away and disappeared through a door beside her.

Klein smiled faintly as he waited, standing in place.

She didn't even offer me a cup of water... The level of service awareness here is truly concerning...

He didn't bother sitting on the sofa or armchair.

A couple of minutes later, the brown-haired girl reappeared, offering him a sweet smile.

"Mr. Moretti, please follow me. The captain is on duty at Chanis Gate today and can't leave at the moment."

“Okay.”

As Klein followed her, a question lingered in his mind.

Chanis Gate—what could that be?

Stepping through the door, the first thing Klein noticed was a short corridor lined with three offices on each side.

Some of the doors were tightly shut.

Others were wide open, revealing workers typing rapidly on heavy mechanical typewriters.

At a glance, Klein spotted a familiar figure:

The young officer who had searched his flat the other day.

The man with dark hair, green eyes, and the air of a romantic poet.

Except this time, he wasn't dressed in a suit.

His white-collared shirt was untucked from his trousers, giving him a disheveled, almost carefree look.

Maybe he really is a poet...

Klein nodded in greeting.

The officer smiled in return.

The brown-haired girl pushed open the door to an office on the left, then turned to Klein with a smile.

“We still have to go down a few flights.”

The office had no furniture or decor. Only a grayish-white stone staircase extending downward. Elegant gas lamps lined the walls, their stable glow dispelling the darkness and lending a sense of tranquility.

Ahead of Klein, the receptionist walked carefully, keeping her gaze on the steps as she descended.

“Even though I walk here often, I'm still afraid of falling and tumbling down like a barrel,” she admitted. “You know, that's exactly what Leonard did once.”

She chuckled.

“The first day he became a Sleepless—before he had fully mastered his new abilities—he tried to rush down these stairs, bolting ahead. And then...he rolled down like a barrel. Ha-ha-ha! I laugh whenever I think about it. Oh! Yes, it was that guy. The one who greeted you just now.”

“That was three years ago. Speaking of which, I’ve been with the Nighthawks for five years. I was only seventeen when I joined...”

She continued chatting freely, carefully picking her steps, but then she suddenly smacked her forehead discreetly as though remembering something.

“I forgot to introduce myself! I’m Rosanne. My father was an official member of the Nighthawks, but he died on a mission five years ago.

“I suppose we’ll be colleagues from now on. Errr, yes, I think *colleague* is the right word... We’re not teammates since neither of us is a Beyonder.”

“I’d be honored, but it depends on what Mr. Smith says,” Klein replied politely, scanning the enclosed space around him. A cool dampness emanated from the stone walls, dispelling the summer heat.

“Don’t worry. The fact that he told you to come here means the captain has already approved. I’ve always been a little afraid of him, even though he’s very amiable and caring. Almost like a father to me.

“I don’t know why, but I’m still a little scared of him.”

She spoke as if there was a piece of candy in her mouth.

Klein chuckled. “Isn’t it normal to be afraid of your father?”

“You’re right,” Rosanne agreed, holding the wall as they rounded a bend in the staircase.

As they finished descending the winding stairs, the stone-paved floor came into view.

They stepped into a long corridor, lined with metal-grated gas lamps casting their elongated shadows onto the walls.

Klein keenly noticed that every few meters, there was a Sacred Emblem of Darkness—the symbol of the Evernight Goddess.

A deep black field, dotted with sparkling embellishments, clustered around a crimson half-moon.

At first glance, they seemed unremarkable, yet walking between them filled Klein with an odd sense of serenity.

Even Rosanne, who had been chattering endlessly before, fell completely silent.

Soon, an intersection appeared ahead.

Rosanne briefly introduced the paths:

"The left leads to Saint Selena Cathedral."

"The right takes you to the armory, storeroom, and archives."

"And straight ahead..." She gestured forward. "That's Chanis Gate."

Saint Selena Cathedral? So that means Jutland Street is just behind Red Moon Road?

Saint Selena Cathedral on Red Moon Road was the Tingen headquarters of the Church of Evernight—a sacred ground where all nearby parishioners congregated.

Together with the Holy Numeris Cathedral of the Church of Steam and Machinery in the suburbs and the River and Sea Cathedral of the Church of Storms in northern Tingen, it formed one of the three pillars of religion in the city and its affiliated towns.

Still, aware that his clearance level was limited, Klein remained silent.

They passed the intersection and continued straight.

Less than a minute later, a massive iron double door carved with seven sacred emblems loomed before them.

It was black, heavy, cold, and intimidating; like a giant standing guard in the darkness.

"This is Chanis Gate."

Then, pointing at a room beside it, Rosanne added, "The captain's inside. You can go in yourself."

"Yes, thank you." Klein nodded politely.

From an open window, light gently spilled out of the room in front of Chanis Gate, illuminating the dim corridor.

Taking a deep breath to calm himself, Klein lifted his hand and knocked.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

"Come in." He heard Dunn Smith's deep and amiable voice.

Klein gently pushed open the slightly ajar door.

Inside, the only furniture consisted of a table and four chairs.

Dunn Smith, dressed in the same black trench coat from the night before, sat at the table. A gold watch chain dangled near his front button as he leisurely read the newspaper.

Looking up, he set the paper down and gave Klein a small smile.

"Have a seat. Have you thought it through? Are you certain you want to join us?"

Klein removed his hat, gave him a polite bow, and then sat by the table. He nodded slowly.

"Yes, I am certain."

Dunn pulled open a drawer and retrieved a bundle of paper.

"Then take a look at this pact. Ha, I suppose people prefer to call it a *contract* these days."

Klein took the documents and carefully examined them.

There weren't many clauses, and most of them had already been mentioned by Dunn.

The main focus was on the confidentiality clause. Any violations would be tried in the tribunal courts of the Church of Evernight, bypassing the king's court entirely.

It was similar to a military court-martial, where soldiers and officers were subject to their own laws.

A five-year pact... Two pounds and ten soli per week, plus a ten-soli subsidy as compensation for the risk and confidentiality..., Klein thought it through carefully as he read and answered with a solemn expression, "I have no problem with it."

"Then you can sign it," Dunn said as he pointed to the dark red fountain pen and ink.

Klein picked up the pen, tested it briefly on a scrap of wastepaper, and drew in a quiet breath.

Then, with deliberate strokes, he signed his name:

Klein Moretti

Lacking a personal stamp, he pressed his thumbprint onto the contract instead.

Dunn retrieved the signed contracts, took out a stamp from his drawer, and marked the end of both documents along with key sections.

Then, standing up, he returned a copy to Klein and extended his hand.

"Welcome. From now on, you are one of us."

He added lightly, "Please note that the contract itself must also be kept confidential."

Klein stood as well, taking the contract with one hand while shaking Dunn's hand with the other.

"So...should I address you as Captain now?"

"Yes."

Dunn's gray eyes seemed deeper in the dim lighting.

After the handshake, they both sat down again.

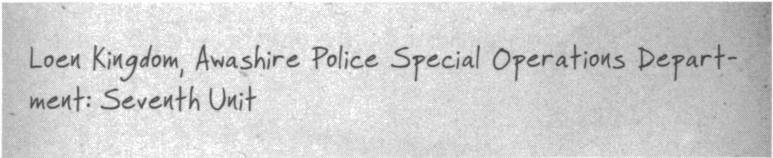
Klein glanced at the stamp on the contract, which read:

"Nighthawk Squad, Tingen City, Awashire, Loen Kingdom."

Chuckling, he remarked, "I didn't expect you to use a name like Blackthorn Security Company as a disguise."

"Actually, we have other signage." Dunn pulled out a piece of paper from the drawer.

It was stamped with the dual stamps of the municipal government and the police department. The contents were as follows:



Loen Kingdom, Awashire Police Special Operations Department: Seventh Unit

"The first four units," Dunn began, "are regular police units handling general security, like VIP protection or securing important locations. The rest deal with supernatural incidents within the county's cities.

"Our unit is responsible for incidents related to the followers of

the Evernight Goddess in Tingen. If the incident involves different sects, then we delegate the case by geographical area. We are mainly responsible for Northside, Westside, and the Golden Plane area.

“Unit Six of the Mandated Punishers squad under the Church of Storms is in charge of the piers, Eastside, and Southside. The university town and the suburbs are under Unit Five, which is the Machinery Hivemind squad in Tingen.”

“Right.” Klein had no questions about it. He then laughed. “What happens if someone really comes here because of the ‘Blackthorn Security Company’ sign and requests our services?”

“We take them, as long as it doesn’t interfere with our real work,” Dunn said slowly and with good humor.

“Any earnings go toward bonuses, so our members are quite happy to accept such jobs. Of course, minor cases, like finding lost dogs and cats, have already been taken over by private detectives.”

“How many people are there in this Nighthawk squad?” Klein asked since they were on this topic.

“There aren’t many supernatural incidents, and there are even fewer Beyonders. In all of Tingen, there are only six official members of the Nighthawks, including me.”

He added, “As for office staff...including you, we now have six.”

Klein nodded.

After a brief pause, he finally asked the question that had been weighing on his mind the most.

“Captain, what did you mean by Beyonders losing control? Why do they lose control?”

CHAPTER 18

◆ ORIGIN AND CAUSE ◆

Upon hearing Klein's question, Dunn gazed out the window toward the corridor leading to Chanis Gate.

He reached into his coat and retrieved his pipe, stuffing it with a mixture of tobacco and mint leaves.

Bringing it to his nose, he took a deep whiff. His voice turned reflective, drifting as he said, "Only at home can I enjoy the exquisite flavors of tobacco mixed with mint leaves without any reservations... Klein, do you know about the creation myth?"

Klein nodded, recalling fragmented memories from the original Klein.

"Of course. When I was in Sunday school, we learned to read using *The Revelation of Evernight*. In particular, the chapters 'Book of Wisdom' and 'Letters from the Saints' mention the myth of creation."

Then, with deliberate care, he began to recite the story from memory.

"The Creator awoke from within the Chaos, shattering the darkness and creating the first ray of light. He then fused Himself into the universe and transformed into all of existence. His body became the land and stars. One of His eyes became the sun, and the other the crimson moon. Some of His blood rushed forth and became the rivers and oceans, nourishing and nurturing lives..."

Klein subconsciously paused when he said that. Partly because the relevant memories were a blur and partly because it was very similar to the Chinese creation myth of Pangu.

Do myths across worlds tend to converge like this...?

Noticing that Klein seemed to have trouble, Dunn smiled and continued for him, “His lungs turned into the elves; His heart turned into the giants; His liver turned into the treants; His head turned into the dragons; His kidneys turned into the feathered serpents; His hair turned into the phoenixes; His ears turned into the eldritch wolves; His mouth and teeth turned into the mutants; and His remaining bodily fluids turned into the sea monsters, the most precious of His liquid turning into the naga. His stomach and intestines, as well as His parts of malice turned into demons, evil spirits and various wicked unknown beings. His mind became the Eternal Blazing Sun, the Lord of Storms, and the God of Knowledge and Wisdom...”

Klein finished the last sentence. “His wisdom gave birth to humanity, making way for the First Epoch, the Age of Chaos.” He found it a little funny—and a little ridiculous.

As a keyboard folklorist, it was the first time he’d heard a creation myth that had been arranged in such great detail. It was so detailed that almost every prominent race corresponded very specifically to a particular body part of the Creator.

Sure sounds like the Creator was giving out body parts like gifts on a talk show.

Furthermore, it was not only the canon of the Evernight Goddess that mentioned this. The Churches of the Lord of Storms and the God of Steam and Machinery also had similar descriptions. They were not elevating themselves while demeaning other gods...

This either meant that the creation myth was real or hinted at the fact that the major churches had agreed to a consensus before the Fifth Epoch after undergoing long periods of conflict and compromise...

A sudden thought struck Klein.

He frowned and voiced his question aloud:

“I do have a small problem with that. Why were the Eternal

Blazing Sun, Lord of Storms, and God of Knowledge and Wisdom born directly from the Creator's mind, yet the Goddess wasn't?"

In *The Revelation of Evernight's* recordings of prehistoric times, the Evernight Goddess had only awoken at the end of the Second Epoch. Together with the Lord of Storms, Eternal Blazing Sun, and other gods, she'd protected and helped humanity survive the Great Cataclysm. It was also known as the Third Epoch, the Age of Cataclysm.

It was during that time that the Earth Mother and the God of Combat appeared as well. Meanwhile, the God of Steam and Machinery, whose original name was the God of Craftsmanship, did not appear until the Fourth Epoch.

From a historical perspective, this seemed to imply a hierarchy among the gods.

Those who were more ancient were considered more orthodox.

This was a long-standing concern among Evernight followers.

Dunn Smith held his pipe in one hand, and instead of answering, he returned with a command. "Repeat the Goddess's full title."

Klein immediately regretted asking the question.

He racked his brains and tried his best to recall:

"The Evernight Goddess stands higher than the starry sky and is more eternal than eternity. She is also the Master of Crimson, the Mother of Secrets, the Queen of Fear and Calamity, and the Lord of Repose and Silence."

Thankfully, Klein's mother had been a devout believer of the Evernight Goddess.

Before her passing, she had recited this prayer every evening and before every meal.

Even though the memories of the original Klein were now mere fragments, not all had been lost.

"What does the Master of Crimson symbolize?" Dunn asked with a guiding tone.

"The red moon." The moment Klein answered, he immediately understood.

“And which part of the Creator did the red moon come from?” asked Dunn with a smile.

The answer was instantly clear.

“A single eye!”

Klein and Dunn exchanged a knowing look and grinned.

This was in no way less impressive than the Lord of Storms, who was formed from only a third of the Creator’s mind!

As for the churches of the Earth Mother and the God of Combat, they likely had similar explanations. However, the God of Steam and Machinery had been “born” too late for such justifications. Their church had remained weak for the past thousand years until the invention of the steam engine, which allowed them to seize the opportunity to truly stand beside the other gods.

Dunn stroked his pipe thoughtfully and spoke again.

“Humanity was born from the wisdom of the Creator. Thus, we possess intelligence but lack other fantastical abilities. However, from the creation myth, we can draw a simple yet clear conclusion: Everything stems from the same origin.”

“The same origin...,” Klein repeated the last few words.

“According to this conclusion, humans who are protected by the gods to be able to resist giants, demons, and the mutants gradually figured out means to obtain the power of the Beyonders. They do that by using the corresponding parts of evil spirits, dragons, monsters, magical trees, flowers, or crystals and combining them with other materials to make potions. By consuming and absorbing the potion, one will gain various powers. This is common knowledge among students of mysticism.”

Dunn didn’t elaborate in great detail and only gave a brief introduction. “In this process, our ancestors relied on painful lessons to discover that if someone directly consumes high-level or unconventional potions, there are three possible outcomes.”

“Which three?” Klein pressed curiously.

“The first is mental death and a complete breakdown of a body. Every piece of flesh would become a terrifying monster. In the second,

their personality would be changed by the powers contained in the potion. They would become cold, sensitive, irascible, cruel, and apathetic. As for the third, well..." Dunn put down his pipe and picked up a porcelain cup, taking a sip. "Fermo coffee from the Paz Valley is bitter but very fragrant. It leaves a splendid aftertaste. Would you like some?"

"I prefer coffee from the Feynapotter highlands. Of course, I have only drank it a few times at Welch's home." Klein politely declined. "What's the third outcome?"

"Insanity, to go mad on the spot, becoming more devilish than the devil. This is what it means to lose control." Dunn emphasized the words *lose control*.

Without waiting for Klein to say a word, he put down his coffee cup and continued, "After a long period of experimentation and exploration, together with the emergence of the Blasphemy Slate, humans have finally perfected the potion system. We developed a tiered system of stable progression paths. This system is known as the Sequences. The lower the Sequence number, the higher the level of the potion. Today, the seven major churches each control at least one complete Sequence. Besides that, there are also incomplete paths they've gathered over the past hundreds or thousands of years."

"The Blasphemy Slate?" Klein perked up at the term. At the tarot gathering, The Hanged Man had also brought it up!

According to The Hanged Man, the Blasphemy Slate was the key to the formation and completion of the potion system.

But Dunn's explanation seemed different.

"Those were things made up by some wicked gods. As for which era it first appeared, what it contains, or what's so special about it, I am unsure as well," Dunn said vaguely. "If you discover any clues, you should report them to me immediately. It deserves the highest level of response. Just now, I mentioned one of the ways Beyonders lose control. I'll now tell you the remaining four."

"Yes, I am all ears." Klein pushed the question of the Blasphemy Slate to the back of his mind and listened attentively.

“Although humans are born with clever minds, we lack extraordinary powers, but that is not an absolute statement. There are always a few lucky ones, or perhaps I should call them unlucky. They are born with above-average spiritual perception. Yes, it refers to one’s affinity for spirits. They can hear voices that others cannot and see things that remain invisible to the rest of us.”

While Dunn spoke, he looked at the relatively vacant room around him and watched Klein shiver with goosebumps. “In other words, they are equivalent to half a Sequence Nine Beyond, with fixed characteristics. Oh, incidentally, nine is the lowest rank in the Sequence... In short, they can only choose their corresponding, fixed Sequence path. If they consume other potions, the side effects might range from mental disorders to a loss of control or, even worse, death.”

“Got it.” Klein nodded slowly.

“The third kind is similar to the second kind. Once you choose a Sequence, you can only go down that one path. There is no turning back. If you attempt to consume a potion from another Sequence, the effects will be catastrophic.

“You will acquire mixed, unstable, and warped powers. Perhaps you will become sensitive and volatile...or bloodthirsty and cruel... or silent and melancholic.

“And there is only one such opportunity for divergence. After that, regardless of if you consume the potions from the original path or potions in the present Sequence, the only result is a loss of control, which will either lead to mental death, a physical bodily breakdown into monsters, or even transformation into an evil spirit.” As Dunn continued, he lifted his coffee cup to take another sip.

Klein, alarmed and fearful after hearing this, fell silent for a few seconds before asking, “And what about the fourth kind?”

“The fourth kind, ha. That is actually the most common one. When we consume potions to gain powers that originally belonged to extraordinary beings, we undergo an unnatural transformation. Therefore, we will more or less be affected by the residual spiritual powers inherent to the original ingredients. While perhaps the

symptoms might not manifest and are undetectable to others, they will still affect the mind. Rush to consume a higher rank potion in the Sequence before fully mastering the extraordinary powers the potion brings and eliminating the subtle traces of its effect, and the madness will accumulate, and so too the possibility of losing control..." Dunn suddenly trailed off.

After a short pause, he said with a sigh, "As per our internal rules in the Nighthawks, even if a teammate makes a great contribution, they must have consumed their last potion at least three years prior before advancing to the next Sequence. Even so, there are still many who lose control every year."

How terrifying..., Klein thought. He drew in a deep breath and asked, "Then what about the final kind?"

There was no trace of a smile despite Dunn's curved lips.

"The fifth kind is also a common reason for losing control. Beyonders possess an enhanced spiritual perception. The higher the rank in the Sequence, the more enhanced their perception. Therefore, they can hear what others cannot hear, see what others cannot see, and encounter things others would never run into. They are constantly enticed by mystery and bewitched by illusions. If they experience a great shock or give in to greed and desire, they will slowly go down the path of losing control."

As he spoke, Dunn looked straight at Klein, his gray eyes reflecting Klein's figure. Voice bleak, he continued, "Archbishop Chanis, the founder of the modern institution of Nighthawks, once said, 'We are guardians, but we are also a bunch of miserable wretches in a constant struggle against danger and madness.'"

CHAPTER 19

◆ SEALED ARTIFACTS ◆

"We are guardians, but we are also a bunch of miserable wretches in a constant struggle against danger and madness."

The corridor outside the window was sealed, and its walls were ice-cold. The room was illuminated by bright yellow lights. Dunn Smith's voice echoed in the enclosed space, tolling over and over in Klein's mind. It left him temporarily at a loss for words.

Dunn shook his head and smiled when he saw Klein remain silent. "Does that disappoint you? Beyonders are not what you imagine them to be. We've always walked side by side with danger."

"There is always a price for power," Klein answered in an even tone after recovering from his shock.

It was true that he had never imagined that behind the halo of the unusual and the extraordinary aspects of a Beyonder, there would be such hidden threats. Perhaps it was because he had only heard descriptions without witnessing them firsthand or because he had already been sucked into this vortex, with strange occurrences ready to befall him at any moment. Either way, Klein was soon able to bring his fear, unease, worry, and apprehension under control.

Of course, the thought of shrinking back was inevitable; it lingered in his mind, refusing to leave.

"Not bad. Very mature and rational..." Dunn finished the last

mouthful of coffee and added, "Also, Beyonders are not as powerful as you imagine them to be, especially ones high in the Sequence. Ha, why do we use 'one' to represent the highest rank while 'nine' is the lowest? It's against all logic and intuition. The low Sequence we often mention refers to a low rank but a high number. It's the starting point of the Sequence.

"All right, where was I? Yes, Beyonders are not as powerful as you imagine. A low-rank Beyerder's power is no match for firearms, much less cannons. They are just more unpredictable and difficult to defend against in some aspects compared to firearms. If you ever have the chance to become a Beyerder, you should carefully consider what I've said today. Do not make a rash decision."

Klein gave a self-deprecating smile. "I don't even know when I'll have the chance."

He felt that if an opportunity presented itself, he wouldn't miss it. The risk of consuming the wrong potion or one too high in the Sequence could mostly be avoided. The main danger lay in the subtle influences of the potions and the unknown things one might see and hear after an upgrade in spiritual perception.

For the former, he could draw on the experiences of those who came before him. As long as he wasn't in a rush to advance and steadily worked to gain mastery over his powers, the chances of losing control were relatively low. Furthermore, he had taken this step with the primary goals of resolving the underlying dangers he currently faced, understanding the essential principles of mysticism, and finding a way to return home. His aim was not to climb to a higher Sequence rank. If it was that easy to lose control, he would simply abandon the idea of advancement. He could stay at his current Sequence level and rely on knowledge to strategize his way back.

As for the other potential risks, he didn't need further lectures. Klein still remembered the murmurs by his ear during the luck-enhancement ritual as if it were yesterday. Those voices had nearly driven him mad, threatening to make his head explode. It wasn't something he could

avoid simply by choosing not to be a Beyonder. In that case, it was better to hold onto the power he could use to defend himself.

With this in mind, Klein felt the pros clearly outweighed the cons. His thoughts of withdrawing almost disappeared.

Dunn picked up his pipe again, his gray eyes carrying a trace of a smile.

"I can't give you a definite answer on that. To become a Beyonder, first, you must make enough contributions. Perhaps tomorrow or the day after, you'll decipher some critical ancient documents or provide valuable guidance on one of our cases. Second, it depends on whether the higher-ups have any new ideas. No one can be sure of that.

"In any case, I believe you now understand quite a bit about Beyonders and won't be making any rash decisions in the future. Now I'll tell you about the Nighthawk team's office duties."

He stood up and walked to the door, pointing in the opposite direction of Chanis Gate. "We have an accountant and someone responsible for procuring necessities, collecting supplies from the church and the police department, and occasionally acting as a carriage driver. They are both professionals and don't need to take shifts, so they get Sundays off.

"The other three office staff members are Rosanne, Brett, and Old Neil. Their jobs include receiving visitors, keeping the rooms tidy, writing and organizing case files, and maintaining inventory lists. They also guard the armory, storeroom, and archives, strictly enforcing the registration process for anyone wishing to enter, remove an item, or return it. Each of them has one day off per week, excluding Sundays. They negotiate among themselves for night shift and rest day arrangements."

"Will I be doing the same tasks as Rosanne and the others?" Klein swept away his thoughts about Beyonders and focused on confirming his job responsibilities.

"No, you don't need to. You are a professional," Dunn said with a smile. "You currently have two tasks. First, every morning or

afternoon, take a stroll outside. Focus on the various streets that lead from the Welch residence to yours.”

“What?” Klein was dumbfounded.

What kind of job is this?

Is it really professional?

Dunn inserted his hands into the pockets of his black trench coat and said, “After you confirmed that you had lost your memories, the case on Welch and Naya was considered closed. Similarly, the Antigonus family’s diary has vanished completely. We suspect that you took it with you at the time and might have stashed it away somewhere on your way home. That might explain why we found no clues in your flat. It’s also likely the reason you weren’t at the scene but instead chose to commit suicide at home.

“Although you were influenced by mystical forces and have forgotten that piece of your memory, the human spirit and brain are fascinating. There may still be residual traces. Daly might not have been able to retrieve them as a medium, but that doesn’t mean they don’t exist. Perhaps you’ll feel a sense of déjà vu at a familiar or critical location. *That’s* what we’re hoping for.”

“I see.” Klein was enlightened.

The Nighthawks’ deduction of the diary’s location was indeed reasonable. He was the only one alive among those present at the time. Only he had both the opportunity and motive to take the diary and hide it on his way back!

“If you can find the diary this way, it will likely be enough of an achievement for you to become a Beyonder.” Dunn encouraged him, indirectly revealing the diary’s importance.

“I hope so.” Klein nodded.

Dunn shifted the topic back to work. “Your second task is to take one day off every week. For now, you can decide which day. When you’re not out of the office on workdays, go to our archives and read through our canon and literature. That is the job of a professional historian. Once you’ve finished reading everything, you’ll begin taking shifts with Old Neil and the others.”

"Yes, no problem." Klein quietly heaved a sigh of relief.

That doesn't sound so difficult...

At that moment, Dunn turned slightly and pointed to the black iron double doors engraved with seven sacred emblems. "This is Chanis Gate. It's named after Archbishop Chanis, the founder of the modern Nighthawks. There is one under the central cathedral of every major city.

"Formal Nighthawk team members take turns guarding it. Additionally, at least two Keepers are stationed inside, sent by the church, along with countless traps. You must not approach it under any circumstances. Misfortune will befall you."

"That sounds scary," Klein admitted.

"The area inside is divided into several zones. Stored within are potion formulas for various Sequences and other magical materials. It is also used to temporarily detain heretics, mutants, cultists, and members of secret organizations. But don't worry, ha-ha. They're eventually sent to the Holy Cathedral," Dunn said in passing.

The Holy Cathedral? The Cathedral of Serenity, the headquarters of the Church of Evernight, located in the county of Wintrester, north of the kingdom? Klein nodded thoughtfully.

"In addition, there are all sorts of highly classified documents and records inside the gate. When you've gained a higher clearance, you might have the chance to read them." Dunn hesitated for a moment before adding, "At the bottommost level of Chanis Gate, there are also sealed artifacts."

"Sealed artifacts?" Klein repeated the term, mulling it over.

It sounded like a specialized term.

"Of the extraordinary items we've collected, some are simply too important and powerful. If they were to fall into the wrong hands, the destruction would be immense. Therefore, they must be kept strictly confidential and under close watch. Even so, they can only be used under special circumstances.

"Besides..." Dunn paused briefly before continuing. "Some of them have very unique properties and even contain certain 'living'

characteristics. They can entice the Keepers, influence their surroundings, attempt to escape, and cause catastrophic consequences. They must be strictly controlled.”

“How fascinating,” Klein marveled.

“The Nighthawks headquarters has categorized these sealed artifacts into four grades. Grade Zero is Extremely Dangerous. These are of the highest priority and the highest confidentiality. They are not to be inquired about, disseminated, described, or spied upon. They can only be sealed deep underground in the Holy Cathedral,” Dunn explained in detail.

“Grade One is Highly Dangerous. These artifacts can be used in limited ways. Their security clearance is restricted to diocesan bishops, Nighthawk executives, and higher. The central cathedrals of diocesan headquarters, such as Backlund, can hold one to two of these artifacts. The rest must be handed over to the Holy Cathedral.

“Grade Two is Dangerous. They can be used with caution and moderation. Security clearance requires one to be a bishop or a Nighthawk team captain or higher. The central cathedrals in major cities can keep three to five of these artifacts. The rest must be turned in to the Holy Cathedral or the diocesan headquarters. Grade Three is Somewhat Dangerous. They have to be used carefully and can only be requested for operations that require three or more people... The security clearance requires one member of the team to be a formal member of the Nighthawks.

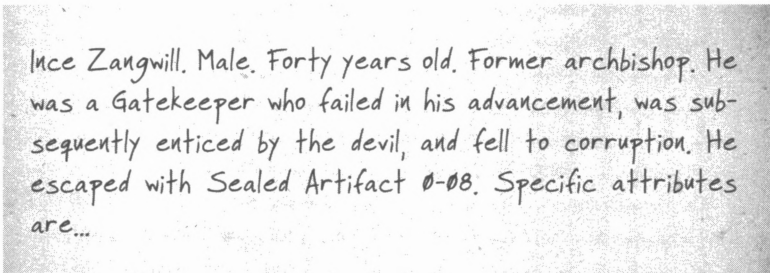
“In the future, when you read the relevant literature, you’ll understand what they represent simply by their numbers. For instance, 2-125 is Dangerous Sealed Artifact No. 125.”

As Dunn spoke, he suddenly turned around and returned to the room. He pulled a piece of paper from the bottom of a drawer.

“By the way, take a look at this. Three years ago, a newly appointed archbishop lost control and somehow managed to storm through layers of protection before vanishing mysteriously with a Grade Zero sealed artifact. Look at this photo. If you ever find him, do not alert or approach him. Just report back immediately. The chance

of perishing in the line of duty against this man is one thousand percent.”

“What?” Klein took the piece of paper. There was no heading, just a black-and-white photo with a few lines of text.



Ince Zangwill. Male. Forty years old. Former archbishop. He was a Gatekeeper who failed in his advancement, was subsequently enticed by the devil, and fell to corruption. He escaped with Sealed Artifact 0-08. Specific attributes are...

The picture and description depicted Ince Zangwill wearing a double-breasted black clergyman's robe with a soft cap on his head. His dark blond hair and deep blue eyes—so dark they were nearly black—gave him a striking appearance. His high nose and tightly pursed lips, combined with his smooth, wrinkle-free features, made his face resemble a classical sculpture. The most distinctive feature, however, was that he was blind in one eye.

“The description of the corrupted is so detailed, but the only thing about the lost artifact is its serial number...,” Klein remarked honestly.

“That's because it falls under the highest security clearance. Information about the search for Sealed Artifact 0-08 is only delivered verbally, never written down. Besides, we have only the barest information on it,” Dunn said with a sigh. “Artifact 0-08 appears to be an ordinary writing quill but doesn't require ink to write. That's all we know.”

Dunn did not delve further into the topic. He tugged at the golden chain on his lapel, pulling out a glamorous pocket watch of the same color. Clicking it open, he took a glance before pointing outside.

“I've told you everything you need to know. Go to the armory and

find Old Neil. Have him arrange the specific literature you'll need to read. He is no ordinary office clerk. He was once a formal member of the team, but due to his age, his failure to advance, and his declining health, he can no longer go out on cases. Furthermore, he has no desire to become an internal Keeper inside the gate or retire at home. All he wants is to be surrounded by the literature in our archives."

CHAPTER 20

◆ THE FORGETFUL DUNN ◆

“Okay.” Klein bowed slightly as he put on his hat again. However, his mind was preoccupied with imagining what Sealed Artifact 0-08 actually looked like.

It appears to be just your everyday quill?

It writes without ink?

Then what is its actual use? What makes it classified at the highest level of confidentiality and deemed Extremely Dangerous?

Could it be a pen that kills anyone whose name is written with it?

No way, that would be far too overpowered. Ince Zangwill wouldn't have needed to run away and hide if that were the case...

Just as Klein turned to leave, Dunn suddenly called out to him.

“Just a moment. I forgot something.”

“What is it?” Klein turned his head, his expression puzzled.

Dunn tucked away his pocket watch and smiled. “Remember to visit Mrs. Orianna, the accountant, and get a four-week advance on your pay. A total of twelve pounds. After that, you'll continue to receive half of your salary each week until the difference is covered.”

“That's too much. There's no need for that. I'd be okay with less,” Klein replied instinctively.

He had no objection to receiving an advance. After all, he didn't even have enough to pay the fare for the coach ride back to his flat.

However, receiving twelve whole pounds at once left him feeling a little uneasy.

“No, it’s necessary,” Dunn said with a chuckle, shaking his head. “Think about it. Do you really want to keep living in that apartment? The one where you have to share a bathroom with so many other tenants? Even if you’re not thinking about yourself, you should at least consider the lady of the house. Besides...”

He paused when he saw Klein nod in agreement, then smiled as he sized him up and added meaningfully, “Besides, you also need a walking stick and a new suit.”

Klein was taken aback for a second before realization dawned. His face immediately burned with embarrassment. His suit was cheap and of poor quality.

Typically, a top hat made of silk cost five to six soli. A bow tie was three soli, a silver-inlaid walking stick was seven to eight soli, and a shirt was three soli. Trousers, a vest, and a tailcoat combined amounted to about seven pounds. Leather boots ranged from nine to ten soli. Altogether, a proper gentleman’s outfit would cost upward of eight pounds and seven soli. And of course, to truly present oneself as a gentleman, a watch chain, pocket watch, and leather wallet were also necessary.

Long ago, Benson and the original Klein had scrimped and saved to set aside a little money. When they visited a clothing store to ask about prices, they had run off without even bothering to haggle. In the end, they each bought a set of clothes from a bargain shop near Ironcross Street for less than two pounds total.

It was also because of that incident that the original Klein had a lasting impression of clothing prices.

“O-okay,” Klein stammered in reply.

Like the original Klein, he couldn’t stand the thought of appearing less than presentable.

Dunn took out his pocket watch again and clicked it open, taking a quick glance.

“Perhaps you should go to Mrs. Orianna first? I know you’ll end

up spending quite some time with Old Neil, and Mrs. Orianna will likely be going home soon."

"That's a good idea." Klein, keenly aware of his financial situation, had no objections.

Dunn returned to the table and pulled on a few hanging ropes. "I'll get Rosanne to take you there."

The ropes moved, setting off a series of gears that turned and shifted, producing a chime from a bell in the reception area of Blackthorn Security Company. When Rosanne heard it from her desk, she hurriedly stood up and carefully made her way down the stairs.

It didn't take long before she appeared in front of Klein again.

Dunn humorously said, "Hope I didn't disturb your rest. Ah, yes. Please take Moretti to Mrs. Orianna."

Rosanne pouted in secret but answered with a pleased smile, "Yes, Captain."

"That's all?" Klein blurted out in surprise.

Shouldn't the captain need to sign some kind of approval? Shouldn't he write something?

"Pardon?" Dunn responded, puzzled.

"I mean, don't I need your signature to claim an advance payment from Mrs. Orianna?" Klein tried his best to phrase it simply.

"Oh, no. There's no need. Rosanne is proof enough." Dunn pointed at the brown-haired girl as he spoke.

Captain, it seems there's almost zero oversight when it comes to our financial management...

Klein resisted the urge to make a sarcastic remark and instead turned to leave the room with Rosanne. Just then, Dunn called out again.

"Wait, please. There's one more thing."

Can we please just get everything out of the way at once?

Klein turned back with a smile. "Yes, sir?"

Pressing a hand to his temple, Dunn said, "When you see Old Neil, remember to pick up ten demon-hunting bullets."

"Me? Demon-hunting bullets?" Klein asked in astonishment.

"You still have Welch's revolver, right? You don't need to turn it in." Dunn slipped a hand into his pocket and continued, "With the demon-hunting bullets, if you run into any paranormal danger, you'll be able to protect yourself. Uh, at the very least, it'll give you some courage."

There was no need for that last part...

Klein had been worrying about this exact issue, so he answered without hesitation, "All right. I'll remember!"

"This, however, *will* require a formal note. Give me a moment." Dunn sat down, picked up a dark red fountain pen, and hastily scribbled out a note before signing and stamping it.

"Thank you, Captain." Klein accepted it sincerely.

He slowly backed away before turning around—

"Hold on."

... Captain, you look to be in your thirties. Why do you seem to exhibit early symptoms of dementia?

Klein forced a smile and turned back. "Anything else?"

"I forgot earlier that you haven't been trained in firearms, so just having demon-hunting bullets wouldn't do you much good. How about collecting thirty normal bullets every day? Take the opportunity when you're out to visit the underground shooting range at No. 3 Jutland Street, at the end of the road. Most of it belongs to the police department, but there's a section reserved especially for us Nighthawks.

"Oh, right, you'll also need to get a badge from Old Neil. Without it, you won't be allowed inside the range."

Dunn smacked his forehead, took the note back from Klein, added the information, and stamped it with another seal.

"Practice makes perfect. A good marksman is made with spent bullets. Don't take this lightly." He handed the revised note back to Klein.

"Got it." Klein, always fearful of potential danger, was already itching to visit the shooting range that very day.

He took two steps toward the door before carefully and slowly

turning around again. After a moment's hesitation, he asked, "Captain, is that really everything?"

"Yes." Dunn nodded firmly.

Klein heaved a sigh of relief and walked straight out the door. As he walked, he had to suppress the strong urge to turn back and ask, "Are you *absolutely* sure there's nothing else?"

He resisted the temptation and finally left the guard room successfully.

"Captain has always been this way, always forgetting things," Rosanne said as she walked beside him, softly disparaging the captain. "Even my granny has a better memory than he does. Of course, he only forgets the trivial stuff. Mm-hmm, yes, trivial stuff."

"Klein—oh, I guess I'll just call you by your name from now on—Mrs. Orianna is a very affable person. She's easy to get along with. Her father is a watchmaker with excellent skills..."

Klein listened as the brown-haired girl prattled on while they ascended the stairwell and returned to the upper floor. They found Mrs. Orianna in the outermost office on the right-hand side.

She was a black-haired woman dressed in a long, ruffled gown. Appearing to be in her thirties, she wore her curly hair in the latest fashion. Her green eyes were bright and smiling, giving her a refined and elegant air.

After Rosanne relayed Dunn Smith's instructions, Mrs. Orianna took out a note and wrote an advance payment slip.

"Sign here. Do you have a seal? If not, you can just leave a thumbprint."

"All right." Klein went through the now-familiar procedures.

Orianna retrieved a copper key and unlocked the safe in the room. As she counted out the pound notes, she smiled and said, "You're lucky. We happen to have enough cash today."

"By the way, Klein, did Captain recruit you because you were involved in an occult incident *and* because you have a special skill?"

"Yes, you have impeccable intuition." Klein wasn't stingy with his praise.

Orianna took out four banknotes, each printed with a light gray background and deep black designs. After locking the safe, she turned back with another smile.

"That's because the same thing happened to me."

"Really?" Klein expressed an appropriate level of surprise.

"Do you know about the serial killer who shocked all of Tingen sixteen years ago?" Orianna asked as she handed over four gold-pound notes.

"...Yes! The Bloody Butcher who killed five girls in a row—some with their hearts taken out, others with their stomachs removed. My mother used to scare my sister with those stories when we were young," Klein said after a moment of thought.

He accepted the notes, realizing that two were five-pound denominations and the other two were one-pound denominations. All of them had a gray background with black designs, their four corners adorned with intricate motifs and special ink to prevent counterfeiting.

The five-pound notes were slightly larger and bore the portrait of Henry Augustus I, the direct ancestor of George III and the fifth king of the Loen Kingdom. He wore a white hair band over his round face, his slender eyes set in an unusually serious expression. But to Klein, he looked rather *adorable*.

This is a five-pound note!

That's nearly four weeks of Benson's salary!

Meanwhile, the one-pound notes featured William Augustus VI, the former king and father of George III. With his thick mustache and commanding gaze, he had led Loen out of the shackles of old traditions, restoring the kingdom's status as a global power.

They were all good rulers, Klein thought, faintly inhaling the delightful scent of the ink.

"Yes, if the Nighthawks hadn't arrived in time, I would have been the sixth victim." Despite the passage of more than ten years, Mrs. Orianna's voice still carried a trace of lingering fear.

"I heard that the serial killer—I mean, the Butcher—was a

Beyonder?" Klein asked as he carefully folded the banknotes and tucked them into the inner pocket of his suit. He patted the area a few times to make sure they were secure.

"Yes." Mrs. Orianna nodded gravely. "He had killed even more before that. He was only caught because he was preparing a demonic ritual."

"No wonder he wanted different organs... I'm sorry, Mrs. Orianna, for making you recall such unpleasant memories," Klein said sincerely.

Orianna smiled. "I've long since stopped being afraid... Back then, I was studying accountancy in business school. After that incident, I've been here ever since. All right, I won't keep you any longer. You still need to see Old Neil."

"Goodbye, ma'am." Klein took off his hat and bowed before leaving the office. Before heading downstairs, he couldn't help but pat his inner pocket to make sure the twelve pounds were still there.

This time, when he reached the corridor's intersection, he turned right. It didn't take long before he saw a half-closed iron door.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Behind the sound of his knocks, an aged voice rang out from inside. "Come in."

Klein pushed open the metal door and found himself in a cramped room, just big enough for a desk and two chairs.

There was another tightly locked iron door inside the room. Behind the desk sat a hoary elder dressed in a traditional black robe. He was reading a few yellowed pages by the light of a gas lamp.

Lifting his head, he glanced toward the door and asked, "So you're Klein Moretti? Little Rosanne came by just now and said you're very polite."

"Miss Rosanne is certainly an amiable person. Good afternoon, Mr. Neil." Klein took off his hat as a gesture of respect.

"Have a seat." Neil pointed to a silver tin can adorned with intricate floral patterns on the table. "Would you like a cup of coffee? I ground the beans myself."

The wrinkles at the edges of his eyes and mouth were deep, and his dark red eyes appeared slightly turbid.

"It doesn't seem like you drink coffee," Klein noted keenly, having noticed that Neil's own porcelain cup contained only clear water.

"Ha-ha, that's just my habit. I don't drink coffee past three in the afternoon," Neil explained with a laugh.

"Why?" Klein asked out of curiosity.

Neil held back his smile and looked him in the eye. "I'm afraid it would affect my sleep. If that happens, I end up hearing random murmurings from unknown existences."

...Klein was momentarily at a loss for words. Quickly changing the subject, he asked, "Mr. Neil, what literature and books should I be reading?" As he spoke, he took out the note from Dunn Smith.

"Anything related to history, whether complex or incomplete. To be honest, I've always wanted to study it properly, but I've only managed to grasp the most rudimentary stuff. The rest is too difficult. Things like personal diaries, popular contemporary books, epitaphs, and so on..." Neil lamented. "For example, the documents I have here require more detailed historical records to deduce their specific content."

"Why?" Klein asked, confused.

Neil pointed at the yellowed pages in front of him. "These are pages from Roselle Gustav's lost diary, written before his death. To maintain secrecy, he invented his own strange symbols."

Emperor Roselle? The transmigrated forefather? Klein was taken aback, then immediately perked up, listening attentively.

"Many believe that he never truly died but instead became a hidden deity. Because of this, cultists who revere him perform all kinds of rituals in attempts to gain power. Occasionally, we encounter such incidents and manage to obtain original or duplicated pages of his diary," Neil said, shaking his head. "To this day, no one has been able to fully decipher these special symbols. That's why the Holy Cathedral has allowed us to keep copies here for research, hoping for a pleasant surprise."

As he spoke, Neil revealed a smug smile.

"I've already deciphered a few symbols myself and confirmed that they represent numbers. Look at what I've discovered—it's actually a diary! My plan is to cross-reference different historical periods, especially events surrounding the emperor, with the corresponding dates in the diary. That way, I can try to decipher even more symbols.

"That's the mind of a genius, right?" The old gentleman, with his white hair and deep wrinkles, looked at Klein with bright eyes.

Klein nodded. "Indeed."

"Ha-ha, you can take a look as well. Starting tomorrow, you'll be helping me with this diary." Old Neil pushed the yellowed pages toward him.

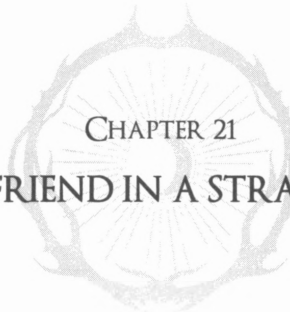
Klein turned them over, but after just a cursory glance, he was completely stunned!

Although they were crude, slightly distorted copies of the aforementioned symbols, there was no mistaking it...

...because this was a text he was intimately familiar with:

Chinese!

And it's freaking Simplified Chinese, to boot!



CHAPTER 21

◆ AN OLD FRIEND IN A STRANGE LAND ◆

For a moment, Klein almost believed he had transmigrated back to his own world. But the elegant gas lamp encased in brass and the silver-inlaid coffee tin before him grounded him in his current reality.

Could it be that Emperor Roselle, the legendary transmigrator, is a fellow countryman of mine?

And more importantly, he used Simplified Chinese—a script that doesn't exist in this world—to record his secrets?

Overcome by the indescribable feeling of encountering an old friend in a strange land, Klein quickly read through the three pages before him.

November 18 – Truly an incredible thing. A wild fantasy of an experiment and a chance mistake led me to discover a pathetic fellow, lost and trapped in the depths of darkness amid the storms. He can only barely approach the real world on the full moon each month, yet he is unable to transmit his cries. Lucky for him, he met me—the protagonist of this era.

Reading over what I just wrote, I suddenly feel a bit wistful. Even when writing in Chinese, my words feel like a translation. Forty years have passed in the blink of an eye. My memories of the past feel more like a dream.

January 1, 1184 – The grand New Year's Gala. Lady Frenelle is truly a most ravishing beauty.

January 2 – My diplomats are all idiots!

January 3 – My choice back then was far too hasty. In hindsight, the Apprentice, the Seer, or the Marauder all would have been better. Unfortunately, there's no way to redo it now.

January 4 – Why are my children so stupid? I've repeated myself so many times—don't be fooled by those charlatans! No, perhaps those charlatans have even fooled themselves. The key thing about potions isn't just mastering them—it's digesting them! It's not about tapping into power but acting the part! And a potion's name isn't just a symbolic representation of its core—it's a concrete image and the key to digestion!

September 22 – An alliance opposing me is forming. Feysac in the north, Loen in the east, Feynapotter in the south—my enemies have finally joined forces. But I have no fear. I will teach them, with undeniable facts, that the gap between our weapons and knowledge cannot be bridged by sheer numbers and low-rank Beyonders. Besides, it's not as though I lack my own Beyonders. As for the higher ranks... Ha-ha, have they forgotten who I am?

September 23 – I've lost communication with the ship sent to search for the Forsaken Land of the Gods. It's time to consider inventing wireless telegraphs. I hope they won't be affected by the storms.

September 24 – Miss Ithaca is even more mesmerizing than Lady Frenelle. Or perhaps I'm simply nostalgic for my youth.

Since these were handwritten copies, and because Simplified Chinese had more intricate strokes compared to this world's writing, the font had been significantly enlarged, resulting in very little content per page. Furthermore, for preservation and research purposes, the back of each page had been left blank.

Even so, Klein felt an immense surge of emotion as he read through the diary. In particular, Roselle's notes on the key to potions made him feel as though he had just discovered the missing piece to a complex mathematical equation. The realization sent a thrill through him.

This...might be the guiding light for my future as a Beyer!

Hmm, the three pages are from different years. It seems Emperor Roselle

only wrote the year on the first entry of each new year, which means there's no way to determine which years the September and November entries belong to...

And who is this "pathetic fellow" he discovered?

What exactly do "digesting" and "acting the part" mean?

Where is this Forsaken Land of the Gods...?

Questions bubbled and churned in Klein's mind, making him eager to gather all of Emperor Roselle's diary pages and read every last one.

"Klein?"

At that moment, Old Neil's puzzled voice snapped him out of his thoughts.

Klein jolted back to reality and hurriedly covered his reaction with a laugh. "I thought I might be the special one, so I was trying to see if I could decipher it."

Old Neil chuckled. "You really are young." He nodded with a knowing smile. "I once thought I might be the special one, too."

Klein flipped through the three pages in his hand, confirming he hadn't missed anything, then handed them back to Old Neil. Feigning ignorance, he asked, "Are these all we have?"

I need to see more of Emperor Roselle's diary!

"Do you think we have an abundance of them?" Old Neil scoffed as he caressed the pages, his wrinkles deepening. "To begin with, there aren't that many mystical or supernatural incidents in a given year."

He sighed. "Mainly, it's because of the gradual extinction of extraordinary species on the Northern Continent. Without them, we don't have as many potions, and as a result, the number of Beyonders is dwindling with each passing year.

"Over the past few centuries, dragons, giants, and elves have been reduced to mere records in books. Even the seafolk no longer appear near coastal waters."

Hearing this, Klein suddenly thought of a comparison and joked, "I think it's time to establish a Society for the Protection of Dragons and Giants."

Old Neil looked confused for a moment before the meaning dawned on him. When it did, he slapped the table and burst into hearty laughter, completely abandoning any pretense of gentlemanly composure.

“Ha-ha, Klein, you really are funny. It’s good that young people have a sense of humor. That’s an important tradition in the Loen Kingdom. But why limit it? Why only protect dragons and giants? It should be the Society for the Protection of Fantastic Beasts!”

“Oh, no, no. How could we forget about those poor, endangered plants?” Klein shook his head with feigned seriousness.

They exchanged a look and declared in unison, “The Society for the Protection of Fantastic Organisms!”

Any lingering awkwardness or unfamiliarity dissolved in their shared laughter.

“There are fewer and fewer interesting young people like you these days...” Old Neil mused before shaking his head. “Now, where was I? Oh yes. There aren’t many cases each year that involve Beyonders or mystical phenomena. And those fools who revere Emperor Roselle have always been rare to begin with. We’re lucky to have obtained even three pages of his diary.

“Well, the larger cathedrals or dioceses might have more...” he muttered to himself before reaching for the permission slip Klein had placed on the table earlier.

“Do you need pistol rounds, rifle rounds, or steam-gun rounds?”

“It’s for a revolver,” Klein answered truthfully.

“All right. I’ll fetch them. Ahem, do you have an underarm holster? As a gentleman, you mustn’t walk around with something bulging at your waist in public.” Old Neil made a joke that every man understood.

“Hee-hee, no. Should I ask Captain to add it to the slip?” Klein chuckled in response.

Old Neil waved a hand dismissively. “No need. I’ll just make a note of it. It’s included as an accessory item. Repeat after me! *Accessory item.*”

"Were you a teacher in the past?" Klein teased.

"I spent some time teaching at the church's Sunday school and affiliated schools," Old Neil replied as he picked up the permission slip, retrieved a key from a drawer, and unlocked the iron door leading to an inner chamber.

Beyonders don't seem that different from ordinary people..., Klein mused before his gaze instinctively drifted to the table, where the three pages of the diary lay.

Emperor Roselle was truly involved in the mystical world...

His diary is invaluable. To others, they're just undeciphered scraps of paper, collecting dust until someone cracks the code. But to me, they are a priceless treasure!

Where is the rest of his diary?

I need to find a way to get more...

Klein's thoughts surged uncontrollably, making it difficult to calm down. This continued until Old Neil emerged from the inner chamber and locked the iron door behind him.

"Ten demon-hunting bullets and thirty standard rounds for your revolver. A leather underarm holster. And your Seventh Unit, Special Operations Department badge. Here. Count them out and test the holster. Then sign your name in the logbook." Old Neil placed the items neatly on the table.

The revolver cartridges were arranged in a paper box in three even layers. They shimmered with the same yellow sheen as his current bullets, but these appeared narrower and slightly longer.

The demon-hunting bullets, however, were stored in a small iron box. Though identical in shape to the regular ones, their silver exteriors gleamed under the light. Upon closer inspection, Klein noticed intricate patterns etched onto their surfaces, with tiny Sacred Emblems of Darkness engraved at the bottoms.

The leather holster was sturdy, complete with a belt and buckle. Beside it lay a badge, about half the size of a palm. It had a metallic background with "Awashire Police Department" and "Seventh Unit—Special Operations Department" inscribed in silver, forming

two nearly closed circles around the police emblem of two crossed swords beneath a crown.

"Too bad it's not a Nighthawks badge," Klein remarked, half-joking and half-probing.

Old Neil simply smiled and motioned for him to try on the holster.

Removing his jacket, Klein took some time to fasten the holster securely under his left armpit.

"Not bad." He left it on and put his jacket back on over it.

Old Neil eyed him approvingly. "Suits you well. My eyes are as sharp as ever."

After pocketing the other items and signing the logbook, Klein chatted with Old Neil for a while longer before finally leaving.

Halfway down the corridor, he suddenly stopped in his tracks.

Then he slapped himself on the forehead.

I forgot to ask for more information about Sequences and potions...

It's all Emperor Roselle's diary's fault. It completely distracted me...

At this point, Klein still had no idea what the first rank (Sequence Nine) of the complete pathway possessed by the Church of Ever-night was.

Though Rosanne might have mentioned something... The Sleepless?

As he walked slowly toward the stairs, a figure suddenly rushed down from above.

The man wore form-fitting trousers that allowed for easy movement. His white shirt was untucked, and he carried the unmistakable air of a romantic poet. It was none other than the dark-haired, green-eyed inspector who had searched Klein's flat. They had crossed paths upstairs earlier but hadn't exchanged words.

"Good afternoon," the young poet-like Nighthawk greeted him with a smile.

"Good afternoon. I suppose I don't need to introduce myself?" Klein replied humorously.

"No need. I remember you quite well."

The young Nighthawk extended his right hand. "Leonard Mitchell. Sequence Eight, Midnight Poet."

Sequence Eight... He really is a poet...

Klein shook his hand and smiled. "Do you have a deep impression of me?"

Leonard Mitchell's green eyes seemed bottomless and unreadable as he replied with a faint smile, "You have an unusual air about you."

...Hmm, is he giving off a gay vibe...?

The corners of Klein's mouth twitched slightly, but he maintained his smile. "I don't think so myself."

"After encountering an incident like that, you managed to survive without our protection. That's plenty unusual." Leonard pointed ahead. "I have to relieve the captain. See you tomorrow."

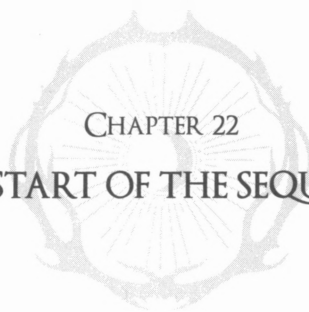
"See you tomorrow." Klein stepped aside to let him pass.

Once Klein had disappeared down the stairwell, Leonard Mitchell suddenly stopped and turned around.

Gazing at the stone-paved floor illuminated by the golden hues of the setting sun, he muttered softly into the air, "Did you notice anything...?"

...

"Yes. There's nothing special about him..."



CHAPTER 22

◆ THE START OF THE SEQUENCE ◆

After climbing the stairs and returning to the reception hall, Klein was about to bid Rosanne farewell when the brown-haired girl cheerfully mentioned, “Captain says you can start on Monday. He wants you to take some time to settle your household affairs first.”

“...Oh, all right.”

Klein hadn’t expected the Nighthawks’ management to be so humane and accommodating. He felt a little touched.

Originally, he had planned to wake up early the next morning to visit Tingen University while carrying out his job of wandering around the city. He wanted to inform the interview staff that he wouldn’t be proceeding with the follow-up rounds. After all, the original Klein had secured the interview through his mentor’s recommendation. Regardless of the circumstances, basic courtesy dictated that he give them notice. He had to respect his mentor’s efforts.

In a world without telephones, where telegrams were charged by the letter and a posted notice would arrive too late, taking a coach to the university was the most economical and practical choice.

Now, with the Captain’s special permission, Klein wouldn’t have to tire himself out. He could get a proper night’s rest and take his time.

Just as he was about to remove his hat and bid Rosanne farewell,

a thought struck him. Looking around cautiously, he lowered his voice.

“Rosanne, do you know what the starting point of the Church’s complete Sequence is?”

He had forgotten to ask Old Neil earlier.

Rosanne’s eyes widened in astonishment. “You want to become a Beyonder?”

Was I that obvious? Klein touched his face self-consciously and answered with slight embarrassment, “After learning that extraordinary and mystical powers exist, it’s only natural to feel drawn to them.”

“Oh my Goddess. Do you know how dangerous it is? Didn’t the captain tell you? A Beyonder’s enemies aren’t just cultists and dark sorcerers—their greatest enemies are themselves! People lose control and die nearly every year. Have you thought about how your family would feel?”

Rosanne gestured animatedly as she spoke, her agitation evident.

“Klein, I think the better choice is to stay grounded and work as regular office staff. There’s nearly no danger in that, and our salaries increase every year. After a few years, you’ll have saved up plenty of money. Then you can rent a detached house in Northside or the suburbs, marry a charming lady, start a happy family, and have adorable, mischievous little angels—”

“Stop, Rosanne! Hold up!” Klein quickly cut her off, realizing she was veering further and further from the topic. “I just wanted to... well, have a basic understanding.”

“All right...” Rosanne fell silent for a few seconds, lowering her gaze as she calmed down. “Because of what happened to my father, I tend to get...you know, a little worked up about these things. But to be honest, I admire anyone who willingly chooses to become a Nighthawk.”

“Of course. I understand,” Klein reassured her.

Rosanne blinked her light brown eyes and added, “My father once said that one should never think they can conquer hidden

dangers simply by becoming more powerful or advancing further in the Sequence. In fact, it's the opposite. The stronger you become, the more terrifying the things you encounter. When facing some unknown horror, death and insanity are often the only outcomes... He died two weeks after saying that..."

"Rosanne..."

"Don't worry, Klein. My life is great now, really great! But you should be a little more afraid of these things!"

"...I really just wanted a basic understanding," Klein replied, feeling cornered, so he simply repeated himself.

Captain explained it in far greater depth and detail than you did. And even if I don't become a Beyonder, I've already encountered the extraordinary...

"All right, then," Rosanne said, her expression softening in thought. "I've heard Captain and Old Neil talk about this before. Because extraordinary creatures are declining or extinct, there are hardly any high-Sequence Beyonders left in this era. Becoming a Beyonder is impressive enough on its own!"

"The combined population of Tingen and the surrounding suburbs is several hundred thousand, maybe more. And yet there are only about thirty Beyonders here. Well, that's just my guess... I'm not counting the cultists and dark sorcerers hiding in the shadows."

Without waiting for Klein's reply, Rosanne seemed to regain her vibrancy. She clenched her fist and brought it to her chest.

"And among these thirty-plus Beyonders, most of them are Sequence Nine! Oh, it seems I've gone off-topic..."

"It's okay. That's exactly the kind of basic information I was looking for."

Klein hoped Rosanne would keep talking as usual, revealing more details as she rambled on.

"Anyway, becoming a Beyonder is already a very, very impressive feat on its own!" Rosanne repeated. "The starting rank for our church's complete Sequence is a Sleepless!"

I see...

Klein nodded slightly as he listened, now that Rosanne had found her rhythm.

"You should be able to guess from the name. A Sleepless doesn't need to sleep at night. Just three to four hours of rest during the day is enough. Ah, I'm so envious... No, wait, not at all! Sleep is a gift bestowed upon us by the Goddess. It's the truest bliss in the world!

"Where was I? Ah, right. Sleepless can see through the darkness even without any lights. The deeper the night, the more powerful they become. I mean that in all aspects—their physical strength, spiritual perception, and mental capabilities. However, even though they can detect lurking dangers, they still need demon-hunting bullets and other tools to deal with monsters that can't be fought through conventional means. My father was once a Sleepless."

Without giving Klein a chance to interrupt, Rosanne continued, "After that comes Sequence Eight—Midnight Poet. And one level above that is Sequence Seven—Nightmare."

Nightmare?

Klein immediately recalled how Dunn Smith had entered his dream. He asked, as if to confirm, "The captain?"

Rosanne's mouth formed an *O* shape. "You know about that?"

"The captain entered my dream once..." Klein glanced around and lowered his voice.

"I see..." Rosanne looked enlightened. She took a sip from her coffee cup before saying wistfully, "The church only has two Sequence Seven Beyonders in Tingen. The captain is probably one of them. He'd be an impressive figure even in a large diocese like Backlund. Some Nighthawk leadership might not even be as strong as he is!"

"So the captain is that formidable, huh?" Klein echoed with a smile.

Frankly, Dunn Smith's appearance in his dream the night before had left a deep impression on Klein. Instinctively, he had already considered the captain a very powerful Beyond.

"Of course!" Rosanne straightened her back proudly.

But her thoughts jumped to another topic, and she furrowed her brows. "As for what's above Sequence Seven, I have no idea. The captain is probably the only one among the Nighthawks in Tingen who knows."

"Then what about other starting Sequences? The ones that aren't complete?"

Satisfied, Klein smoothly changed the subject.

Rosanne's description of Sleepless matched his expectations of Beyonders, but it wasn't what he wanted to become. In his mind, the perfect Sequence Nine should be one that studied and mastered a wide range of mystical knowledge. That way, he could uncover the mystery behind his transmigration and lay the foundation for finding a way back.

Rosanne thought for a moment before sighing. "I don't have much interest in that. I just know that our church has more than others. After all, the Goddess is the Mother of Secrets..."

"Well, there should be two or three more. Some of our teammates are rather cold and distant. They even smell a little peculiar, which makes me uneasy. While others... Well, I mean, you should talk to Old Neil. He knows a lot, including plenty of fascinating magical rituals.

"Let me think... Hmm... Ah! I remember now! He once mentioned his Sequence Nine title—the name of the potion formula... Yes, it's called Mystery Pryer."

A great number of interesting magical rituals? And "Mystery Pryer"... That sounds exactly like what I'm looking for...

Klein felt a surge of hope.

"Oh! And I also know the name of a Sequence Seven from an incomplete pathway!" Rosanne added with a hint of excitement, clearly pleased with herself for remembering.

"What is it?" Klein asked, his curiosity piqued.

In a world where High-Sequence Beyonders were scarce to the point of nonexistence, Sequence Seven was probably considered quite a potent force in the church.

Rosanne revealed a sweet smile as she replied smugly, "Spirit Medium!"

"Ms. Daly?" Klein blurted. After his initial surprise, he realized that it shouldn't have been surprising. Only a strong Beyonder at Sequence Seven could achieve such an impressive performance as a medium!

Rosanne's eyes widened once again as she said in disbelief, "H-how do you know about her?"

"I've met Ms. Daly." Klein did not hide the matter.

"All right," said Rosanne in an envious tone. "If I could directly become a Spirit Medium, one just like Ms. Daly, then I'd want to be a Beyonder, too. No, I'd consider it carefully for ten minutes..."

"Yes, Ms. Daly fulfills all of my expectations of what a Beyonder is like," Klein echoed in a slightly exaggerated manner.

Having fulfilled his goals, he chatted idly with Rosanne for a few more minutes. Once he was sure he wouldn't be getting any new information, he took off his hat and bowed before leaving.

As he descended the stairs outside, Klein suddenly stopped after a few steps. He reached out to touch the bank notes in his inner pocket.

Then he took out the twelve gold pounds and clenched them tightly in his left palm before stuffing his hand into his trouser pocket and refusing to release the notes or pull them out again. Without realizing it, a subtle smile had appeared on his face.

According to the customs of the Foodaholic Empire from which he hailed, after receiving a sum of money, a good meal was in order!

He would treat his sister to a good meal tonight!

CHAPTER 23

◆ SECONDARY WEAPON ◆

As Klein walked down Jutland Street, feeling the warm, humid breeze against his face, a realization suddenly struck him.

He only had three pence in change. Taking a coach back to Iron-cross Street would cost him four. If he handed over a one-pound note, it would be like using a hundred-dollar bill to pay for a cheap bottle of water back on Earth. There was nothing inherently wrong with it—just incredibly awkward.

Should I use three pence to travel three kilometers and walk the rest of the way?

Klein reached into his pocket with one hand, slowing his pace as he considered his options.

That won't do. He quickly dismissed the idea.

Walking the remaining distance would take too long, and considering he was carrying twelve pounds—a small fortune—it wasn't exactly safe.

Besides, he had deliberately left his revolver at home, worried that the Nighthawks might confiscate it. If he encountered any lingering threats from Welch's death, he'd have no way to defend himself.

I could get change from a bank... No, no way! Banks charge a 0.5% processing fee. That's way too extravagant! Klein shook his head silently. Just thinking about it made his heart ache.

Ruling out one solution after another, Klein's eyes lit up when he spotted a clothing shop up ahead.

That's it! The logical course of action would be to buy something at a reasonable price to get some change. A formal suit, shirt, vest, trousers, leather boots, and a walking stick are all within budget. Plus, I'd have to buy them sooner or later.

Hmm... But trying on clothes is a hassle. Besides, Benson knows more about this than I do, and he's better at bargaining. I should wait until he's back...

Then a walking stick? Yes!

As the saying goes, a cane is a gentleman's best choice for self-defense. It's half as good as a crowbar. A gun in one hand and a cane in the other. That's how a civilized person fights!

His decision made, Klein turned and stepped into the shop under the sign that read WELKER CLOTHING AND HATS.

The store's layout resembled the ones he had seen on Earth. The left wall displayed rows of formal suits. The center was filled with shirts, trousers, vests, bow ties, and other apparel, while the right housed leather shoes and boots neatly arranged inside glass cabinets.

A male sales assistant dressed in a white shirt and red vest approached him with a polite smile. "Sir, may I help you find something?"

In the Loen Kingdom, wealthy gentlemen of high status typically wore black suits with white shirts paired with black vests and black trousers. Their colors were deliberately monotonous, so they required their male servants, sales assistants, and waiters to dress in brighter tones to distinguish them from their masters.

Conversely, ladies wore glamorous dresses in vibrant colors, while their maidservants were restricted to black-and-white uniforms.

Klein pondered for a moment before responding, "A walking stick. Something sturdy and hard."

Preferably the kind that can crack open someone's skull.

The red-vested sales assistant gave Klein a subtle once-over before leading him deeper into the store. He gestured toward a row of canes in a corner.

"This one with gold inlay is made of ironheart wood. It has a wonderful heft and is incredibly durable. This costs eleven soli and seven pence. Would you like to give it a try?"

Eleven soli and seven pence? Why don't you go rob a bank while you're at it?! So what if it has a gold inlay? Big whoop!

Klein was momentarily taken aback by the price but maintained a neutral expression. He nodded slightly. "Why not?"

The sales assistant carefully picked up the ironheart wood cane and handed it to Klein, as if afraid that Klein would drop and break the merchandise.

Klein took the cane and immediately felt its weight. He moved it around experimentally and found that it was too heavy to swing smoothly.

"It's too heavy." He shook his head, relieved.

And I'll have you know that's not just an excuse!

The sales assistant put the cane back and pointed at three others.

"This one is made of walnut, crafted by Mr. Hayes, Tingen's most renowned cane maker. It's priced at ten soli and three pence. This one here is made of ebony wood, inlaid with silver. It's as hard as steel and costs seven soli and six pence. And this one is made from the core of a white bory tree, also inlaid with silver. It costs seven soli and ten pence."

Klein tested each one, ensuring they were of a suitable weight. He tapped them with his fingers to check their hardness before finally making his choice.

"I'll take the ebony wood." He pointed at the silver-inlaid cane in the sales assistant's hand.

"Of course, sir. Please follow me to complete the purchase. If your cane ever gets scuffed or stained, feel free to bring it back for free maintenance."

The sales assistant led Klein to the counter.

Taking the opportunity, Klein unfolded the four gold-pound notes he had been tightly gripping and pulled out two of the smaller denominations.

Behind the counter, the cashier greeted him with a polite smile.

"Hello, sir. That will be seven soli and six pence."

Klein had intended to maintain his gentlemanly image, but as he held out his hand with the one-pound note, he couldn't help but ask, "Would there happen to be some kind of discount?"

"Sir, all our merchandise is handcrafted, so our costs are quite high," the sales assistant beside him replied politely. "And since the owner isn't here, we aren't authorized to lower the prices."

The cashier behind the counter added with a slight bow, "Yes, we are terribly sorry about that, sir."

"All right then."

Klein handed over the note, exchanging it for the black, silver-inlaid walking stick.

While waiting for his change, he took a few steps back from the counter and tested the swing of his new secondary weapon.

Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!

The cane slashed through the air, producing a satisfyingly heavy sound. Klein nodded in approval.

But when he looked forward again, expecting to see his change prepared, he was instead met with an unexpected sight—the red-vested sales assistant had retreated far away while the cashier had backed into a corner, subtly inching toward the double-barreled shotgun hanging on the wall.

The Loen Kingdom had a semi-regulated policy on firearms. To legally own a gun, one had to apply for either an all-purpose weapon permit or a hunting license. However, neither permit allowed for the possession of restricted military firearms such as repeating rifles, high-pressure steam-powered guns, or six-barrel machine guns.

An all-purpose weapon permit allowed one to purchase and possess any civilian firearm, but acquiring it was notoriously difficult. Even merchants of considerable status often found their applications denied.

In contrast, a hunting license was much easier to obtain. Even suburban farmers had them. However, it was strictly limited to hunting rifles and imposed a cap on the number of firearms one could own.

Most people with considerable wealth or assets applied for a hunting license as a means of self-defense in case of emergencies—like this one.

...

The corners of Klein's mouth twitched as he looked at the two shop assistants, who were now watching him with intense wariness.

He let out a dry chuckle. "Not bad. This cane is perfect for swinging. I'm very pleased."

Realizing he had no ill intentions, the cashier behind the counter let out a quiet breath and carefully handed over the notes and copper coins with both hands.

Klein accepted the change and glanced down. He had received two five-soli notes, two one-soli notes, a fivence, and one penny. He nodded inwardly in satisfaction.

After a brief pause, he ignored the wary gazes of the shop assistants and held the four notes up against the light, inspecting the anti-counterfeiting watermarks.

Satisfied, he tucked the notes and coins into their respective places. With the cane in hand, he touched the brim of his hat in farewell and strode out of Welker Clothing and Hats like a proper gentleman.

Lavishly, he spent six pence on the fare for a short-distance trackless coach and a transfer, successfully making his way home.

After closing the door behind him, Klein counted his remaining eleven pounds and twelve soli three more times before finally placing them into his desk drawer.

Then he pulled out the bronze revolver by its wooden grip.

Clink! Clang!

Five brass cartridges fell onto the table.

He then retrieved the silver demon-hunting bullets, each engraved with intricate Sacred Emblems of Darkness, and loaded them one by one into the revolver's cylinder.

As before, he only loaded five rounds, leaving an empty chamber to prevent accidental misfires. The remaining demon-hunting bullet and the five ordinary bullets were carefully placed into the small iron case.

Clack!

He snapped the cylinder into place, and an unmistakable sense of security settled over him.

With growing excitement, Klein holstered the revolver under his armpit and buckled it securely. Then he began practicing the quick-draw motion, unbuckling and pulling the gun repeatedly.

Whenever his arms ached, he would pause for a short rest, only to continue again. He repeated this cycle over and over until sunset, which was when the sound of tenants walking in the corridor outside finally drew his attention.

Phew!

Klein let out a slow breath before returning his revolver to its holster.

Only then did he remove his suit and vest, swapping them for his usual brownish-yellow jacket. He swung his arms a few times to loosen them up.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

The sound of approaching footsteps echoed in the hallway. Moments later, a key turned in the lock.

The door opened, and Melissa entered, her soft black hair neatly framing her face.

She sniffed the air and immediately glanced toward the unlit stove.

The light in her clear eyes dimmed slightly.

"Klein, I'll heat up the leftovers from last night. Benson will probably be home tomorrow." She turned to her brother.

Klein, hands casually tucked into his pockets, leaned against the desk with a grin.

"No, we're eating out tonight."

"Eating out?" Melissa asked in surprise.

"How does Silver Crown Restaurant on Daffodil Street sound? I hear their food is excellent."

"B-but..." Melissa still looked confused.

Klein's grin widened. "To celebrate my new job."

"You found a job?" Her voice unknowingly rose in excitement.

"B-but isn't your interview at Tingen University tomorrow?"

"A different job."

Still smiling, Klein reached into the drawer and pulled out the stack of notes.

"They even gave me an advance—four weeks' pay."

Melissa's eyes widened as she stared at the gold pounds and soli.

"Oh my Goddess... You... They... What kind of job is it?"

This...

Klein's expression froze for a moment as he carefully considered his words.

"A security company that specializes in seeking, collecting, and protecting ancient relics. They were in need of a professional consultant. It's a five-year contract, paying three pounds a week."

Melissa was silent for a moment before asking, "Is this what you were troubled over last night?"

Klein nodded. "Yes. Being a lecturer at Tingen University would have been more respectable, but I like this job better."

"... Well, it isn't bad, either."

Melissa gave him an encouraging smile, though her expression remained half-suspicious, half-curious.

"Why would they give you such a large advance?"

"Because we need to move." Klein grinned and shrugged. "We need a place with more rooms...and our own bathroom."

He felt that his smile was impeccable—just short of saying, "Surprised?"

Melissa was momentarily stunned before she suddenly spoke in a fluster. "Klein, our current living situation isn't that bad. It's just that I sometimes complain about the bathroom out of habit. Do you remember Jenny? She used to live next door to us. But after her father was injured and lost his job, they had no choice but to move to Lower Street. Their entire family of five is crammed into a single room—three in a bunk bed and two sleeping on the floor."

Melissa looked up at Klein, her voice soft but firm.

"And even then, they were thinking about renting out the last bit of empty floor space to someone else... Compared to them, we're

already very lucky. Don't waste your salary on this. Besides, I love Mrs. Smyrin's bakery."

Sis...why is your reaction completely different from how it played out in my head...?

Klein's expression stiffened as he listened to her words, utterly caught off guard.



The sky outside was gradually painted in golden hues as Klein met Melissa's gaze, momentarily at a loss for words. None of the lines he had prepared seemed suitable.

He cleared his throat twice and quickly searched for another approach. "Melissa, this isn't a waste of money. In the future, my colleagues—and Benson's as well—might visit our home. Are we supposed to host them in a place like this? And when Benson and I get married, are we still going to sleep in our bunk bed?"

"Neither of you even has a fiancée yet, right?" Melissa countered, logical and precise. "We can wait a little while and save up more money in the meantime."

"No, Melissa. This is about social expectations." Stumped, Klein had no choice but to pull the "it's what people do" argument. "Since I'll be earning three pounds a week, we should live in a way that reflects that income."

To be honest, he didn't find their current living conditions that uncomfortable. Having shared rental apartments before, he was used to it. But precisely because of that experience, he knew how inconvenient this environment was for a girl.

More importantly, his goal was to become a Beyonder and study mysticism to find a way home. He would eventually have to conduct

magical rituals at home, and with so many people living in the same building, the risk of being discovered (or causing accidents) was simply too high.

Seeing that Melissa was about to argue further, Klein quickly added, "Don't worry. I'm not planning to buy a detached house, just a terraced house. The most important thing is that it has a bathroom we can call our own.

"I like Mrs. Smyrin's bread, Tingen pancakes, and lemon cakes, too. We can look for a place near Ironcross Street and Daffodil Street."

Melissa pursed her lips, hesitating for a moment before slowly nodding.

"Besides, I'm in no rush to move." Klein chuckled. "We'll wait for Benson to come back first. Otherwise, he'd be in for quite a shock when he opened the door and would probably cry out, 'Where are my things? Where are my siblings? Where is my home? Is this my home? Did I go to the wrong address? Oh Goddess, wake me up if this is a dream! I was only gone for a few days, and now my home has vanished!'"

His imitation of Benson's exasperated tone made Melissa involuntarily smile, revealing her shallow dimples.

"No, Mr. Franky would definitely be waiting by the door, demanding Benson hand over his keys. He wouldn't even get the chance to come upstairs." She scoffed, disparaging their miserly landlord.

In the Moretti household, joking about Mr. Franky had become a beloved pastime—one that Benson had started long ago.

"Right, there's no way he'd change the locks for the next tenants." Klein laughed before gesturing toward the door. "Miss Melissa, shall we head to Silver Crown Restaurant for our celebration?"

Melissa let out a soft sigh and said, "Klein, do you know Selena? My good friend from school?"

Selena?

A mental image surfaced in Klein's mind—a girl with wine-red hair and deep brown eyes. Both of her parents were devout followers

of the Evernight Goddess, and they had named her after Saint Selena as a blessing. She was not yet sixteen, half a year younger than Melissa, and was always cheerful and outgoing.

"Yes." Klein nodded. He remembered Selena Wood.

"Her older brother, Chris, is a solicitor. He earns close to three pounds a week, and his fiancée works part-time as a typist," Melissa began. "They've been engaged for more than four years. To ensure they have a stable and comfortable life after marriage, they're still saving up. They have yet to walk the wedding aisle, and according to Selena, they plan to wait at least another year. She says there are many people like her brother who can't afford to marry until they're at least twenty-eight. You have to plan ahead, Klein. You need to save. Don't squander your money."

...It's just a meal at a restaurant. Is there really a need for a lecture?

Klein was speechless. He didn't know what to say or how to react. After a brief pause, he finally replied, "Melissa, I'm starting at three pounds a week, and my salary will increase every year. You don't need to worry."

"But we need to save in case of unexpected emergencies." Melissa's tone was firm. "What if that security company suddenly shuts down? One of my classmates had to quit school because her father's workplace went bankrupt. Their family's situation worsened drastically, practically overnight. He had to take up temporary work at the pier just to get by."

...

Klein rubbed his face.

"That... Well, this security company has...some government connections. It won't go bankrupt so easily."

"But even the government isn't stable." Melissa refused to back down. "Every election, if the party in power changes, positions shift, policies get overturned, and everything turns into a mess."

...Sis, you sure know a lot...

Klein let out a small sigh of exasperated amusement and shook his head. "All right, all right..."

"Then...I'll make some soup with last night's leftovers. Why don't you head out and buy a pan-fried fish, a black-pepper steak, a small jar of butter, and a mug of ginger beer? We should still celebrate a little."

These were common street foods sold by hawkers on Ironcross Street.

A pan-fried fish cost six to eight pence, a not-so-big piece of black-pepper steak was five pence, a quarter-pound jar of butter was four pence, and a mug of ginger beer was a pence.

Buying a full pound of butter would be a better value since that would only cost one soli and three pence.

The original Klein had been responsible for buying ingredients whenever he had time off, so he was no stranger to the prices. Klein took a few seconds to do the mental calculation, deducing that Melissa would need about one soli and six pence. He took out two one-soli notes and handed them to her.

"Okay."

Melissa didn't object to Klein's proposal. She put down her briefcase and accepted the notes.

As he watched his sister ready a small jar for the butter and a tub for the other food before briskly heading toward the door, Klein thought for a moment and called out, "Melissa, use the leftover change to buy some fruit."

On Ironcross Street, many merchants sold low-quality or near-spoiled fruits they had acquired cheaply from elsewhere. The residents had no qualms about buying them because they were extremely affordable. As long as they cut away the rotten parts after bringing them home, they could still enjoy delicious fruit at a fraction of the cost.

As soon as he spoke, Klein took a few quick steps forward, reached into his pocket, and pulled out his remaining copper pennies, stuffing them into Melissa's palm.

"Huh?"

Melissa's brown eyes widened in confusion as she looked at him.

Klein stepped back and smiled. "Remember to stop by Mrs. Smyrin's. Reward yourself with a slice of lemon cake."

Melissa's mouth opened slightly as she blinked. After a brief pause, she finally said a single word.

"Okay."

Then she quickly turned around, opened the door, and ran toward the stairwell.

...

Cedars and maples lined the banks of the river, filling the air with a fresh scent that was almost intoxicating.

Carrying both his revolver and walking stick, Klein stepped off the coach carriage he had paid six pence for. He walked along a cemented path leading toward a three-story stone building shaded by greenery—Tingen University's administrative block.

It truly deserves its status as one of the two major universities of the Loen Kingdom...

Klein marveled at the sight. This was his first time here.

Compared to Tingen University, Khoy University, located just across the river, could only be described as shabby.

"Heave ho!"

"Heave ho!"

A series of rhythmic shouts drifted toward him.

Two rowing boats were making their way upstream along the Khoy River, their oars slicing through the water in perfect unison.

This was a popular varsity sport across the Loen Kingdom. Even Klein, who had needed a scholarship to finance his university education, had joined Khoy University's rowing club alongside Welch and a few others. Surprisingly, he had been pretty good at it.

"Ahhh, youth..."

Klein sighed wistfully, stopping for a moment to watch.

In another week, such sights would disappear. Summer break was approaching.

As he continued down the tree-lined path, Klein reached the

three-story stone building. After registering himself, he easily found his way to the office he had visited before.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

He rapped lightly on the half-closed door.

“Come in.”

A male voice responded from inside.

As Klein entered, he saw a middle-aged instructor dressed in a white shirt and black tailcoat. The man frowned slightly and said, “The interview isn’t for another hour.”

“Do you remember me, Mr. Stone? I’m Klein Moretti, a student of Senior Associate Professor Cohen. You read my recommendation letter before.”

Klein smiled as he removed his hat.

Harvin Stone stroked his full, dark beard and looked at him in puzzlement. “Do you need help with something? I don’t conduct the interviews.”

“Here’s the situation. I’ve already found a job, so I won’t be participating in today’s interview.”

Klein explained his reason for coming.

“I see...”

Harvin Stone nodded in understanding before standing up and extending his right hand.

“Congratulations. You certainly are a polite young man. I’ll inform the professor and senior associate professors.”

Klein shook his hand and was about to make some brief small talk before taking his leave when a familiar voice suddenly spoke from behind him.

“Moretti, you found another job?”

Klein turned around and saw an elderly man with silver hair and deep-set features. His dark blue eyes were sunken, yet his face bore few wrinkles. Dressed sharply in a black tailcoat, he had an unmistakable presence.

“Good afternoon, Professor Cohen. And Mr. Azik,” Klein greeted them hurriedly. “What are you doing here?”

The elderly man was none other than Senior Associate Professor Quentin Cohen of Khoy University's history department—Klein's mentor.

Beside him stood a middle-aged man of average build with bronze-colored skin and no facial hair. He held a newspaper in one hand. His black hair and brown irises gave him a mild and approachable appearance, yet there was a subtle, unspeakable weariness in his soft features. His eyes carried the weight of time, as though they had seen all the vicissitudes of life.

Beneath his right ear was a small black mole, visible only if one looked closely.

Klein recognized him immediately—Mr. Azik, a lecturer in Khoy University's history department.

He had often helped the original Klein in his studies. He also enjoyed debating with Senior Associate Professor Cohen. Though they frequently held opposing views, the two were close friends, always meeting for discussions.

Cohen nodded, his tone relaxed. "Azik and I are here to participate in an academic conference.

"What kind of job did you find?"

"A security company that seeks, collects, and protects ancient relics. They needed a professional consultant and are paying me three pounds a week," Klein repeated the same explanation he had given his sister the previous day.

Then he added, "As you know, I prefer exploring history rather than summarizing it."

Cohen nodded slightly. "Everyone makes their own choices. I'm pleased that you came all the way to Tingen University to inform them instead of simply not showing up."

At that moment, Mr. Azik interjected.

"Klein, do you know what happened to Welch and Naya? I read in the papers that they were killed by burglars who broke into their home."

The incident has been classified as an armed burglary? Why is it already in the newspapers?

Slightly surprised, Klein carefully weighed his words before responding.

"I'm not very sure of the details, either. Welch obtained a diary from the Fourth Epoch—from the Antigonus family of the Solomon Empire. He asked me to help decipher it. I assisted them for the first few days but later got busy preparing for my interviews. The police even came to see me two days ago."

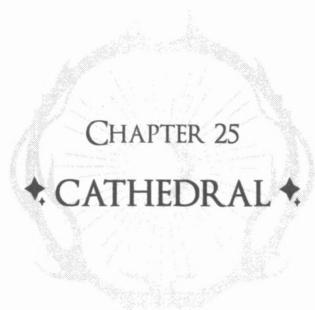
He deliberately mentioned the Solomon Empire and the Antigonus family in the hopes of drawing information from the two history teachers.

"The Fourth Epoch..." Cohen muttered, his brows furrowing.

Meanwhile, Azik's bronze-skinned fingers tightened slightly around the newspaper.

For a moment, he simply stared blankly. Then he inhaled sharply and rubbed his temple with his left hand.

"Antigonus... That name rings a bell... But why can't I remember where I've heard it before?"



As Azik muttered to himself, he subconsciously shot a glance at Quentin Cohen, as if hoping for a hint to jog his memory.

Cohen, his deep-set blue eyes calm and unwavering, shook his head without hesitation. "I don't have any recollection of it."

"...All right then. Perhaps it was just something that sounded similar." Azik lowered his left hand and let out a self-deprecating chuckle.

Klein felt a pang of disappointment at the outcome. He hesitated for a moment before adding, "Professor Cohen, Mr. Azik, as both of you know, I'm very interested in exploring and restoring the history of the Fourth Epoch. If either of you ever recall anything or come across relevant information, could you please write to me?"

"Of course."

Thanks to Klein's polite conduct, the silver-haired Senior Associate Professor seemed particularly pleased with him.

Azik nodded as well. "Is your address still the same?"

"For now, but I'll be moving soon. I'll send a letter to inform you once I do," Klein replied respectfully.

Cohen tapped his black cane against the floor and remarked, "It's about time you moved to a better environment."

At that moment, Klein's gaze drifted toward the newspaper in Azik's hand. After a brief deliberation, he asked, "Professor Cohen, Mr. Azik, what did the papers say about Welch and Naya?"

"I only learned a little from the constables investigating the case."

Azik was about to answer when Cohen suddenly pulled out his pocket watch, the golden chain glinting under the light. He clicked it open, glanced at the time, and then tapped his walking stick against the ground.

"The meeting is about to begin, Azik. We can't afford to be late. Just give Moretti the newspaper."

"Ah, good idea."

Azik handed the newspaper over to Klein.

"We're heading upstairs. Don't forget to write. Our address hasn't changed. It's still the Khoy University history department office. Ha-ha."

With that, he laughed lightly and turned away, leaving the room with Cohen.

Klein took off his hat and gave a slight bow as they departed. After watching them disappear down the corridor, he bid Harvin Stone farewell and strolled out of the gray three-story building.

Beneath the midday sun, Klein unfolded the newspaper and saw that it was *The Tingen Morning Post*.

Tingen sure has an abundance of periodicals...

There's The Morning Post, The Evening Post, The Honest Paper, The Backlund Daily Tribune, The Tussock Times, plus family magazines and book review columns...

A list of names surfaced effortlessly in his mind. Of course, not all of them were local. Some were transported to Tingen via steam locomotive.

With advancements in papermaking and printing, the price of a newspaper had dropped to as little as one penny, making it accessible to a wider audience.

Klein didn't bother scanning the other articles. Instead, he flipped directly to the news section and found the headline report.

DAILY NEWS

According to the police department, the scene at Mr. Welch's home was devastating.

All the gold, jewelry, and cash, as well as any valuables that could be easily carried away, were stolen. Not a single penny was left behind.

There is reason to believe this crime was committed by a cruel and merciless gang, one that doesn't hesitate to kill the innocent, like Mr. Welch and Ms. Naya, the moment their faces are seen.

This is an act of blatant contempt for the laws of our kingdom! A direct threat to public safety! No one wishes to face such horror.

Of course, there is one piece of good news: The police have already located the suspect and apprehended the main culprit.

We will continue to provide updates as more details emerge.

Reporter: John Browning

Klein walked down the shaded path, nodding to himself imperceptibly.

So...the matter has been handled and covered up...

As he flipped through the newspaper, he skimmed other news articles and serialized stories.

Suddenly, he felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

It was a feeling as though countless thin needles were stabbing into his skin.

Someone is watching me...?

Observing me?

Monitoring me?

As thoughts flooded his mind, Klein felt a faint realization dawn upon him.

Back on Earth, he had occasionally experienced the sensation of being watched before eventually discovering the source. However, he had never felt it as intensely—nor as assuredly—as he did now!

The same was true for similar occurrences in the original Klein's fragmented memories.

Was it transmigration itself or the mysterious luck-enhancement ritual that enhanced his sixth sense? Klein fought back the urge to search for the observer. Instead, he imitated what he had learned from fiction, TV, and movies, slowing his pace as he folded the newspaper. He then pretended to be admiring the Khoy River.

Moving naturally, as if merely taking in the scenery, he began to gradually turn his head little by little until he had rotated almost fully—his eyes scanning his surroundings all the while.

Other than the trees, grass, and distant students passing by, the boulevard appeared empty.

Yet Klein was certain that someone was watching him!

This...

His heart pounded.

Blood coursed through his body in time with the intense thumping in his chest.

Klein unfolded the newspaper and covered half his face with it, afraid that the observer might notice something in his expression.

At the same time, he tightened his grip on his walking stick, keeping himself ready to draw his revolver.

One step.

Two steps.

Three steps.

He walked slowly, maintaining a steady rhythm.

The eerie sensation persisted, but no immediate danger erupted.

With forced composure, he continued forward, reaching the end of the boulevard and arriving at the coach carriage stop.

Just in time.

One was already pulling up.

"Iron... Jut... No, Champagne Street."

Klein changed his mind multiple times before finally settling on a destination.

He had originally planned to head straight home, but he feared leading the unknown watcher back to his flat.

Then he considered going to Jurland Street to seek help from the Nighthawks or his colleagues. But what if the observer was trying to bait him into exposing his connection with them?

Eventually, he settled on a random location.

“Six pence,” the fare collector said matter-of-factly.

Klein hadn’t brought any gold pounds with him today. He had hidden his savings in their usual spot and only carried notes worth two soli. After spending the same amount on the ride earlier, he was left with one soli and six pence.

So he handed over all his remaining coins and boarded the carriage.

Once inside, he found a seat and listened as the door shut.

Instantly, the unsettling sensation vanished.

Klein exhaled slowly. His hands and feet trembled slightly.

What do I do?

What should I do next?

Staring out the window, Klein’s mind raced.

Until he could determine the watcher’s intentions, he had to assume malicious intent.

Numerous thoughts surfaced, but he dismissed them one by one. He had never experienced anything like this before, and it took him a few minutes to organize his thoughts.

I have to notify the Nighthawks.

Only they can truly eliminate this threat. But I can’t head there directly since I might expose them. And that might be exactly what the observer wants—to force me into exposing the Nighthawks.

Following this line of thinking, Klein began to crudely deduce various possibilities. His thoughts gradually became clearer.

Phew!

Exhaling again, he felt himself calm slightly. He then turned his focus to the passing scenery.

The journey to Champagne Street was uneventful.

But the moment Klein stepped out of the carriage and onto the street, the suffocating sensation returned.

That same oppressive feeling...

I'm still being watched!

Feigning ignorance, Klein held his newspaper and walking stick as he slowly walked toward Jutland Street.

However, just before reaching it, he made a sudden decision—he didn't make the turn at the corner.

Instead, he continued walking past the street, heading toward Red Moon Road.

There, in the center of a beautiful white plaza, stood a magnificent cathedral with a pointed roof.

Saint Selena Cathedral.

The Tingen headquarters of the Church of Evernight.

As a follower of the Goddess, there was nothing suspicious about him attending mass or praying on his day off.

The cathedral's architecture was reminiscent of the Gothic style found on Earth.

Its black facade loomed ominously, and a tall, mottled clock tower stood at its front, rising toward the clouds.

Between its checkered windows of blue and red glass, the tower cast long shadows across the plaza.

Klein stepped inside, his footsteps echoing across the vast prayer hall.

The narrow red and blue stained glass windows allowed only slivers of light to enter.

The blue was closer to black, and the red the same color as the crimson moon.

Together, the hues bathed the interior in an eerie, enigmatic glow.

The feeling of being watched vanished again. Klein's expression betrayed nothing as he approached the wide-open prayer hall.

There were no high windows inside. Instead, profound darkness dominated the space. However, at the far end of the hall, behind the arch of the holy altar, about twenty round, fist-sized holes punctured

the stone wall, allowing pure, radiant sunlight to pour through. The concentrated beams of light shined brilliantly into the dimly lit hall.

It was akin to a traveler in the night lifting their gaze toward the sky and seeing shimmering stars glowing with grace, purity, and sacredness.

Even though Klein had always believed that deities could be analyzed and understood, he couldn't help but lower his head in reverence at this moment.

As the bishop preached in a deep, gentle voice, Klein silently made his way down the aisle, which split the rows of pews in two.

He found an empty seat near the aisle and slowly took his place.

Leaning his walking cane against the back of the pew in front of him, Klein removed his hat and placed it on his lap, along with the folded newspaper. Then he clasped his hands together and lowered his head onto them.

Every movement was deliberate, slow, and methodical—as though he were genuinely here to pray.

Klein closed his eyes and listened silently to the bishop's sermon in the darkness.

"Utterly naked and wanting for clothes and food, they shiver uncovered in the cold.

"Thoroughly drenched by rains with nowhere to hide, they huddle around the rocks.

"They are mothers from whom children have been snatched. They are orphans from whom hope was lost. They are the poor forced astray from the proper path.

"The Evernight did not forsake them but bestowed them with care²."

...

Echoes amplified as they entered his ears. With the expanse of darkness in front of him, Klein felt as though his spirit and mind had been cleansed.

² Adapted from Job 24:8, Old Testament.

He calmly took this in until the bishop finished his sermon and ended the mass.

Following this, the bishop opened the door to the confessional booth on the side. Men and women began lining up before it.

Klein opened his eyes.

Donning his hat once more, he picked up his walking stick and newspaper before standing and joining the line.

After waiting more than twenty minutes, it was finally his turn.

He stepped into the confessional booth and closed the door behind him.

Darkness enveloped him once again.

"My child, what do you wish to say?"

The bishop's voice came from behind the wooden screen.

Klein reached into his pocket.

He pulled out his badge—engraved with the words *Special Operations Department—Seventh Unit*.

Sliding it through the narrow slit in the screen, he spoke in a low voice that seemed to blend in with the silent darkness.

"Someone is following me. I wish to see Dunn Smith."

The bishop took the badge.

A few seconds of silence followed.

Then he said, "Turn right from the confessional booth and walk all the way to the end of the path. There is a hidden door to the side. Once you enter, someone will guide you."

As he spoke, he pulled a rope inside the booth.

A faint chime rang, notifying a particular priest.

Klein took back his badge, removed his hat, and pressed it to his chest. He gave a slight bow before turning around and exiting.

After confirming that the feeling of being watched was gone, he donned his short top hat again. Keeping his expression neutral, he turned right and walked toward the arched altar.

On the side wall, perpendicular to the altar, he found a hidden door.

Without hesitation, he silently pushed it open and stepped through.

The door closed soundlessly behind him.

In the glow of gas lamps, a middle-aged man in a black priest robe appeared.

His gaze was calm but sharp.

"What is it?" he asked tersely.

Klein lifted his badge once more.

Repeating his words from before, he said, "Someone is following me. I wish to see Dunn Smith."

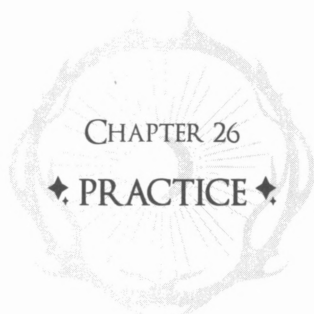
The priest gave a brief nod.

Without asking any further questions, he simply turned around and began walking forward.

Klein nodded as well, taking off his hat once again.

Holding his walking stick, he quietly followed.

Rosanne had mentioned before that turning left at the underground crossroad would bring him to the Saint Selena Cathedral.



Tap! Tap! Tap!

The sound of footsteps echoed through the dark, narrow corridor, spreading through the silence.

Klein kept his back straight as he followed the priest's even steps. He did not ask questions or make small talk, remaining as quiet as a still lake.

After passing through a heavily guarded doorway, the priest unlocked another hidden door with a key and pointed down a staircase made of stone. "Turn left at the intersection to reach Chanis Gate."

"Goddess bless you." Klein tapped four points on his chest, making the sign of the crimson moon.

In society, one followed etiquette. In the house of God, one followed the rites of religion.

"Praise be to the Lady." The priest returned the gesture.

Klein said nothing further. He followed the stone steps down into the darkness, aided by the elegant gas lamps recessed into both sides of the wall.

Midway, he subconsciously turned back and saw the priest still standing at the top of the stairs. Encased in shadow, he resembled an immobile wax statue.

Klein looked away and continued his descent. It didn't take long before he reached flat ground, where ice-cold stone slabs led him deeper underground to the intersection.

He did not turn toward Chanis Gate—Dunn Smith, having only recently finished his shift, was definitely not there.

Instead, he turned right, following the familiar path. He ascended another flight of stairs and emerged inside Blackthorn Security Company.

Seeing doors that were either ajar or tightly shut, he refrained from entering any rooms unannounced. Instead, he went to the reception desk, where a brown-haired girl with a sweet smile was fully engrossed in a magazine.

"Hi, Rosanne." Klein approached and deliberately rapped the table.

Crash!

Rosanne jumped to her feet, knocking over a chair in the process. Flustered, she blurted, "Hi! What nice weather we're having today. Oh! It's you, Klein! What are you doing here?"

She patted her chest and caught her breath, like a young lady afraid her father had caught her slacking off.

"I need to see the captain," Klein said simply.

"...You sure gave me a fright. I thought you were the captain." Rosanne glared at him. "Don't you know how to knock? Hmph, you should be glad I'm a tolerant and forgiving woman. Well, I do prefer the term *girl*... Why are you looking for the captain? He's in his office, across from Mrs. Orianna."

Despite his tightly wound nerves, Klein was amused by Rosanne's antics and smiled. He pondered for a moment before saying, "A secret."

"..." Rosanne's eyes widened. As she reeled in disbelief, Klein bent forward in a slight bow before quickly taking his leave.

He passed through the partition beyond the foyer and knocked on the door of the first office on the right.

"Come in." Dunn Smith's deep, mild voice sounded from within.

Klein pushed open the door, entered, and closed it behind him. Removing his hat, he bowed. "Good morning, Captain."

"Good morning. Is something the matter?" Dunn's black trench coat and hat hung from a nearby coat stand. Dressed in a white shirt and black vest, his high forehead and deep gray eyes gave him a solemn air, yet his countenance appeared lighter than before.

"There's someone following me," Klein stated candidly, without preamble.

Dunn leaned back and clasped his hands together. His deep gray eyes studied Klein's face. Instead of addressing the topic immediately, he asked, "You came from the cathedral?"

"Yes," Klein answered.

Dunn nodded slightly but did not comment. Instead, he steered the conversation back. "It could be that Welch's father doesn't believe the cause of death we reported and hired a private investigator from Wind City to look into the matter."

The city of Constant in Midseashire, also known as Wind City, was a major industrial hub, boasting advanced coal and steel industries. It ranked among the top three cities in the Loen Kingdom.

Before Klein could voice an opinion, Dunn continued, "However, it could also be tied to whoever—or whatever—that notebook came from. We're currently investigating where Welch obtained the Antigonus family's notebook. Of course, we can't rule out the possibility of other people or organizations being after it."

"What should I do?" Klein asked in a serious tone.

Without question, he hoped for the first scenario.

Dunn did not answer immediately. Raising his coffee mug, he took a sip, his calm eyes betraying not the slightest ripple. "Return the way you came, then go on doing anything you wish."

"Anything?" Klein asked, seeking clarification.

"Anything." Dunn nodded with certainty. "Naturally, don't scare them off or flout the law."

"All right." Klein took a deep breath and bade him farewell. He left the room and returned underground. Turning left at the intersection,

he walked silently through the dim, cold passageway, bathed in the glow of the gas lamps lining either side.

His footsteps echoed through the empty corridor, amplifying his loneliness and compounding his unease.

Soon, he arrived at the stairs. Climbing up, he saw the middle-aged priest standing in the doorway, shrouded in shadow. The two did not exchange words. The priest simply turned in silence, making way for him.

Klein proceeded without a sound, returning to the prayer hall. The round openings behind the arched altar remained as pure and bright as before, while the interior retained its serene darkness. Men and women still lined up outside the confessional booth, though their numbers had dwindled.

After pausing briefly, Klein slowly exited the prayer hall with his walking stick and newspaper as though nothing had happened and made his way out of Saint Selena Cathedral.

The moment he stepped into the blazing sunlight, the familiar feeling of being watched returned. He felt like prey under the scrutiny of a hawk.

A question surfaced in his mind.

Why hadn't his stalker followed him into the cathedral? Even if he had used the dark environment and the priest to conceal his temporary disappearance, wouldn't it have been easy for them to continue monitoring him by pretending to pray? If they had done nothing wrong, there would be no issue walking openly into the church, right? Unless...they had a reason to fear the clergy. A dark history? Perhaps they knew that some priests possessed the powers of a Beyonder...

If that was the case, the likelihood of it being a private investigator was very slim.

Klein exhaled, no longer as tense as before. He strolled leisurely around the block toward Jutland Street.

Stopping in front of an archaic building with mottled walls, he eyed the number written on the door—3.

This was the Jutland Shooting Club.

Part of the police department's underground shooting range had been opened to the public as a way to earn additional funds.

As soon as Klein stepped inside, the oppressive sensation of being watched disappeared. He took the opportunity to hand over his Special Operations Department badge to the attendant.

After a brief verification, he was led underground to a small, enclosed shooting range.

"Ten-meter target," Klein informed the attendant simply. He retrieved his revolver from his underarm holster and pulled a box of brass cartridges from his pocket.

The feeling of being hunted had sharpened his desire for self-preservation, outweighing his habit of procrastination. He had come here because he *needed* to practice.

Snap!

Once the attendant left, he flicked open the cylinder and removed the silver demon-hunting bullets. Then he reloaded the revolver with standard brass rounds.

This time, he didn't leave an empty chamber to prevent misfires. Nor did he remove his suit jacket or short top hat. He intended to practice in his usual attire. After all, in a real encounter, he wouldn't have the luxury of saying, "Wait a minute. Let me change into something more comfortable."

Click!

Klein closed the cylinder and spun it with his thumb.

Suddenly, he raised the gun in both hands, arms straight out, and aimed at the target more than ten meters away.

Yet he didn't fire immediately. Instead, he recalled his week of military training back in school, mentally reviewing past mistakes—how to align the iron sights, account for a gun's recoil, and steady his aim.

Amid the rustling of his clothing, he repeated his drawing, aiming, and ready stance over and over, as serious as a student preparing for a university entrance exam.

After several repetitions, he retreated to the wall and sat down on

a long, cushioned bench. Setting the revolver aside, he massaged his arms, resting for a while.

He spent a few minutes mentally reviewing his earlier practice before picking up the revolver again. Standing in place, he assumed the standard firing position and pulled the trigger.

Bang!

His arm trembled slightly, his body shifting from the recoil. The bullet missed the target.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Adjusting as he went, he fired again and again until all six rounds were spent.

I'm starting to hit the target...

Klein stepped back and sat down, catching his breath.

Click!

He swung out the cylinder and let the six spent shells clatter to the ground. Without hesitation, he loaded more brass cartridges.

Rotating his shoulder to loosen the stiffness, he stood up once more and returned to position.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Shots echoed as the target shook. Klein alternated between practice and rest until he had expended all thirty regular rounds, along with the five he already had. His accuracy was gradually improving. He was now consistently hitting the target and even beginning to aim for the bull's-eye.

Swinging his sore shoulders, he tossed aside the last five spent shells. Then, with his head slightly bowed, he reloaded the silver demon-hunting bullets into the cylinder, leaving an empty chamber to prevent misfires.

After securing the revolver in his underarm holster, Klein patted the gunpowder and dust from his clothes and exited the shooting range, stepping back onto the streets.

The feeling of being watched returned immediately, but he remained calmer than before. Walking unhurriedly to Champagne

Street, he spent four pence on a tracked coach to Ironcross Street and made his way home.

As soon as he stepped inside his flat, the eerie sensation of being spied on vanished without a trace.

Klein took out his keys and unlocked the door—only to see a short-haired man in his mid-twenties, wearing a linen shirt, seated at the desk.

His heart tensed momentarily before relaxing. He smiled and said, “Good morning— No. Good afternoon, Benson.”

The man was none other than Benson Moretti, Klein and Melissa’s older brother. Though only twenty-five, his receding hairline and world-weary appearance made him look closer to thirty.

With dark hair and brown eyes, he bore some resemblance to Klein, though he didn’t have the same mild, bookish air.

“Good afternoon, Klein. How was the interview?” Benson stood, grinning.

His black coat and short top hat hung from the side of their bunk bed.

“Horrible,” Klein replied flatly.

Benson blinked in surprise.

Chuckling, Klein continued, “Actually, I didn’t even go to the interview. I found a job ahead of time—three pounds a week.”

He repeated what he had told Melissa earlier.

Benson’s expression eased as he shook his head with a laugh. “Feels like I’m watching a child grow up... Well, this job sounds pretty good.” He sighed and added, “It’s nice that the first thing I hear upon returning from a trip is good news. We should celebrate tonight. How about some beef?”

Klein smiled. “Sure, but I think Melissa will feel the pinch. Why don’t we go buy the ingredients together this afternoon? We can bring at least three soli.” He paused before muttering, “I won’t lie—twenty soli to a pound, twelve pence to a soli, plus extra denominations like the halfpenny and farthing... This currency system is

completely counterintuitive. It's such a hassle. I'd say it's one of the most foolish monetary systems in the world."

As soon as he said it, he noticed Benson's expression turn stern. A flicker of apprehension crossed his mind.

Had he said something wrong?

Could it be that, in the lost memories of the original Klein, Benson was actually an extreme patriot with no tolerance for criticism of the kingdom?

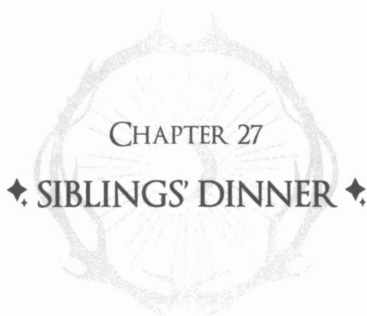
Benson took a few steps forward, his face serious, and refuted him in a firm voice.

"No, not one of the most foolish. *The* most foolish."

Klein blinked.

Then realization dawned, and he burst into laughter alongside his brother. Indeed, this was Benson's signature sarcasm.

With the corners of his lips slightly upturned, Benson added dryly, "You see, to implement a reasonable and simple currency system, one must understand the decimal system—and know how to count. Unfortunately, there are too few such talents among the powerful who rule."



CHAPTER 27

♦ SIBLINGS' DINNER ♦

How sharp and incisive...

Klein burst into laughter. Drawing from the rich experience of his previous life, he added, "In fact, there's no evidence to suggest that those powerful people have any brains at all."

"Yes! Very good!" Benson roared with laughter, giving him a thumbs-up. "Klein, your sense of humor has improved." Catching his breath, he continued, "I have to return to the pier this afternoon. I won't have a day off until tomorrow. After that...let's visit the Tingen Housing Improvement Company together and see if they have any decent, affordable terraced houses for rent. Also, I need to pay Mr. Franky a visit."

"Our landlord?" Klein asked, perplexed. "Does our current landlord *own* terraced houses in good neighborhoods?"

Benson shot him a glance, amused. "Have you forgotten our one-year lease with him? It's only been six months."

Klein inhaled sharply.

He had completely forgotten!

Although they paid rent weekly, the lease itself lasted a full year. Moving now would be a breach of contract. If they were taken to court, they could end up owing a hefty sum.

"You still lack societal experience." Benson touched his receding

hairline with a sigh. "I fought hard for that clause. Otherwise, Mr. Franky was only willing to offer us three-month leases at a time. For wealthier tenants, landlords are happy to sign long-term contracts—one, two, or even three years for stable income. But for us, and for our neighbors, landlords worry about unexpected circumstances that might prevent tenants from paying rent. So they prefer short-term contracts."

"It also makes it easier for them to raise the rent frequently," Klein added, drawing from both the original Klein's memories and his own experience as a tenant.

Benson sighed. "That's the harsh reality of today's society. But don't worry. The lease issue can be easily resolved. Frankly, the moment we miss a week's rent, Mr. Franky will throw us out and confiscate anything valuable we leave behind. His intelligence is barely above that of a curly-haired baboon. He's incapable of handling anything too complicated."

Hearing this, Klein was reminded of a joke about a certain Sir Humphrey Appleby. Shaking his head, he said seriously, "No, Benson. You're wrong."

"Oh?" Benson raised an eyebrow.

"Mr. Franky's intelligence is surely at least a smidge higher than that of a baboon," Klein replied with an utterly straight face.

Benson's smile deepened.

"...When he's at his best, that is," Klein added.

"Ha-ha!" Benson blurted out, unable to contain his laughter.

After a round of hearty laughter, he pointed at Klein, momentarily at a loss for words. Finally, he shook his head and returned to the topic at hand.

"Of course, as gentlemen, we can't resort to such shameless tactics. We'll speak with Mr. Franky tomorrow. Believe me, he's easily convinced."

Klein had no doubt. The existence of the gas pipes in their flat was proof enough.

After some idle chatter, the brothers made use of the leftover

pan-fried fish from the previous night, adding it to a soup with vegetables. As it boiled, steam moistened the rye bread they had placed inside the pot.

Smearing a little butter on the bread, they enjoyed a simple but satisfying meal. The rich aroma and sweetness of the butter left a lingering sense of contentment.

Once Benson left for work, Klein took three soli and some spare pennies to the produce and meat market. He spent six pence on a pound of beef and seven pence on a Tussock fish that was tender and had few bones. Then he purchased potatoes, peas, radishes, rhubarb, lettuce, and turnips. He also bought herbs and spices, like rosemary, basil, and cumin, along with cooking oil.

The entire time, the feeling of being watched remained. Yet, as before, there was no direct contact.

After stopping by Smyrin Bakery for a while, Klein returned home and began weight training using heavier items like stacks of books to build arm strength.

He had originally planned to run through boxing drills, which he had learned during his brief high school military training camp. However, he had long forgotten the daily radio exercise routines from school, let alone the boxing moves he had only practiced once a year at most. With no better option, he settled for something simpler.

Klein made sure not to overexert himself; muscle fatigue would only put him in greater danger. After an appropriate amount of training, he stopped to rest and began reading the original Klein's textbooks and notes, refreshing his knowledge of the Fourth Epoch.

...

In the evening, Benson and Melissa sat properly and still in front of the desk, staring at the food like eager schoolchildren.

The rich aroma of the dishes blended into a tantalizing overture—the savory scent of stewed beef, the lingering heartiness of mashed potatoes, the sweet warmth of pea soup, the mellow tang of stewed rhubarb, and the fresh creaminess of the butter on rye.

Benson swallowed a mouthful of saliva as he turned to watch Klein

place a golden, crispy fish onto a plate. The heavenly aroma of the oil wafted into his nostrils, traveling down his throat and settling deep in his stomach.

Gurgle!

His stomach let out a distinct growl.

Klein rolled up his sleeves and set the fried fish in the middle of the desk. Then he retrieved two large mugs of ginger beer from the cabinet and placed them before himself and Benson.

Smiling at Melissa, he reached into the cabinet again and, as if performing a magic trick, produced a lemon pudding. "We'll have our beer while you have this."

"...Thank you," Melissa murmured as she accepted the pudding.

Seeing this, Benson lifted his mug with a grin. "Here's to Klein for finding a decent job."

Klein raised his mug and clinked it against Benson's, then lightly tapped it against Melissa's lemon pudding as well. "Praise be to the Lady!"

He tilted his head back and took a deep drink. The spicy taste warmed his gullet, the lingering aftertaste just as satisfying.

Despite its name, ginger beer contained no alcohol. It mimicked the taste of beer with the sharp spiciness of ginger and the tartness of lemon—a beverage even women and children could enjoy. However, Melissa never cared for its taste.

"Praise be to the Lady!" Benson took a hearty gulp, and Melissa nibbled at her lemon pudding, chewing it slowly to savor every bite before reluctantly swallowing.

"Go ahead and dig in." Klein set his cup down and picked up his fork and spoon, gesturing to the table full of food.

Of all the dishes, he was least confident in the pea soup. Back on Earth, he had never eaten anything like it. He could only rely on the original Klein's fragmented memories, adapting and refining the recipe as best as he could.

As the eldest, Benson didn't stand on ceremony. He scooped up a spoonful of mashed potatoes and stuffed it into his mouth.

The potatoes were perfectly boiled, blended with the mild taste of lard, and seasoned with just the right amount of salt. The warmth and rich texture whetted his appetite and made his mouth water.

"Mmm...not bad," Benson mumbled through his chewing. "Much better than the ones I had at work. They used butter."

Well, this is one of my specialties, after all... Klein gladly accepted the praise. "It's all thanks to Welch's chef giving me some pointers."

Melissa's gaze fell on the beef soup. Floating in the clear broth were fresh green basil leaves, crisp lettuce, and chunks of radish. Beneath them, tender hunks of beef rested at the bottom, hidden but releasing a tantalizing fragrance.

She forked a piece of beef and placed it in her mouth, chewing slowly. The meat was tender yet retained just enough bite. The salt, the sweetness of the radishes, and the spiciness of the basil leaves blended seamlessly, enhancing the beef's natural flavor.

"..." She seemed to want to offer her approval but couldn't stop chewing.

Klein took a bite and found it delicious, though not without flaws. It was far from his usual standard. He had been forced to use substitutes for certain seasonings, which altered the taste slightly.

Of course, even at his best, his culinary skills were only average.

A sudden pang struck his heart as he thought of Benson and Melissa—of how they had never seen the possibilities of a wider world.

After swallowing a piece of beef, Klein picked up a piece of fried Tussock fish. Sprinkled with cumin and rosemary, it was crispy on the outside and tender on the inside, with a perfect golden-brown skin where the salt and oil merged into a rich, savory harmony.

Nodding in approval, he then sampled the stewed rhubarb; acceptable but nothing exceptional. At the very least, it helped cut through the richness of the meat.

Finally, mustering his courage, he scooped a bowl of pea soup.

Too sweet and too sour... Klein frowned slightly.

Yet, seeing Benson and Melissa eating it with satisfaction, he began

to question his own taste buds. He swigged a mouthful of ginger beer to cleanse his palate.

By the end of the meal, the siblings were stuffed. They slumped back in their chairs, too full to move.

"Let us praise the Lady once more!" Benson declared cheerfully, raising his ginger beer, now down to its last sip.

"Praise the Lady!" Klein downed the last of his drink.

"Praise the Lady." Melissa placed the final bite of lemon pudding into her mouth, savoring the flavors as they slowly seeped out.

Klein, feeling the slight haze of fullness and warmth, chuckled. "That's not right, Melissa. You should eat your favorite, most delicious thing at the beginning. That way, you can enjoy it at its best. If you save it for last, when you're already full, it won't taste as good."

"No, it's still just as delicious," Melissa replied firmly, stubborn as ever.

The siblings laughed and talked, letting their food settle before working together to clean up. They washed the dishes and cutlery, then poured the used oil from the fried fish back into its container.

Once the kitchen was tidied, they each settled into their evening routines. One reviewed class materials, and another studied new accounting methodologies. Klein continued reading through old textbooks and notes. These moments were quiet and warm.

At eleven o'clock, they extinguished the lamp and went to bed.

...

Klein felt groggy, staring into the darkness.

Suddenly, a figure in a black trench coat and short top hat appeared before him.

Dunn Smith.

"Captain!" Klein jolted awake but immediately realized he was dreaming.

Dunn's gray eyes remained calm, as though discussing something mundane. "Someone has entered your room. Pick up your revolver and force him into the corridor. Leave the rest to us."

Someone's broken in? Klein stiffened. *The stalker finally made his move?*

His pulse quickened, but he didn't ask further. He simply nodded. "Yes, sir!"

At once, the scene before him shifted. Colors swirled and burst like bubbles, one after another, fading into darkness.

Opening his eyes, Klein carefully turned his head toward the window.

A thin, unfamiliar silhouette stood at his desk, silently rummaging through his belongings.

CHAPTER 28

◆ THE SECRET ORDER ◆

Badump! Badump! Badump!

Klein's heart began beating rapidly. It shrank into a small clump before abruptly expanding again, making his entire body tremble.

There was a moment when he nearly forgot what he was meant to do until the lurking figure suddenly paused. The person seemed to prick up his ears as though he had heard something.

Blood flowed back into his brain as Klein regained his basic cognitive abilities. He reached beneath the pillow and grasped the wooden grip of the revolver.

Feeling the firm yet smooth surface in his hand, he rapidly calmed down. He slowly and soundlessly pulled the revolver out and aimed it at the trespasser's head.

To be honest, he had little confidence in hitting the target. Although he could consistently hit a stationary target during practice, a person who could move was an entirely different matter. He was not foolish enough to confuse the two.

However, he vaguely remembered something from his previous life. The general idea was that a nuclear weapon wielded the greatest power before launch.

That principle applied in his current situation. The best deterrence was achieved before the bullet left the gun!

By not pulling the trigger or shooting blindly, the other party would never realize that he was a complete rookie with an extremely high chance of missing his target. Their worry and fear would force them to deliberate, restraining their actions!

In that split second, one thought after another raced through his mind. Klein quickly made his decision. He was not the type to grow calmer in the face of danger; instead, he had already anticipated the scenario of encountering his stalker and planned to use intimidation rather than attack.

There was an idiom back in his home country: Where there is precaution, there will be no danger!

As Klein aimed his gun directly at the intruder, the thin man froze suddenly, as though sensing something. Then he heard what he thought was the hint of a chuckle.

“Good evening, sir,” Klein said.

The scrawny man discreetly clasped his hands together, and his body tensed. Klein sat up on the lower bunk, still aiming his revolver at the man’s head as he tried to speak as casually and naturally as possible.

“Please raise both your hands and turn around. Try to do it slowly. Frankly, I am a very timid person, and I get nervous easily. If you move too quickly, I will be frightened, and I can’t guarantee that I won’t end up misfiring. Yes, just like that.”

The scrawny man raised his hands and held them up near his head before turning his body around inch by inch. The first thing that came into view was a form-fitting black suit, neatly buttoned up. After that, he noticed a pair of thick, sharp brown eyebrows.

Klein saw no fear in the intruder’s deep blue eyes; instead, the man glared at him with the intensity of a ferocious beast. It seemed that if Klein were careless for a second, the man would lunge toward him and tear him to pieces.

He clenched the handle tightly as he struggled to appear calm and indifferent. It was only when the thin man faced him completely that Klein shifted his chin toward the door. He softly and gently said,

"Sir, let us talk outside. Do not disturb the beautiful dreams of others. Oh, do keep your movements slow and your footsteps light. It's a basic courtesy for a gentleman..."

The thin man's cold eyes flickered as he shot Klein a glance. Still holding up his hands, he walked slowly to the door. With the revolver still pointing at him, he twisted the handle and inched open the door.

When the door was halfway open, he suddenly ducked down and rolled forward. The door slammed shut at once as if thrown forward by a strong gust of wind.

"Mmm..." Benson stirred in the top bunk, disturbed by the loud commotion. He murmured vaguely as if he were about to wake up.

At that moment, a leisurely and serene melody drifted in from outside. A deep and relaxed voice began to sing:

"Oh, the threat of horror, the hope of crimson!

One thing at least is certain—this Life flies;

One thing is certain and the rest is Lies;

*The Flower that once has bloomed forever dies..."*³

The poem seemed to possess the power to calm and relax. Benson, who was on the top bunk, and Melissa, who was in the other room, drifted back to sleep.

Klein's body and mind were also peaceful and quiet. He nearly yawned.

The thin man had darted away so swiftly that Klein could not react in time.

Looking at the closed door, he smiled and muttered to himself, "You might not believe it, but that was a blank."

He had an empty chamber to prevent misfiring!

Afterward, Klein continued to listen to the midnight poem as he patiently waited for the battle outside to end.

Within a minute, the melody, as tranquil as the reflection of moonlight on a lake, stopped, and a deep silence enveloped the dark night.

³ Adapted from Edward Fitzgerald's English translation of Rubáiyát.

Klein silently spun the cylinder and shifted the empty chamber away as he waited for the outcome to present itself.

Ten minutes went by. Just as unease overwhelmed him, making him wonder if he should investigate, he heard Dunn Smith's staid and warm voice through the door: "It's done."

Phew. Klein exhaled. Taking his revolver, he picked up his key as well. Barefoot, he carefully approached the door before silently opening it. He saw Dunn Smith, his deep, calm gray eyes visible beneath a black trench coat and short top hat.

Klein closed the door behind him, followed Dunn to the end of the corridor, and stood beneath the faint crimson moonlight.

"I spent some time entering his dream," said Dunn calmly as he looked at the red moon outside the window.

"Do you know where he came from?" Klein asked, feeling much more relieved.

Dunn nodded and said, "An ancient organization known as the Secret Order. They were established in the Fourth Epoch and have connections to the Solomon Empire and a number of fallen aristocrats of that period. Turns out the notebook of the Antigonius family came from them. Due to one member's negligence, it entered an antiques market where it was obtained by Welch. They had no choice but to send people in search of it."

Without waiting for Klein's next question, he continued.

"We will follow the trail to apprehend some of their members. Well, it might not go too well since these fellows excel at hiding like rats in the sewers. But at the very least, they will have reason to believe that we've obtained the Antigonius family's diary or a critical clue about it. In that case, as long as the object is not of utmost importance to them, they will abandon the operation. That is their philosophy of survival."

"...What if the notebook *is* of utmost importance?" asked Klein, worriedly.

Dunn smiled without replying immediately. Instead, he said, "We know very little about the Secret Order. Our success this time is

entirely thanks to your quick wits. This victory is all yours. In light of the possible hidden dangers you're exposed to, and the fact that heightened perception would aid in finding the notebook, you now have an opportunity to make a choice."

"A choice?" Klein echoed, as his breathing grew heavy.

Dunn wiped the smile from his face and said in all seriousness, "Do you wish to become a Beyonder? You can only choose from one of our incomplete Sequences. Of course, you can forgo this and choose to wait until you have enough merit to become a Sleepless, which is also the first rank of our complete Sequence, one that the Goddess has bestowed upon us, the Nighthawks."

I was right... Delighted, Klein did not hesitate for a second. He took the initiative to ask, "Then which of the Sequence Nines can I choose?"

I need sufficiently detailed information to decide whether to give up or accept—and which one to choose!

Dunn turned around, as if cloaked in the thin crimson veil that shined down on him. He looked into Klein's eyes and said slowly, "Apart from the Sleepless, the church has three Sequence Nine potion formulas. One of them is Mystery Pryer, which is also the power that Old Neil controls. Ha, Rosanne has likely mentioned this to you. She can never hold her tongue."

Klein smiled awkwardly, unsure of how to respond. Thankfully, Dunn did not seem to mind as he continued, "Our Mystery Pryer potion formula and the rest of the broken Sequences were obtained from the Ascetic Order of Moss. It was said that they had yet to fall to corruption back then; they still insisted on their morals and precepts, determined in their pursuit of knowledge, and kept their secrets strictly confidential. Anyone who entered the order and became a Mystery Pryer would be barred from speaking for five years. They would learn to be silent, so as to cultivate and enhance their focus. The maxim of the Ascetic Order of Moss—do as you wish but do no harm—originated from them.

"Mystery Pryers have a comprehensive but rudimentary understanding and command of magic, witchcraft, astrology, and other mystical

knowledge. They also know a fair number of ritual magics. However, because they can easily sense the presence of certain entities hiding behind matter, they are cautious and hold great respect toward any extraordinary powers.

“We are missing a considerable part of this Sequence, rendering it an incomplete chain. For example, its eighth rank, which is the next level up. Of course, perhaps the Holy Cathedral has it.”

This pretty much met all my requirements... Klein nodded slightly, feeling the impulse to choose this one. Thankfully, he still remembered a few other things.

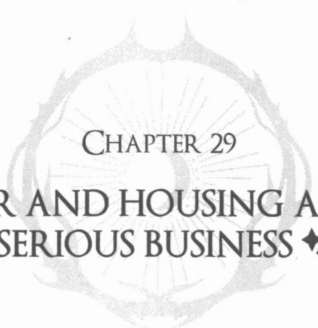
“What about the other two?”

“The second type is called Corpse Collector. Many cultists on the Southern Continent who worship the Lord of Death choose it. After consuming the potion, unintelligent spirits of the dead would mistake them for one of their own and refrain from attacking. They would gain resistance to cold, decay, and the corrosiveness of cadaveric auras. They would be able to directly see some evil spirits, understand the characteristics and weaknesses of undead creatures, and gain certain physical enhancements. We have the eighth and seventh ranks of that Sequence. Heh-heh, you can probably guess the Sequence Seven—Spirit Medium! This was Daly’s choice back then.” Dunn described in detail.

Spirit Medium does sound mysterious and cool, but what I want most is mastery of mystical knowledge... Klein did not interject, only listened quietly.

Dunn Smith turned his gaze toward the crimson moon and said, “We only have the Sequence Nine of the third type. Whether the Holy Cathedral has it, I’m not sure. It’s called Seer.”

Seer? Klein’s pupils constricted as he recalled the regret Emperor Roselle had expressed in his diary: not choosing Apprentice, Marauder, or Seer!



CHAPTER 29

♦ CAREER AND HOUSING ARE BOTH SERIOUS BUSINESS ♦

Klein did his best not to reveal his emotions as he asked with genuine interest, “What abilities do Seers have?”

“Your question is imprecise. You should be asking what abilities you would receive upon consuming the Seer potion.” Dunn Smith shook his head and chuckled. His face and gray eyes were turned away from the moon, casting his features in shadows. “There are many possible abilities—astromancy, cartomancy, spiritual pendulums, and spirit vision. Of course, consuming the potion will not immediately allow you to master them all. The potion merely provides you with the qualifications and ability to learn.

“Since Seers lack direct means of fighting enemies, you can probably imagine that setting up a magical ritual requires too much advance preparation. Heh. They are not suited for combat. Therefore, in terms of knowledge of mysticism, a Seer is more learned and specialized than a Mystery Pryer.”

This sounds like it matches my requirements as well... However, the lack of means to directly deal with enemies gives me pause... Furthermore, the Church of Evernight likely doesn't have the subsequent potions in the Sequence. The Holy Cathedral probably refers to their

headquarters, the Cathedral of Serenity... And the combat methods available to Low-Sequence Beyonders might not even compare to firearms...

Klein fell into deep thought as he teetered between the various options. He went back and forth between Mystery Pryer and Seer; he was no longer considering Corpse Collector.

Seeing this, Dunn Smith smiled and said, "You don't have to rush into a decision. Tell me your answer on Monday morning. Regardless of whether you choose a Sequence or forgo this opportunity, none of us among the Nighthawks will have any further thoughts on the matter. Calm down and ask your heart."

With that said, he took off his hat and bowed slightly, then slowly walked past Klein and headed for the stairwell.

Klein said nothing and did not immediately reply. He silently bowed and watched Dunn leave.

Although he had fervently hoped to become a Beyer, the opportunity now presented him with a dilemma: the missing Sequences, the risk of losing control, the questionable authenticity of Emperor Roselle's diaries, and the illusory murmurs that could draw one into corruption and madness all mingled together to form a moat, obstructing his path forward.

He took a deep breath and slowly exhaled.

It was like a high school senior with average grades trying to decide on a university and future career...

Klein gave a self-deprecating chuckle. Gathering his scattered thoughts, he quietly opened the door and climbed back into bed. He lay there with his eyes open, silently staring at the bottom of the top bunk beneath the thin crimson light of the moon.

A drunkard staggered by outside the window; a carriage sped down the deserted street in the distance. These sounds did not break the night's serenity but instead deepened its darkness and remoteness.

Klein's emotions settled as he remembered his life on Earth. He recalled his father, who always spoke loudly and had a keen interest in physical exercise; his mother, who delighted in bustling about and

doing things for him despite suffering from a chronic disease; his childhood friends, who accompanied him from soccer and basketball to video games and mahjong; and the person to whom he had made a failed romantic confession, who now appeared only as a blurred face in his mind... All these memories flowed like a silent river, without many ripples or intense emotions, but nonetheless silently flooding his heart.

Perhaps it's true what they say... You only learn to cherish what you have after you lose it.

As the crimson receded and the flaming horizon gave way to a golden yellow sky, Klein made his choice.

...

He got out of bed and headed to the public bathroom to freshen up. Then he took a one-soli note to Mrs. Smyrin's and spent nine pence on eight pounds of rye bread, replenishing the staples consumed the night before.

"The price of bread has begun stabilizing..." he commented after breakfast as Benson changed his clothes.

It was Sunday, so both he and Melissa finally had the chance to rest.

Klein, already fully dressed, sat on a chair and flipped through the outdated newspapers he had brought home yesterday. He noted in surprise, "There's a house for rent here! 3 Wendel Street in Northside. It's a detached two-story house with six bedrooms, three bathrooms, and two large balconies upstairs. Downstairs, there's a dining room, a living room, a kitchen, two more bathrooms, and two guest bedrooms, as well as an underground cellar... In front of the house are two acres of a private lawn and a small garden behind. It can be rented for one, two, or three years, with a weekly rent of one pound and six soli. Those interested can go to 16 Champagne Street and ask for Mr. Gusev."

"That's our goal for the future." Benson donned his short top hat and said with a smile, "The rent in the newspaper listings is always overpriced. The Tingen Housing Improvement Company offers options that are just as good, if not better, for less."

"Why are we not going to the Tingen Labor Housing Improvement Association?" Melissa emerged from her room, holding her shabby old cap. She had changed into a grayish-white, long walking dress that, despite having been mended several times, was the best article of clothing she owned.

She was silent and introverted, but that could not mask her youthfulness.

Benson laughed. "Where did you hear of the Tingen Labor Housing Improvement Association? Was it Jenny? Or Mrs. Rochelle? Or is it from your good friend Selena?"

Melissa looked to the side and mumbled, "Mrs. Rochelle... While washing up last night, I happened to run into her. She asked me about Klein's interview, and I gave her a brief account of what happened. She suggested we go to the Tingen Labor Housing Improvement Association."

Benson noticed Klein's puzzled expression and shook his head in amusement. "They are a housing association geared toward the poor—or, more precisely, the lower strata of society. Almost all the houses they build and remodel have communal bathrooms. They only provide three choices: single, double, or triple bedrooms. Do you wish to continue living in such an environment?"

"The Tingen Housing Improvement Company is in the same business as them, but they also provide options for the lower-middle class. To be honest, we are a little better off than the lower-middle class now, but we are still quite far from being a true middle-class family. It's not a matter of salary—it's just that we never had the time to save up."

Klein understood. He put away the newspaper and picked up his hat. Then he stood up and said, "Should we head over?"

"I remember that the Tingen Housing Improvement Company is on Daffodil Street," Benson said as he opened the door. "Similar to the Tingen Labor Housing Improvement Association, they are also known as a Five Percent Charity. Do you know why?"

"I don't." Klein picked up his cane and walked by Melissa's side while the girl with long dark hair nodded.

Benson continued as he walked out, "These kinds of housing improvement associations and companies were established as a result of Backlund's influence. They are funded in three ways—first, by raising donations from charitable foundations; second, through funding proposals and receiving a loan from the government's public affairs mortgage commissioner at a special interest rate of only four percent; and third, through commercial investments. By collecting a certain amount of rent, they provide their investors with an annual return of five percent. That's why they are called Five Percent Charities."

The siblings went down the stairs and slowly walked toward Dafodil Street. They decided to check out a new place before talking to Mr. Franky, their current landlord, so they wouldn't be forced to move out before the new place was ready.

"I heard from Selena that there are housing improvement companies run purely as charities," Melissa said after a moment of thought.

Benson chuckled. "There are. For example, the Dwyer Trust, established with funds donated by Sir Dwyer. He builds apartments for the working class and provides dedicated real estate management while charging relatively low rent. However, the criteria for applying are very strict."

"It sounds like you aren't fond of the idea," Klein remarked with a smile, acutely sensing his tone.

"No, I respect Sir Dwyer a lot, but I'm certain he does not know what true poverty is. The entry requirements for his buildings are as unrealistic as a priest's promises—far from reality. For instance, tenants must have the primary vaccines, must take turns cleaning the bathroom, and aren't allowed to sublease their apartments or use them for commercial activities. They're also forbidden from throwing their rubbish everywhere, and children must refrain from playing in the corridors. My Goddess, does he think he can turn everyone into proper ladies and gentlemen?" Benson replied in his usual flippant tone.

Klein furrowed his brows in confusion. "That sounds all right. Those are all very reasonable requests."

“Yeah.” Melissa nodded in agreement.

Benson cocked his head and looked at them before laughing. “Perhaps I have protected you both so well that you have not seen actual poverty. Do you think the poor would have the money to get the necessary vaccinations? The wait for free ones from charitable health organizations can be as long as three months. Do you think their work is always stable and long-term? If they cannot sublet parts of their flat to earn extra income, are they to move out again when they lose their jobs? Besides, many ladies mend clothes or make matchboxes at home. Would you give up that source of income? Most poor people expend all their energy on simply surviving. Do you think they have time to mind their children and stop them from running in the corridors? Perhaps Mr. Dwyer expects them to be locked up at home until they’re seven or eight, when they’re old enough to be sent to places that accept child labor.”

Although Benson was not excessively detailed in his explanation, it still caused Klein to shudder a little.

Is this really how the lowest class of people lives?

Beside him, Melissa fell silent. It was a long while before she spoke again, her voice a little unsteady. “Ever since they moved to Lower Street, Jenny never wanted me to visit her at home anymore...”

“Let’s hope her father gets back on his feet after that injury and finds a stable job. Although I have seen too many drunkards who subsequently numb themselves with alcohol...” Benson scoffed somberly.

Klein was at a loss for words. Melissa seemed similarly silent. The siblings walked down Daffodil Street without another word until they reached the Tingen Housing Improvement Company.

The person who received them was a middle-aged man with an amiable smile. He wasn’t wearing a formal coat or hat—only a white shirt and black waistcoat.

“You can call me Schutte. Might I know what kind of house you have in mind?” he asked, glancing at Klein’s silver-inlaid cane as his smile grew even more genial.

Klein looked at Benson, who had a way with words, and gestured for him to answer.

Benson replied directly, "A terraced house."

Schutte flipped through the files and documents in his hand before smiling. "There are currently five available. To be honest, we primarily serve those with real housing difficulties—working-class families and their children, where six, eight, or even ten or twelve people squeeze into a single house. There aren't many terraced houses available. One is at 2 Daffodil Street, another in Northside, and a third in Eastside. The weekly rent ranges from twelve to sixteen soli. You can take a look at their detailed introductions here."

He handed a sheet of paper to Benson for him to look at with Klein and Melissa. After reading it, the siblings exchanged looks and simultaneously pointed to the same spot on the paper.

"We will take a look at 2 Daffodil Street first," said Benson. Klein and Melissa nodded in agreement.

This neighborhood was one they were familiar with.

CHAPTER 30

◆ A NEW BEGINNING ◆

Number 2, 4, and 6 Daffodil Street were terraced houses with multiple gable roofs. Their exteriors were uniformly painted a grayish blue, and three chimneys stood at the top.

There were obviously no lawns, gardens, or porches here. The entrances directly faced the street.

Schutte from the Tingen Housing Improvement Company took out a large ring of keys and introduced the house as he opened the door. "Our terraced houses do not have foyers, so you enter directly into the parlor. There's a bay window facing out to Daffodil Street, which provides excellent lighting..."

Klein, Benson, and Melissa were greeted by a set of fabric sofas bathed in the golden rays of the sun and a space as large as their two-bedroom flat.

"This parlor can also be used as a drawing room. To its right is the dining room, and along the left-hand wall is a fireplace that will keep you warm in the winter," Schutte said, pointing with great familiarity.

Klein looked around and confirmed that the layout was a crude, open-concept design. The dining room and parlor were not separated by any partitions, but they were distant from the bay window, making those spots rather dim.

There was a medium-sized red rectangular wooden table surrounded by six hardwood chairs with soft cushions. The fireplace on the left wall looked exactly like the ones in the foreign movies and TV series Klein had watched in the past.

"Behind the dining area is the kitchen, but we do not provide any utensils. Opposite the parlor is a small guest bedroom and a bathroom..." Schutte walked around and described the remainder of the ground floor.

The bathroom was divided into two areas. The outer area was where one would wash their face and brush their teeth at the sink, while the inner section housed the toilet, separated by an accordion door. The guest bedroom was described as small, yet it was as spacious as the room where Melissa was staying. She was stunned at the sight.

After looking around the first floor, Schutte led the three siblings to the staircase next to the bathroom. "Down below is the cellar. It is quite stuffy downstairs, so you must remember to let in some fresh air before entering every time."

Benson nodded impassively and followed Schutte to the second floor.

"On my left, there is a bathroom. Next to it on the same side are two bedrooms. The layout is the same on my right, but the bathroom on that side is adjacent to the balcony."

As he spoke, Schutte opened the bathroom door and turned his body so as not to obstruct Klein, Benson, and Melissa from looking in.

This bathroom had an extra bathtub. Like the one downstairs, there was an accordion door next to the toilet. Although it had accumulated little dust, it wasn't dirty, smelly, or cramped.

Melissa stared in a daze until Schutte walked to the adjacent bedroom. Only then did she stop looking and slowly follow the others.

But after a few steps, she turned to glance back again.

Klein, who had seen much more of the world, was delighted and excited as well. Even though Mr. Franky, their landlord, often urged his tenants to clean up the communal bathroom, it was never clean

enough and often nauseating—not to mention the inevitably long queues that formed whenever they needed to relieve themselves.

The third bathroom was identical to the previous one. Of the four bedrooms, only one was slightly larger and furnished with a bookcase; the others were roughly the same size, each containing a bed, a table, and a wardrobe.

“The balcony is very small, so you won’t be able to hang too many clothes to dry at a time.” Schutte stood at the end of the corridor and pointed to a spot protected by a door and a lock. “There is complete underground drainage, gas piping, a meter, and other facilities. It is very suitable for ladies and gentlemen like yourselves. It requires only a weekly rent of thirteen soli and an additional five pence for the use of the furniture. In addition, there is a deposit equal to four weeks’ rent.”

Without waiting for Benson to speak, Klein looked around and asked curiously, “Roughly how much would it cost to buy the house?”

As a transmigrator from the great Foodaholic Empire of China, the desire to acquire real estate still burned within him.

But Benson and Melissa were shocked by the question. They looked at Klein as though he were a monster. Meanwhile, Schutte replied calmly and firmly, “Buy? No, we do not sell real estate. We only provide rental properties.”

“I’m just trying to get a general sense of the prices,” Klein explained, embarrassed. “Just to get an idea.”

Schutte hesitated for a few seconds before saying, “Last month, the owner of 11 Daffodil Street—a property similar to this one—sold it as a leasehold for three hundred pounds over fifteen years. It is much cheaper than renting, but not everyone can fork out such a large sum of money all at once. For freehold ownership, the owner’s listed price is eight hundred fifty pounds.”

Eight hundred fifty pounds? Klein quickly made the mental calculations.

My weekly pay is three pounds. Benson earns one pound ten soli... Rent is thirteen soli, and if we eat well every day, we will spend nearly

two pounds a week. On top of that, there are expenses such as clothes, transportation, social expenditures, and so on. We can only save less than twenty soli a week. After one year, that adds up to about thirty-five pounds. Eight hundred fifty pounds would require more than twenty years. Even if we bought it as a leasehold for three hundred pounds, it would take us at least eight or nine years to come up with the money... That doesn't include getting married, living independently, raising children, traveling, and so on...

In a world without individual housing mortgages, most people were likely to opt for renting.

Realizing this, Klein took a step back and peered at Benson, signaling for him to negotiate with Schutte about the rent.

As for Melissa's intentions, they were obvious from the sparks in her eyes!

At that moment, Klein almost felt as if he were closing the doors and "unleashing" Benson.

Benson tapped his plain walking stick on the floor and looked around before saying, "We should take a look at other houses. The lighting in the dining area is rather poor, and the balcony is so small, to boot. Look, that bedroom is the only one that has a fireplace, and the furniture is all too old. If we move in, we have to replace at least half of these..."

He pointed out a number of faults one by one in an unhurried tone, then spent ten minutes persuading Schutte to lower the rent to twelve soli, reduce the furniture usage fee to three pence, and round the deposit down to two pounds.

Without further ado, the siblings followed Schutte back to the Tingen Housing Improvement Company and signed both copies of the contract. They then headed over to the city's notary office to complete the paperwork.

After paying the deposit and the first week's rent, Klein and Benson's remaining money added up to nine pounds, two soli, and eight pence.

Standing before the door of 2 Daffodil Street, they each held a ring

of copper keys. All at once, they could not tear their eyes away; all kinds of emotions churned in their hearts.

"It feels like a dream..." Melissa finally said in a low, wispy voice after a while, lifting her head to gaze at the future Moretti residence.

Benson let out a breath and grinned. "Then don't wake up."

Klein wasn't as emotional as they were. He simply nodded and said, "We need to change the locks on the main door and the balcony door as soon as possible."

"There's no hurry. The reputation of Tingen Housing Improvement Company is very good. The rest of the money is for your formal suit. However, before that, we need to pay Mr. Franky a visit." Benson pointed toward their flat.

...

The siblings went home and made do with rye bread for lunch before heading to a terraced house on Ironcross Street, where they knocked on their landlord's door.

"You know my rules. No one is allowed to fall behind on their rent!" Mr. Franky declared imposingly from his sofa, despite his short stature.

Benson leaned forward and smiled amiably. "Mr. Franky, we are here to give up our lease."

Just like that? Is that really a good way to negotiate? Standing beside Benson, Klein was shocked at what he was hearing.

On the way here, Benson had mentioned that he wanted to pay a compensation of twelve soli at the most.

"Give up your lease? No! We have a contract, and there's still half a year left!" Franky glared at Benson as he flailed his arms.

Benson looked at him earnestly and waited for him to calm down before saying in a composed voice, "Mr. Franky, you know very well that you could be making even more money."

"Even more money?" Franky asked with interest, running his fingers across his skinny face.

Benson sat up straight and explained with a smile, "The two-bedroom unit was rented to the three of us for five soli and six

pence. But if you were to rent it to a family of five or six people—with two or three of them working and earning money—I think they'd be willing to pay more to stay there instead of staying in a crime-ridden area like Lower Street. I believe a rent of five soli and ten pence, or even six soli, would be reasonable.”

Franky's eyes brightened, and his throat moved. Benson continued, “Besides, you are certainly aware that rent has been increasing in recent years. The longer we stay here, the greater the loss you incur.”

“But...I need time to look for a new tenant.” Mr. Franky, who had inherited the building, obviously liked the idea.

“I believe you can find one very quickly. You have the ability and resources. It will take you only two, maybe three days... We will cover your losses during that time. How about the deposit of three soli that we have paid? That sounds quite fair to me.” Benson practically made the decision for him on the spot.

Franky nodded in satisfaction. “Benson, you are such a conscientious and honest young man. All right, then. We will sign a termination of our contract.”

Watching this unfold from the side, Klein was dumbfounded. He now understood how easy it was to “convince” Mr. Franky. *That really was way too easy...*

With the problem of the previous lease resolved, the three siblings first helped Klein buy his formal wear and then immediately began preparing for their move.

They didn't have anything heavy or bulky, as the larger items all belonged to the landlord. Thus, Benson and Melissa vetoed Klein's idea of hiring a carriage and instead carried everything themselves. They went back and forth repeatedly between Daffodil Street and Ironcross Street.

The blazing sun outside the window descended in the west, and warm, golden rays shined through the bay window, scattering across the desk's surface. Klein looked at the shelf, which had books and

notebooks arranged neatly on it, then gently placed an ink bottle and a fountain pen on the freshly wiped table.

It's finally done... He let out a sigh of relief and heard his stomach growl. Letting down his rolled-up sleeves, he walked toward the door.

Now he had a bed that was truly his. The sheets and cover were all white; old but clean.

Klein twisted the doorknob and walked out of his bedroom. Just as he was about to speak, he saw both doors on the opposite side open simultaneously as Benson and Melissa appeared in their respective doorways.

Looking at the dust and dirt marks on their faces, Klein and Benson suddenly burst into laughter, unusually cheerful and boisterous.

Melissa bit her lip lightly, but the laughter was contagious. She eventually let out a soft laugh.

...

The next morning, Klein stood before a full-length mirror without a single crack, carefully smoothing out the collar and cuffs of his shirt.

His outfit consisted of a white shirt, a black tailcoat, a short silk top hat, a black waistcoat and trousers, boots, and a bow tie. He felt a pinch in his heart when he remembered how he had paid eight pounds in total for them.

However, the effect was remarkable. Klein felt that his reflection exuded an even more bookish air and made him look more handsome, too.

Click!

He closed his pocket watch and slipped it into his inner pocket. Then he took his walking stick and concealed his revolver. After boarding the tracked coach carriage, he soon arrived on Jutland Street.

Right before entering Blackthorn Security Company, he realized that he was so accustomed to his previous lifestyle that he had

forgotten to give Melissa extra money today, though he allowed her to continue walking to school.

Shaking his head, he made a mental note of it before stepping through the door. He saw brown-haired Rosanne making coffee in the reception room, where a rich aroma permeated the office.

“Good morning, Klein. What agreeable weather we have today,” Rosanne said with a grin in greeting. “To be honest, I have always been curious. In such weather, don’t you gentlemen feel warm wearing those formal suits? I know for a fact that Tingen’s summer isn’t as hot as in the South, but it is still summer.”

“It’s the price of fashion,” Klein replied good-humoredly. “Good morning, Miss Rosanne. Where’s the captain?”

“Same old place,” Rosanne answered, pointing inside.

Klein nodded and walked through the partition to knock on Dunn Smith’s door.

“Come in,” Dunn said, his voice as deep and gentle as usual.

When he saw Klein, who looked quite different in a set of fine formal wear, Dunn nodded and smiled, his approval showing in his gray eyes.

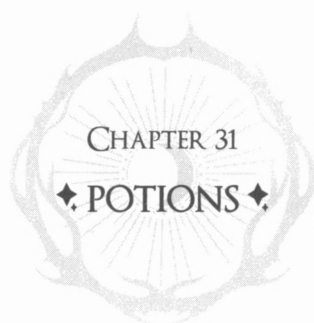
“Have you decided?” he asked.

Klein took a deep breath and answered solemnly, “Yes, I have made a decision.”

Dunn slowly sat up straight. His expression turned serious, yet the depth of his gray eyes remained unchanged.

“Tell me your answer.”

Without hesitation, Klein replied, “Seer!”



CHAPTER 31

♦ POTIONS ♦

Dunn Smith stared at Klein with his gray eyes for a full minute without a word.

Klein didn't cower under the weight of such silence and an intense gaze; he met it steadily.

Finally, Dunn spoke again, his voice deep and inflectionless. "You must understand that once you consume the potion, there will be no room for regret."

Klein smiled and said, "I know, but I respect the voice within."

First, the Sleepless potion does not meet my requirements. It's the same for the Spectator, based on what I heard at the tarot gathering. I'm not sure when I'll come into contact with other Beyonders Sequences. A slow remedy cannot work in an urgent situation; therefore, it is pointless to wait. By the same logic, Corpse Collector was eliminated as well, leaving only two choices—Mystery Pryer and Seer.

Lacking additional information and assuming that potions of the same rank across different Sequences were equally dangerous, Klein noted that both Mystery Pryer and Seer met his requirements. In the end, whether Emperor Roselle's regret over not choosing Apprentice, Marauder, and Seer was merely a passing remark or sincere, it was enough to tip the balance in Klein's heart.

Furthermore, he could tell from the diary that once he figured out

the true essence of “digestion” and “acting the part,” he would be able to avoid the potion’s negative effects to a significant extent. As for the murmurings and illusory enticements that could drive people to corruption and madness, he had already experienced them, even without being a Beyonder!

“All right.” Dunn rose and picked up his hat. As he put it on, he said, “Follow me downstairs.”

Klein nodded and gave a gentleman’s bow in gratitude.

Tap. Tap. Tap. The two of them ventured down, their footsteps echoing through the silent, empty passageways.

Suddenly gripped by anxiety, Klein attempted to distract himself with conversation. “Captain, you mentioned that taking the potion wouldn’t directly grant me mystical knowledge and that I’d only gain the qualifications to learn it. So where did the initial knowledge of mysticism come from? Did our predecessors risk their lives to gradually uncover it, or did they acquire it by other means?”

Every time he went underground, the air here was especially brisk and fresh. Clearly, the ventilation was excellent; however, the occasional draft still sent a slight chill through him.

Dunn glanced at him, his gray eyes appearing unusually deep in the darkness.

He answered calmly, “One part, as you said, is to explore, analyze, and improve. Another part is a gift from the gods. And third, heh, those dangerous murmurs that others can’t hear are not always senseless voices. At times, they reveal truths about mysticism. But from what I know, people who listen to these murmurs long-term invariably go mad or succumb to corruption and become monsters. Of course, we must thank them. The notes they leave behind are priceless treasures in the field of mysticism.”

Doesn’t that make them human lab rats...?

The underground passage’s cold humidity made Klein shudder suddenly.

Does that mean my luck-enhancement ritual, which has become a form of social networking magic, will always be accompanied by chaotic,

terrifying murmurs in the future? And will they eventually lead to a similar outcome?

At the intersection, Dunn did not proceed toward Chanis Gate, nor did he turn down the corridor leading to the weapons, materials, and archives. Instead, he led Klein to the left and approached Saint Selena Cathedral.

Halfway there, he stopped and touched something, opening a secret door in the wall.

"This is our alchemy room. I will ask Old Neil to retrieve the Seer potion formula and the corresponding materials from inside Chanis Gate. Ha, you're quite lucky. The Goddess has blessed you with Her favor. We should still have enough materials for two Seer potions. If not, you'll have to wait quite a long while." Dunn pointed at the room behind the door. "Wait here. Later, observe how Old Neil concocts the potion. It's the most fundamental aspect of mysticism studies. And do not touch anything in there. The items are either very dangerous, very expensive, or both."

Then Dunn added, "Oh, right, I forgot something. Your becoming a Beyonder is necessary for you to face danger and search for the notebook. Your accomplishments so far are only part of the journey. Therefore, you will not be an official member of our team for the time being. You will remain an office staff member with a corresponding salary. Your job is still what I told you about before, with the additional task of learning about mysticism under Old Neil. You can hash out the specifics of your schedule with him."

"All right." Although a little disgruntled by the lack of a pay increase, Klein was in full agreement.

According to Dunn, after consuming the potion, he still had to learn and master his newfound powers. If he were to become a formal member immediately and start participating in supernatural missions, he would not only be foolish—he'd be dead.

Dunn turned around and took two steps toward the intersection when he suddenly paused and turned back.

"One more thing."

I knew it... Klein was already accustomed to the way his captain operated.

"We were successful on our earlier mission against the Secret Order," said Dunn with his usual expression. "It's unlikely they will provoke us again in the near future, but that doesn't mean you should be careless. We can't be certain at this time of the importance of the Antigonos family's notebook to them. From what we discovered, they have certainly preserved a number of ancient customs that we've determined are related to the Solomon Empire and the corrupted nobles of that period."

"Got it. Thanks, Captain," said Klein as he exhaled.

This was also one of the reasons he didn't want to wait—the reason he leaped at the chance to become a Beyonder!

As he watched Dunn leave, confirming that there would be no further words, Klein slowly walked into the alchemy room.

The room contained rows of long tables laden with test tubes, pipettes, scales, and beakers. It looked remarkably like a chemistry laboratory from his previous life, only more austere and ancient.

In addition, there was a huge iron cauldron, a dark wooden ladle, a translucent crystal ball, and various other items, including the Sacred Emblem of Darkness and other strange symbols visible everywhere. All of this imbued the room with an air of mystery.

Klein looked around with interest, though he was not foolish enough to touch anything.

After a while, he heard footsteps approaching. Old Neil entered, carrying a tiny silver chest adorned with ornate patterns. He was still wearing his traditional black robes (which seemed out of place in this day and age) along with a matching felt hat with a round brim.

"Boy, I never expected you to choose Seer." Old Neil put down the chest and, with his somewhat murky maroon eyes, sized up Klein. "Your personality is just like mine when I was your age. You just don't want to follow the masses. Not bad. Now light these gas lamps and close the door."

"Yes, sir." Klein tried hard not to tremble as he lit the gas lamps one by one, restoring a dim glow to the room.

Clack! Clack! Clack!

The secret door closed with a final clack. Klein returned to see Old Neil, white-haired and deeply wrinkled, scrubbing the black cauldron with a bundle of strange tree branches.

"The concoction of a Sequence potion is extremely simple—at least for Sequence Seven and below. There's no need for a special flame or any additional ritual, much less an incantation. And it doesn't require the use of one's spiritual energy. All one needs to do is follow the order in the formula, add the precise amounts of each ingredient, mix it all together, and that's all." Old Neil's wrinkles seemed to bloom with his smile.

"Really?" Klein asked, dumbfounded.

This sounds as simple as my luck-enhancement ritual...

Which is...kind of frightening when you really think about it...

"Maybe that's why it's a gift from the gods. Praise be to the Lady." Old Neil drew a haphazard circle over his chest.

Following that, he opened the silver chest and pulled out a piece of parchment exuding antiquity. The yellowish-brown goatskin unfurled inch by inch, revealing its words. Watching from a short distance, Klein realized it was written in Hermes, a language he knew well.

It was penned in ink resembling blood, its fluidity remarkably preserved even in writing. But aside from that, it did not appear extraordinary.

Seer: 100 milliliters of pure water plus 13 drops of night vanilla essence plus 7 gold mint leaves... Klein silently read the formula, but the remainder was obscured from his view by Old Neil's wrist.

"Pure water is water that has been repeatedly distilled. Thankfully, I prepared some earlier, so there's no need to waste time on it." While Old Neil provided this introduction, he grabbed a large, sealed glass bottle from the table with practiced familiarity.

He removed the stopper and casually poured about one hundred milliliters of pure water into the cauldron.

Klein did not dare ask any questions, fearing he would distract Old Neil. After all, he was the one who would be drinking the potion.

"Thirteen drops of night vanilla essence. This can be extracted and stored as an essential oil ahead of time." Old Neil took out a tiny brown bottle from the silver chest and, using a pipette, added thirteen drops into the cauldron in a carefree manner.

A faint but relaxing fragrance emanated from the cauldron, making Klein feel at peace despite his apprehension.

"Seven gold mint leaves..." Old Neil picked up a silver-patterned tin and removed its lid. With his bare hands, he selected a few leaves and scattered them into the cauldron. The fresh, pungent scent was faint but noticeable.

"Four...five...six...seven. Perfect." Old Neil chuckled as he examined the potion formula on the goatskin. "Three drops of hemlock juice. This isn't something you should drink casually, it can numb your entire body to the point of death. In ancient times, it was considered the best means of suicide."

I'm not stupid enough to do that..., Klein grumbled internally.

Old Neil switched to a new pipette and dripped the hemlock into the cauldron. The mixture emitted a peculiar odor that jolted the senses.

"Nine grams of dragon blood grass powder." Old Neil leisurely reached into the silver chest and pulled out a transparent test tube. The powder inside was as dark as iron.

He used a beaker, a scale, and other instruments to measure out nine grams of powder, which he then dumped into the cauldron. He stirred the mixture with the dark wooden ladle. The casual manner in which the concoction was prepared made Klein hold his breath in trepidation.

"Frankly, all of the ingredients up until now were just supplemental. The exact amounts don't really affect the final outcome. Should I add a little more?" Old Neil joked. "But the last two are crucial.

Their amounts can be slightly less than written, but they must not deviate too far or your advancement could fail. Moreover, the quantity must not exceed the specified amount, even by a little bit. Otherwise, you will have to be treated for mental problems afterward. It's not impossible to die on the spot, so be careful."

Klein immediately tensed as he saw Old Neil pull a black glass bottle from the silver chest.

"Blood of a Rava octopus—ten milliliters. This kind of octopus is considered an extraordinary species. It is clearly mutated and imbued with mysterious attributes. Its blood rapidly degrades under sunlight, losing its unique properties, so it must be stored in an opaque container." Old Neil's tone lost its earlier calm. He quickly and carefully measured ten milliliters of blood with a test tube.

The blood was blue like the sky, and from time to time, illusory bubbles formed as though it were connected to the spiritual world.

"After pouring the blood into the test tube, you need not worry about the remaining drops clinging to the wall, just in case you overdose," Old Neil said in a low voice.

The moment the blue blood entered the cauldron and touched the previous mixture, the sound of crashing waves echoed from within. The room was bathed in a light blue tinge, giving Klein a strange sensation that was distant yet familiar. It felt like being in a mother's womb, as if his soul were ascending.

"The final item is star crystal, fifty grams." Old Neil's voice rang in Klein's ears, jolting him back to reality as he looked at the table.

In the old gentleman's hand was a piece of extremely pure crystal. The crystal appeared gelatinous, reminiscent of edible jelly from Earth rather than a hard mineral. Under the blue light, it reflected specks of light, as if the expanse of an entire galaxy was contained within.

"This is an excellent material for creating divination crystals... Just a little less to account for any mistakes." As Old Neil measured, he used a small, patterned silver blade to cut off the correct amount.

Pure water plus night vanilla essence plus gold mint leaves plus poison

hemlock juice plus dragon blood grass plus Rava octopus blood plus star crystal equals a Seer... Klein couldn't help but silently recite the formula in his mind.

With everything prepared, Old Neil tossed the pieces of star crystal into the cauldron.

Tsssss!

An illusory mist instantly puffed out, enveloping the alchemy room in a haze. Within the mist, Klein seemed to see a night full of stars and felt the observation of an invisible presence.

A few seconds later, the mist dissipated. Old Neil used the ladle to scoop out the viscous, dark-blue liquid. It possessed strange physical properties—thick, sticky, and inseparable—leaving not a trace at the bottom of the black cauldron.

The dark blue liquid was poured into an opaque cup. Old Neil pointed at it and said, "It's done, your Seer potion."



Klein looked at the gelatinous, dark-blue liquid, unsure of what he could compare it to. He swallowed hard and said with difficulty, "Am I supposed to drink it just like that? Is there no need for any other preparations? No ritual, incantation, or words of prayer?"

Old Neil replied tersely, "Preparation? Oh sure. First, you down a cup of Aurmír grape wine from Intis, suck on a Desi cigar, then hum a relaxing little ditty while performing an upbeat court dance. You can even tap dance if you prefer. And finally, finish with a round of Quint..."

Seeing Klein's increasingly confused expression, Old Neil laughed and summarized, "Only if you feel nervous, of course."

...You've got a sense of humor, huh...?

The corners of Klein's mouth twitched as he resisted the urge to draw his gun. He set his cane aside and reached out with his right hand, picking up the opaque cup as though it were heavy. The potion's scent was so mild it was almost nonexistent.

"Young man, do not hesitate. The more you delay, the more nervous and afraid you will become—and that will affect your absorption later," Old Neil said casually, his back turned as he washed his hands at a nearby sink under a gushing faucet.

Klein nodded silently and took a deep breath. Reminiscent of the way he had pinched his nose to down Chinese medicine decoctions

in his youth, he brought the cup to his mouth and tipped it back, chugging the contents in a series of gulps.

A cool, smooth sensation quickly filled his mouth, flowing through his gullet into his stomach. The sticky, dark-blue liquid seemed to grow long, becoming thin tentacles that reached its icy tendrils into every cell of his body.

He couldn't help but convulse as his vision began to blur rapidly. Every color saturated intensely—the reds grew redder, the blues bluer, and the blacks blacker. Blobs of color blended together like an impressionist painting.

Klein had seen such a scene before. It was back when Daly, the Spirit Medium, had questioned him. Though his vision was a blur, his mind remained clear, even as it felt adrift like a castaway floating at sea. Slowly, he began to make out his surroundings. Colors retained their integrity even as they overlapped, and the thick yet insubstantial mist gently stretched out.

Around him were innumerable shapes he found difficult to describe—objects so transparent they seemed not to exist. In the distant depths, rays of lustrous brilliance in various hues shined; these lusters appeared to possess life, or perhaps they held immense, boundless knowledge.

This is a little like what I saw during the luck-enhancement ritual..., he thought.

Instinctively, Klein looked down and realized he was still standing in his original spot, his body convulsing. Suddenly, his consciousness sank abruptly and fused with him as one.

Boom!

The fog quickly retreated, and the colors returned to normal. The bright, clear halos and seemingly nonexistent objects vanished instantly. The scene in the room returned to normal, but Klein could feel his head swelling as if it were about to crack open. Every image left countless afterimages, and his ears were overwhelmed by an ethereal murmur:

"Hornacis... Flegrea... Hornacis... Flegrea... Hornacis... Flegrea..."

A stabbing pain shot through his forehead as destructive, volatile

thoughts filled his mind. He frowned and shook his head several times.

"Has your vision become abnormal? Are you also hearing things you couldn't before?" Old Neil asked with a smile as he approached.

"Yes, Mr. Neil, what should I do?" Klein asked, suppressing intense, aggressive urges.

Old Neil chuckled. "That's because the potion's power is seeping out, and you lack the means to control it. Do as I say. Imagine an object in your mind. Something common, simple, and easy."

Klein quickly focused his thoughts and envisioned his short black silk top hat. He recalled its texture from when he had touched it and pictured its exact shape.

"Concentrate on it. Keep imagining it and outlining its shape. Do you feel any better?" Old Neil's voice, gentle as a serene song, penetrated his mind.

Gradually, Klein shifted his focus entirely to the top hat in his imagination. He felt the incessant murmurs slowly subside into a whisper until they eventually vanished. He also no longer saw double. The overlapping shapes became distinct and clear.

"Much better," Klein said as he exhaled, calming his chaotic emotions. He looked down at his body and saw nothing abnormal. Moving his limbs, he asked with half-anticipation and half-doubt, "I did it? I'm a Seer now?"

Old Neil pulled out a mirror plated with mercury and held it in front of Klein. "Look at your eyes."

Klein gazed into the mirror and saw his reflection. He was wearing a black hat; his features appeared a little sunken yet remained average. Apart from the sweat covering his face, he looked no different than before.

He followed Old Neil's instruction and carefully examined his eyes. Only then did he notice that the color of his brown eyes had deepened considerably. They now resembled a night sky without a speck of light, as if they were capable of absorbing the souls of others. Normally, dark brown irises might easily be mistaken for black,

and without careful inspection, even Klein might have missed the change.

“This is a physical manifestation of the potion’s power. Once you learn to enter a trance and rein it in, your eyes will return to normal,” Old Neil said with a smile as he extended his right hand. “Congratulations to our new Beyonders—our Seer.”

“Thank you,” Klein replied as he shook his hand. “Mr. Neil, when can I learn how to enter a trance?”

“You can start now. The initial steps of meditation are relatively simple, especially for Beyonders,” Old Neil replied with a laugh. “Just now, picturing an object in your mind to divert your attention and turning the energy inward is actually the first step of entering a meditative state. Try doing it again.”

Klein closed his eyes and once more pictured the hat in his mind. His concentration, seemingly easier to maintain than before, quickly drove away all random thoughts, leaving only the clear image of the hat.

“Let your mind empty somewhat. Next, replace the object you imagined with something that doesn’t exist in this world—an object created entirely from your own imagination. You must follow this rule. Only by doing so can you enter a trance and become one with your transcended, limitless, cosmological self. Only then will you gain the insight and revelation of truth—the kind of knowledge that only you will comprehend. In mysticism, this is called a mystic experience,” Old Neil explained in a soothing tone. “You need only listen to my instructions. Don’t focus too much on the details right now. The most important thing is for you to enter a trance.”

Something that doesn’t exist in this world, something born entirely of my imagination... Would something from Earth count?

Klein briefly attempted to replace his top hat with the massive, army-green, intercontinental missile he once saw on television. However, no matter how he shaped or imagined it, his mind grew even more focused than before.

I guess that won’t work..., Klein thought, having no choice but to let his imagination run wild. First, he imagined a sphere of light,

then many similar spheres, gathering them together in his mind. The spheres overlapped, merging into a fantastical object. Gradually, his thoughts lost their anchor, drifting away, hollow and ethereal.

As his body and mind quieted, the illusory fog from before—filled with brilliant lusters and objects that seemed not to exist—reappeared along with clusters of colorful blobs that floated silently overhead. Klein extended his spiritual energy inch by inch, quietly observing and absorbing them.

“Very good. As expected of a Seer. You entered your trance smoothly, almost as well as I did back in my day. Almost,” Old Neil chuckled. “In that case, I’ll begin teaching you the most common, easiest-to-grasp, and most useful ability in your mysticism career: spirit vision!”

Old Neil proceeded to switch off the gas lamps one after another, then opened the door to the alchemy room so that the area where Klein stood remained shrouded in shadows, leaving just enough light to make out the silhouettes of objects.

“Now, while remaining in your current state, raise both your hands and hold them in front of your eyes. Hold your index fingers up, facing each other, but do not let them touch. Then open your eyes until you are accustomed to the darkness.”

Klein followed each step according to Old Neil’s instructions. He saw the silhouettes of his fingers and the outlines of objects around him.

“Technically, you should be lying down so that your body is completely relaxed. But since you did so well entering your trance, let’s continue,” Old Neil laughed. “Focus your gaze on a spot behind your hands—it must be behind. Now, slowly move your fingers, keeping them in the same position without touching, and do not let them leave your sight.”

Klein calmly finished the exercise, then settled his gaze on an empty spot behind his hands. He slowly moved his index fingers within his field of vision.

Once, twice, thrice...

Suddenly, he noticed a tinge of fiery red between his fingers.

“Huh...?” he murmured.

“Do you see a color? That’s right. That’s the initial step toward spirit vision. The color you see is your aura,” Old Neil said with a chuckle. “Take your time. Repeat the motion until the color stabilizes, and then you can start exploring further. I’ll also take this opportunity to explain the different meanings behind the various colors.”

“Okay,” Klein replied, moving his fingers as he concentrated on the fiery red glow.

After a moment’s thought, Old Neil began, “To put it simply, the mainstream school of mysticism divides the nonphysical aspect of a human into four layers. At its core is the soul body—the most fundamental part of a person’s spirituality. Those who believe in animism think that all living things have spirituality and, therefore, a soul body. I’m not sure about the other layers, but for Mystery Pryers, the goal of meditation and the method of strengthening our power are directed toward the soul body.

“Outside of the soul body is the astral body. It is the means for the soul body to communicate with the spirit world and the cosmos. It’s considered an external manifestation of the soul body. Furthermore, it is directly related to your personal will and prevailing emotions... The images you see after consuming the potion are what your astral body perceives as it wanders through the spirit plane, a realm that does not obey the laws of the material world. It involves the transcendent self, the limitless self, and the cosmological self. In the spirit plane, the past, present, and future might all be stacked upon one another—that is the source of divination.

“In the spirit plane, what you see is merely a representation, a symbol. You have to interpret it to understand its true meaning. Divination, along with many other forms of magic, is implemented through one’s astral body. Do not mistake its relationship with, or differences from, the soul body.”

Of course not. One is a form, and the other is a utility...

Klein continued examining the aura between his fingertips as he concisely summed it up.

“Further out from that is the mental body. From this point onward, it will merge with the physical body. It involves your brain and is an overall manifestation of your abilities to infer, analyze, perceive, and judge. Many elevating effects of potions mainly target this part, and quite a number of magic spells are aimed at it as well.”

Old Neil continued to explain in detail. “The outermost layer is your ether body. It is a manifestation of your vital energies as well as your physical form. The aura color you see is an external representation of your ether body. In other words, apart from the spiritual forms, ghosts, and specters you can see directly with spirit vision, you might also see certain existences that should not normally be seen—other people’s ether forms, or rather, their auras. From their thickness, brightness, and color, you can determine their health and emotional state.

“When your spirit vision and mastery of mystical knowledge improve, you will be able to see even more details. You can even deduce another person’s lifespan. By the way, the emotional state I mentioned also manifests outwardly through your astral body. As you advance in your Sequence, your spirit vision will become powerful enough to see another person’s astral body, and then you’ll be able to know even more. This level of perception is attainable only by Seers, Mystery Pryers, and similar Beyonders.

“Some fellows even claim that the strongest spirit vision allows one to see anything, anywhere, including events from the past and future. However, I’m skeptical of that.”

It sounds quite powerful...

Klein felt his eagerness growing.

Old Neil coughed and went on. “Let’s return to the ether body, or rather, to the colors of the auras. Your limbs and other mobile parts of your body will appear red. Your head and the surface of your brain will appear purple. Areas that expel waste and toxins will appear orange, while the digestive system will be seen as yellow. The heart and other regulatory systems will appear green. Your throat and parts of the nervous system will be blue. An entirely balanced body will be cloaked in a halo of white... That is the symbol of health.

"If any area turns dim, the thickness decreases, or the color changes, it indicates a problem in that corresponding part—a sign of exhaustion or illness.

"In addition, the inner layer of the astral body represents prevailing emotions. Red signifies passion and excitement, and orange signifies warmth and satisfaction. Yellow represents happiness and extroversion. Green symbolizes calm and peace, and blue coldness and stillness, possibly indicating a state of deep thought. White shows brightness and an eagerness to improve. Dark colors indicate sorrow, grief, and silence, while purple signifies that one's spiritual energy is taking control, accompanied by coldness and estrangement."

Klein silently committed the information to memory while keeping his initial spirit vision stable.

"Good, now you can look at other things," Old Neil said, nodding as he concluded his explanation.

Klein slowly turned his head and looked at Old Neil. Indeed, he could see different colors in various parts of his body. The aura was both thick and thin in different spots: The purple at his head shined the brightest, while the red on his hands and feet was relatively dim. The overall white halo around his body appeared thin and faded.

Ah, he really is getting on in age..., Klein silently remarked to himself.

Only now, with what he saw, did he feel that he had truly become a Beyonder!

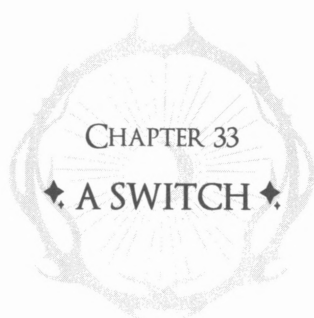
I'm a Beyonder now!

He shifted his gaze and carefully scrutinized Old Neil. Suddenly, he noticed, in the space behind him, a pair of almost transparent disembodied eyes, cold and ruthless!

These illusory eyes stared intently, first at Old Neil and then at Klein.

"What...?" Klein shuddered, his mouth falling open as he blurted, "You have a pair of eyes behind you!"

Momentarily taken aback, Old Neil quickly forced a smile. "Oh, just ignore that."



The moment Old Neil finished his sentence, the illusory eyes that lurked in the darkness behind him vanished at once. Even in his spirit vision state, Klein could find no trace of their existence.

“This is an outward manifestation of ritualistic magic,” explained Old Neil with a chuckle.

Fascinating... Is spirit vision an enhanced version of yin-yang eyes,⁴ then?

Klein felt like a child who had just received a new toy. In his excitement, he turned his gaze away and began observing every corner of the room. He wanted to see if the alchemy room looked any different from before.

In the dim light, the outlines of objects—tables, test tubes, scales, cups, and cupboards—appeared unchanged from when he had not activated his spirit vision. They emitted no additional light or color.

“Do objects without life have no spirituality?” Klein mumbled to himself as his gaze swept toward the silver chest on the table.

Suddenly, he saw a vibrant array of colors—blue as the sky, resplendent as the stars, and red as burning flames!

⁴ In Chinese mythology, yin-yang eyes provide the ability to see through the divide between the human world and the spirit realm. For example, someone born with yin-yang eyes would be able to see the spirits of deceased people walking among the living.

“Do materials sourced from extraordinary beings still retain some life, or...uh...are they still active? Even if the original being is dead?” Klein queried, deliberating his words as he looked at Old Neil with curiosity.

“More precisely, they possess residual spirituality. This is one of the crucial points for a successful potion synthesis and also one reason why a Beyonder might lose control. Dunn might have mentioned this to you already,” explained Old Neil. He suddenly laughed as he recalled something. “I remember the formula for Corpse Collector requires the desiccated body of a mature black-spotted frog. Consuming that potion certainly takes a lot of courage.”

Klein imagined the idea for a moment and found it disgusting. He quickly changed the subject and turned his gaze to the darker corners of the room. To his disappointment, there were no ghosts or shapeless spiritual forms there.

“Isn’t it said that the world of spirits is everywhere?” he asked out of curiosity.

Old Neil chuckled tersely before replying, “Rascal, repeat after me. This is the headquarters of a Nighthawk squad, the ground beneath the Church of Evernight. There are many Beyonders here! Do you think we allow random spirits and souls to roam free? Furthermore, the spiritual world is a different concept from spirits themselves.”

Klein felt a little embarrassed, so he turned his head, pretending to focus on the faint light from the gas lamps outside. “I see.”

As he spoke, the area between his brows began to twitch, like a spasm that felt out of his control or a muscle cramp.

What’s happening?

Just as Klein turned around to ask, he suddenly saw a figure standing just inside the door, at the periphery of the light. The figure appeared human-shaped and almost transparent, its aura’s colors blending almost seamlessly with the surrounding darkness, making it difficult to discern.

Tsk!

Klein drew a sharp breath as a painful spasm between his brows

overwhelmed his mind, disrupting his vision. When he refocused, there was nothing there!

Strange...

He turned around and asked, "Mr. Neil, the spot between my brows is twitching a bit. It's getting painful."

"Ha-ha, this is very common. You are a new Beyonder. Spirit vision places a great burden on your soul body and continues to drain your energy. Physical manifestations of its effects can include spasms between your brows, sharp headaches, oversensitivity, and minor bouts of hallucinations. And while using spirit vision, it's easy to feel uncomfortable because of the unfamiliar surroundings. You'll also be easily influenced by other people's emotions. These are issues you'll need to learn to manage and eventually eliminate with practice. In addition, use spirit vision sparingly and always finish in a timely fashion," answered Old Neil with a smile.

Why do I feel like this amuses you somehow...?

Klein hurriedly asked for advice, "Then how do I end spirit vision?"

He had planned to mention the figure he had seen, but upon hearing that minor hallucinations were among the symptoms, he dismissed the idea.

With his headache and the twitch between his brows, he could easily guess Old Neil's answer.

"Like before, think of an object to focus on. Gather your thoughts and concentrate your mind. Then shift back into a trance. Close your eyes, control your spirituality, and repeatedly command it to end. When you open your eyes again, your spirit vision will have ceased."

Old Neil described the process leisurely and, when finished, added, "Of course, that is the most convoluted and clumsy method. With practice, you can learn to subtly hint to yourself while in a trance, affecting your spirituality, and eventually develop a simple 'switch' action. For instance, lightly tapping twice on the center of my brows allows me to activate my spirit vision easily. Another two taps will end it. How you set it up personally depends on your own habits and preferences."

“Got it,” Klein thought, planning to imitate Old Neil’s method—using two taps between his brows as a switch for his spirit vision. Tapping once might be mistaken for an instinctive knock on his head while tapping thrice could waste valuable time in dangerous situations. Actions like snapping his fingers, however, carried too much personality and might be easily detected by others.

He gathered his focus and imagined the stacked spheres of light once more, reentering his trance.

Under Old Neil’s guidance and after repeated hints and practice, Klein finally set up his “switch.” He curled his fingers into a loose fist and tapped the knuckle of his index finger against the center of his brow twice. Immediately, glowing auras of varying thickness and colors appeared before his eyes. After another two taps, everything returned to normal.

“I’ve finally got it!” he exclaimed with delight.

Only then did he realize how exhausted he was, as if he could fall asleep at any moment. His mind felt empty and sore, as though he had pulled three all-nighters in a row.

Old Neil chuckled. “We are not Sleepless. After each session of excessive spirit vision, you’ll need to recover with some sleep. You can go home now and rest well. In the afternoon, take a walk around Ironcross Street near the Welch residence and try your best to find clues about the Antigonus family’s notebook as soon as possible. Tomorrow, we’ll continue your lessons on mysticism. And of course, don’t forget to read the historical literature.”

“Yes, sir.” Klein agreed fully with Old Neil’s arrangements.

He picked up his walking stick and left the alchemy room. Watching the door close and Old Neil return to the armory, Klein massaged his brow and temples. Gripping the railings, he slowly made his way back upstairs.

Just then, Dunn Smith passed him on the stairs, a vague smile playing at the corners of his lips. His eyes, deep and knowing, met Klein’s as he said, “I heard from Old Neil that you’re adjusting very well. Both to the state of trance and to spirit vision.”

"Perhaps it's only a unique trait of being a Seer," Klein replied modestly.

He guessed that Dunn had been keeping an eye on things in the armory on Old Neil's behalf.

Dunn slowed until he was only a couple of steps ahead of Klein. After a few seconds of silence, he turned around and said, "Remember, curiosity killed the cat. It can also kill Beyonders. Don't attempt to investigate murmurings you shouldn't hear or presences you shouldn't see."

"All right." Klein recognized this as another reminder of how easily Beyonders could lose control.

After returning to Blackthorn Security Company, he greeted Rosanne, who clearly didn't yet know he'd become a Beyonder. Klein slowly walked out the door onto the streets and took a trackless coach to their new house on Daffodil Street, nearly falling asleep during the journey.

It was still morning, and the temperature was a balmy twenty-six degrees Celsius. Klein took the ring of copper keys from his belt and unlocked the door to the house.

Many items were still missing from their home; the dining room and parlor remained empty. Benson and Melissa had left early, off to work and school.

Klein didn't have the capacity to bother with anything else. He closed the door and quickly went upstairs, entering his bedroom—the one with the bookcase.

After taking off his coat and hanging it on the rack, he eagerly jumped into bed and fell fast asleep the moment his head hit the pillow.

Klein was awoken by brilliant sunlight. Turning his head, he slowly opened his eyes to see the sun shining brightly outside.

What time is it? Did I miss the tarot gathering this afternoon?

Klein struggled out of bed and stumbled to the coatrack since his pocket watch was still in the inner pocket of his tailcoat. Not only had he forgotten about the appointment, but he'd also neglected to close his bedroom door and draw the curtains on the bay window.

Click!

Klein snapped open his pocket watch and felt immediate relief. It was only a little past noon. He still had plenty of time before the scheduled gathering at three in the afternoon. It was Monday, the day of his meeting with Justice and The Hanged Man.

As if on cue, Klein tapped the center of his brow twice. The scene before him shifted once again, and he saw that his body had been restored to a bright luster.

He tapped twice more to exit his spirit vision. Well-rested, he went down to the first floor, boiled a kettle of water, placed some low-grade tea leaves into it, and chewed on some rye bread dabbed with a little butter.

Afterward, Klein took out the historical literature and his original notes, beginning to study and consolidate his knowledge.

...

At 2:57 PM, Klein closed his books and capped his fountain pen before pulling the curtains shut. Next, he locked his bedroom door and dimmed the room.

He tapped twice on the center of his brow, activating spirit vision to survey his surroundings. After confirming that no invisible spiritual forms were present, Klein exited spirit vision and checked the time on his pocket watch.

Ticktock. Ticktock.

At one minute before three, he began walking counterclockwise in a square, just as before. With every step, he softly recited the corresponding words in Chinese.

Only this time, he did not prepare any food.

Klein closed his eyes as he felt an itch on the back of his hands. It was almost as if the square of four black dots was coming to the surface.

Hysterical screams and alluring murmurs began resounding in his ears, but Klein realized that his headache wasn't as severe as the first time.

It wasn't that he was unaffected; rather, he was now able to exert control and block out the noise.

As a Beyonder, he possessed a little more self-control in such an environment.

Soon, his body became weightless. As he floated upward, he saw the meandering, endless grayish-white fog. He also saw crimson stars, two of which had an inexplicable connection with him, evoking an unusual sense of familiarity.

Klein looked at his blurry silhouette and muttered in puzzlement, "The astral body that Old Neil mentioned?"

He quieted himself for a few seconds before once again conjuring the image of a majestic palace, a long bronze table set beneath a domed ceiling, and twenty-two high-back chairs adorned with their corresponding constellations.

Klein calmly walked to the head of the table and veiled his body and face in thicker gray fog. He then reached out his right hand and pointed at the two familiar crimson stars in the distance, bridging a miraculous connection.

CHAPTER 34

◆ ADVANCE PAYMENT ◆

In a windowless underground basement, Alger Wilson sat with a gruff expression at a long table laden with various apparatuses and parchment scrolls. In front of him was a half-spent candle; the flickering from its dim, yellowish flame made the shadows of the objects and the table sway like a mirage.

Alger's hair was disheveled like seaweed, its deep blue hue nearly black. He wore a robe adorned with embroidered lightning. His hands were clasped in front of him, thumbs pressed together, as he leaned forward and fixed his gaze on a bottle of black liquid positioned to the left of the candle.

Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!

Splash! Splash! Splash!

The sound of tempestuous winds and crashing sea waves alternated from within the sealed bottle. In areas where the black liquid did not reach, a thin mist curled and spread, as if forming eyes and a mouth.

Alger cocked his head to glance at the clock hanging on the wall; the hour hand pointed directly at three. He pressed his temple as his eyes abruptly darkened, and subtle lusters began to emanate from the various items on the table. At that moment, a crimson light rushed forth like a tidal wave from out of nowhere, instantly engulfing him!

...

Inside the Hall family's luxurious mansion in Empress Borough, Audrey Hall sent her dance teacher away before locking herself in her bedroom and seating herself at her dressing table. Outside, the sun shined brightly, and the flowers in the garden were in full bloom. A light brown notebook made of exquisite goatskin parchment lay open on the table, its pages blank. To its right rested a fountain pen with a golden tip, its body inlaid with rubies.

Audrey went through a series of careful motions, ensuring she could pick up the pen and record the formula the moment she left the gathering.

"This is so exciting..." she murmured, inhaling deeply to subdue her stirring emotions as she looked into the mirror with pursed lips.

However, instead of her own reflection, she saw a crimson, illusory burst of light emanating from all around her—including her own body!

...

Above the gray fog stood a palatial hall as grand as a giant's manor. Crimson light bloomed on both sides of the bronze table, surging upward like a fountain before pattering down and condensing into two hazy figures seated in the exact same spots as before.

Audrey, with her soft golden hair and tall, slim build, instinctively looked toward the head of the table. There she saw a figure enveloped in thick gray fog, sitting back in his seat, one hand resting palm-down on the table's edge while the other stroked his chin.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Fool!" Audrey called out in her cheery voice. Then, turning to the person across from her, she added, "Good afternoon, Mr. Hanged Man!"

This girl sure is trusting. Already she's so sure that I'm a good person with nothing to fear? Is she a well-sheltered noble lady? Klein thought to himself.

Klein smiled, maintaining his enigmatic image. "Good afternoon, Miss Justice," he said. As he spoke, he lowered his head slightly and raised his left hand, tapping the center of his brow twice. Instantly,

his vision shifted. He saw the colorful auras emanating from the figures of Justice and The Hanged Man!

Meanwhile, the surrounding gray fog and crimson stars remained unchanged; there were no additional illusory presences or lifelike luster. Shifting his gaze, Klein noticed that Justice's aura perfectly matched the colors Old Neil had described. Each hue, whether red, purple, blue, or white, appeared in its proper place. The aura maintained a lustrous brilliance and proper thickness, clearly marking her as a vibrant young lady. *The dominant colors of her emotions are red and yellow—symbols of joy, passion, and excitement.*

Klein then turned his attention toward The Hanged Man. Like Justice, his aura displayed nothing extraordinary—except that his emotions were rendered in blue with hints of orange. *Calm, thoughtful, cautious, and a little pleased?*

Given that this was his first attempt at reading an aura, Klein reached his conclusion with little confidence.

Just as he shifted his gaze away, he suddenly noticed something strange: At the innermost layer of The Hanged Man's aura, all the colors and energies had nearly merged into one. Focusing his mind for a closer look, Klein could faintly discern that deep within The Hanged Man's ether body lay a deep blue reminiscent of the sea, a hue that evoked violent tempests and giant waves. Was this his astral body? Or rather, the surface of it? From the looks of it, The Hanged Man was indeed a Beyonder—and apparently stronger than Old Neil. A flurry of thoughts swirled in Klein's mind, even as questions emerged. *But not necessarily... Perhaps it also uniquely reflects my environment. Maybe I'm only able to see these details because we're on my home turf, not because Old Neil failed to manifest the same quality.*

He turned his head toward Justice again and confirmed that such a characteristic was unique to Beyonders. At that moment, Alger had also completed his greetings.

Audrey drew a light breath in anticipation and asked, "Mr. Hanged Man, did you receive the container of Ghost Shark blood?"

Alger glanced at Klein and noticed him tapping the center of his brow as if lost in thought.

“Thank you very much. It met my expectations perfectly. I never expected you to send it so quickly. Ghost Shark blood is not your typical extraordinary material,” Alger said frankly.

Audrey smiled modestly. “I’m very happy to see that you’re satisfied.”

Since childhood, Audrey had loved all things mystical, and she had befriended members of aristocratic circles who shared her interests. They exchanged information, books, and rare artifacts. Yet, until now, none of them had ever acquired any supernatural power to become actual Beyonders. In fact, a few princes had hinted they could grant her desires if she agreed to become their princess consort.

However, this time she had retrieved the Ghost Shark blood directly from her family’s vault. The inventory merely listed it as “one large bottle,” without specifying its volume or fullness. She believed that pouring out a little would go unnoticed—and even if her actions were discovered, her parents were unlikely to pursue the matter.

Alger studied The Fool encased in fog before turning his head back with a smile. “According to our agreement, I will now share with you the formula for the Spectator potion.”

“Let me prepare myself a little,” Audrey said as she inhaled deeply and focused her full attention. “All right, go ahead.”

“Potions low on the Sequence are very easy to concoct. Just add the ingredients in the precise order I give you. Keep in mind that you may use less than the stated amount, but never more—that would lead to major problems. You should have heard about Beyonders losing control. I believe there’s no need for me to repeat it?” Alger began, emphasizing the critical precautions.

Audrey nodded lightly. “I understand completely.”

As she spoke, she turned to look at Mr. Fool, hoping he might add something. Unfortunately, The Fool sat as silent as a statue.

After a moment’s thought, Alger continued, “Using less does not mean you can deviate too much. If you do not have an assistant, I

suggest you first spend some time familiarizing yourself with basic chemistry experiments.”

“I have a family tutor for such matters,” Audrey replied easily.

After discussing the maximum allowable deviation in ingredient quantities and other important points, Alger recited fluently, “Spectator. Sequence Nine potion. It consists of eighty milliliters of pure water, five drops of autumn crocus essence, thirteen grams of cow-teeth peony powder, seven petals of elf flowers, a pair of matured Manhal fish eyes, and thirty-five milliliters of goat-horned black fish blood.”

He paused. “The final two items are the main ingredients—both from extraordinary sea creatures. You must be careful.”

“All right,” Audrey repeated the formula as she committed it to memory. “Eighty milliliters of pure water, five drops of autumn crocus essence, thirteen grams of cow-teeth...”

“Peony powder,” Alger reminded her.

With his guidance, Audrey gradually and precisely memorized the formula’s order. Yet she still appeared worried, mumbling it over and over to herself.

“Do you know about meditation?” Alger asked. When he saw Justice nod, he continued, “I don’t know what you know of it, so let me describe it once. After consuming the potion, quickly begin meditation to enter a trance so you can bring your spiritual energy and power under control. Practice this every day to truly command the powers of the potion and delve into its deeper symbolism and mysteries. Only by doing so can you avoid the danger of losing control. Furthermore, the key to the symbolism behind the potion lies in its name—Spectator.”

Klein listened silently to the conversation without interrupting, secretly memorizing and learning. As he did, a thought suddenly occurred to him.

Audrey listened to The Hanged Man’s explanations attentively, and just as she was about to inquire further, she heard a gentle rapping on the table.

She and Alger turned to look at The Fool together. They saw the mysterious, mighty figure tapping the table lightly with his fingers. In a deep voice, he intoned:

“It’s not about mastery but digestion.

“It’s not about discovery but acting.

“The name of a potion is not only symbolic—it’s imagery. It is the key to digestion.”

Audrey was dazed and confused by these words. She couldn’t quite grasp what Mr. Fool was trying to convey.

From the corner of her eye, Audrey subconsciously searched for a reaction from The Hanged Man. To her surprise, he jolted and stiffened, like an ordinary person who had heard a loud and sudden clap of thunder.

“Digestion, acting... Digestion, acting... Digestion, acting... The key...” Alger murmured repeatedly, as if a vital concept was just within his grasp or as though he had succumbed to a strange curse.

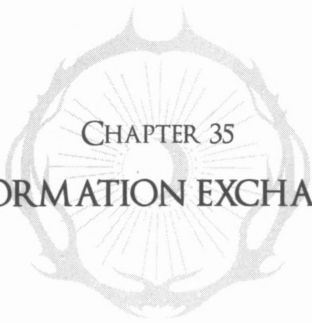
After a while, he raised his head and said hoarsely, “Thank you, Mr. Fool. Your tip is as valuable as my life. You have allowed me to understand many things. Of course, I believe I have yet to fully comprehend it.”

Klein maintained his mysterious, inscrutable demeanor as he smiled and said, “That was an advance payment.” In reality, he didn’t truly understand the exact meaning of what he had just said. He only knew that Emperor Roselle was more powerful than the typical Beyonder and certainly stronger than The Hanged Man.

“Advance payment...” Audrey mused as she eyed The Hanged Man’s reaction, recognizing that the earlier hint was a precious clue. After a moment of contemplation, she asked, “Mr. Fool, what do you wish for us to do?”

Across from her, Alger nodded and replied, “What matter might you wish to entrust us with?”

Klein leaned back slightly, glancing at the two figures on either side of the table, and then said in a soft, easy voice, “Seek out and collect Roselle Gustav’s secret diary—even if it’s just one page.”



CHAPTER 35

◆ INFORMATION EXCHANGE ◆

Roselle Gustav's secret diary?

The Great Emperor Roselle?

Indeed, only such important matters are worth the concern of a mighty figure like Mr. Fool...

Audrey blinked in surprise at first before realizing that it was not at all unexpected.

Legend had it that Emperor Roselle had seen the Blasphemy Slate himself and hidden the twenty-two paths of the divine in the secret cards he created. No doubt, every high-rank Beyonder would pay close attention to this!

"Diary? It's a diary?" Alger's brows furrowed as he keenly noted the detail.

The writing left behind by Roselle Gustav was described by Mr. Fool in such certain tones as a diary!

How did he know?

How could he be sure?

Could it be he knew how to decipher Roselle's secret glyphs?

Faced with The Hanged Man's question and having achieved the desired effect, Klein leaned back in his chair and interlocked his hands. In a relaxed manner, he replied, "Let us treat it as a diary for now."

He neither confirmed nor denied it.

Audrey had heard other noble descendants mention it, but she had never seen it for herself. With her curiosity piqued, she asked, "It's said that Emperor Roselle's...well, diary was written in a cryptic language or in symbols he invented himself?"

"Yes," Alger answered simply. "Some people believe it is a unique set of mystic runes, while others say they are hieroglyphs. But even today, no one has discovered the correct way to decipher it. Not that I know of, at least."

With that, he turned his gaze to Klein, seeking confirmation or perhaps expressing suspicion.

These are texts that have been passed down for generations and, thus, are no longer in their original hieroglyphic state. How can you possibly decipher it with your logic...?

Klein remained as composed as ever and secretly laughed to himself.

Regarding the theory that they were mystical runes...he instantly envisioned a ridiculous, funny scene:

An evil mage, clad in a long-hooded robe, rolls up his sleeve to reveal a symbol tattooed on his arm. It was said that the symbol was a rune with mystical powers left behind by Emperor Roselle. In reality, it was two large, simplified Chinese characters etched in dark ink:

逗比!

...Meaning *schmuck*!

Klein felt unexpectedly lighthearted as he smiled ever so slightly.

Hearing The Hanged Man's description, Audrey said uneasily, "If we can't understand whatever the symbols or words are...how are we to pass the information to you, Mr. Fool? Or are we to send it somewhere by post?"

This certainly is a problem... I don't have a way to receive items in secret yet... Yet Klein did not hurry to answer. Still weaving his fingers in front of him, he repeatedly pressed his thumbs together as he pondered the question.

Soon, he thought of a solution:

Since I can create a divine palace and table here according to my wishes, would it be possible to similarly project the content from the minds of others?

I could give it a try...

At that moment, Audrey and Alger saw Mr. Fool slowly straighten up amid the thick gray fog.

"Miss Justice, let us try something. Imagine a paragraph of text and imbue it with the urgency of writing it down. Yes, pick up the fountain pen beside you and write on the piece of paper."

Before Klein finished his sentence, Audrey saw a sheet of parchment and a dark red fountain pen in front of her.

Curious and doubtful, she picked up the pen and envisioned a poem Emperor Roselle once wrote:

*If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?*⁵

After reviewing this text in her mind, she picked up the fountain pen and imbued it with the desire to express the words on the page.

Klein sensed this desire and, using the fountain pen as a medium, gently guided her hand.

The moment Audrey touched the pen to the parchment, a line of text appeared:

If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

"Oh my Goddess! This is incredible!" Audrey exclaimed in astonishment.

Then, looking at Klein with a hint of fear, she asked, "Mr. Fool, can you hear what I'm thinking?"

"No, I'm merely guiding you. I have simplified the process of writing for you and made the paper an imprint of your thoughts. If you did not wish to express it, nothing would appear," Klein said in a low, steady voice.

"I see... So we just need to memorize the symbols or the appearance of the cryptic text and project them with our thoughts?" Audrey asked as understanding dawned, and she heaved a sigh of relief.

⁵ A quote from "Ode to the Wind" by Percy Bysshe Shelley.

"Yes," Klein answered.

"What a good idea. But, Miss Justice, do not doubt your memory. After becoming a Spectator, you will improve immensely in this field." Alger had watched the attempt from the side, fully coming to the realization that The Fool was more powerful and mysterious than he'd imagined.

As for his own memory, he believed that his upcoming advancement would improve it more than sufficiently.

Audrey nodded in delight. "What a happy reminder. Mr. Hanged Man, do you have any other guidance on the Spectator potion?"

She then looked toward the head of the table.

"Mr. Fool, I will work hard to complete your mission. I will do my best to gather Emperor Roselle's secret diary."

"Like I said, I favor a fair and equal exchange. The advance payment I gave is equivalent to two pages of the diary per person. If you deliver more, I will provide additional payment in return," Klein said calmly, as if he were an adult who had no desire to take advantage of children.

Naturally, any additional payment would come from the newly acquired diary pages, forming a positive feedback cycle.

"You are truly a generous gentleman." After a few seconds of silence, Alger bowed slightly with his hand on his chest. Then he turned to Justice and continued, "Let me emphasize once more that a Spectator will forever remain a Spectator."

"I know that many Spectators enjoy imagining themselves as the protagonist or some other character. They often invest so much of their emotion into the performance that they end up crying, laughing, raging, or becoming sorrowful. However, that is not the way a true Spectator should behave."

"When faced with the various 'shows' of human society—and with people who knowingly or unknowingly play the role of certain characters—you must remain an absolute bystander. Only then can you calmly and objectively observe them, discover their habits,

detect the tics of a lie, and catch the scent of their nervousness. From these minute clues, you can grasp their true thoughts.

“Believe me, due to the diversity of human emotions, everyone naturally exudes different ‘matter’ and emits different smells. However, only a true Spectator can sniff them out. Once you invest too much emotion, your observations become biased, and your sensitivity toward others’ feelings will become warped.”

Audrey listened attentively, her eyes growing brighter with each word. “It sounds really, really interesting!”

Sitting at the head of the table, Klein’s heart stirred as well. It appeared that the requirements for the Spectator potion could be summarized as being an absolutely neutral and objective spectator.

In a way, it was akin to playing a part...

Playing a part?

Was this what Emperor Roselle was referring to?

Then does that mean I will have to act like a Seer and, from there, gradually digest the potion?

Just as Klein immersed himself in thought, Alger finished explaining what he knew of the requirements for a Spectator. Pausing for a moment, he said, “That seems to be all. Perhaps we can have a casual chat about things happening around us. Something that might seem normal to you could turn out to be an important clue to others.”

“Go ahead,” Klein said, returning to himself and nodding permissively.

He had made up his mind to try playing the role of a Seer. After all, it didn’t seem like there was any harm in doing so.

“Then shall we begin with you, Mr. Hanged Man?” Audrey asked excitedly.

Alger considered for a moment before saying, “The infamous pirate who calls himself Admiral Ludwell has begun his voyage to explore the eastern end of the Sonia Sea again.”

“Oh? The captain of the *Black Tulip*?” Audrey asked after some deliberation.

"That's right," Alger replied with a nod.

I don't even know who that is... Klein listened in silence as he pondered what news he would share. It had to be something that would not expose him while still allowing him to receive feedback.

Soon, he made his decision. Maintaining his enigmatic image as The Fool, he brushed his fingers over the edge of the bronze table and said, "I heard that the Secret Order has lost a notebook that belonged to the Antigonus family."

This news was not known solely to the Nighthawks in Tingen; the Secret Order—and Beyonders with close ties to them—were surely aware of it as well.

"A notebook from the Antigonus family?" Alger repeated, shaking his head with a chuckle. "I'm truly curious as to how the Church of Evernight will react to this news."

Why did he mention the Church of Evernight specifically? Klein noted this immediately, but he couldn't exactly ask directly. That would shatter his image as the enigmatic, inscrutable Fool.

At that moment, Audrey asked, puzzled, "Why are you curious? Is the Goddess's church supposed to have some kind of special reaction?"

Alger smiled and replied, "The Antigonus family was destroyed by the Church of Evernight, though I'm not entirely sure if it happened at the end of the Fourth Epoch or the beginning of the present one."

What...? Klein's pupils constricted as a sudden chill swept through him.

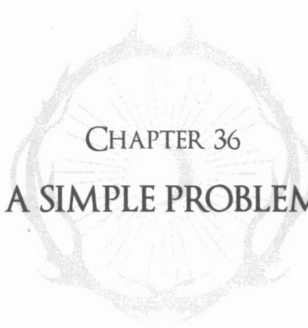
From the looks of it, the Nighthawks have a much larger stake in the notebook than I expected!

The reason they nominated me as a Beyer—while my contributions and the need to protect me might be only minor factors—is that they wish for me to enhance my spiritual perception to help them find the notebook.

The captain didn't keep this fact from me. He did mention it, but I didn't pay it much mind at the time...

After hearing The Hanged Man's explanation, Audrey said with great interest, "I never knew about this..."

"All right, my turn. Let me think of what I have to share." She cocked her head and leaned it on her hand before chuckling. "Yesterday, my etiquette teacher was teaching me how to swoon. Swooning properly and elegantly is a practical skill used at social events to avoid awkward situations or annoying people... Heh-heh. I was just thinking out loud. What I really wanted to say is that ever since the military's defeat on Balam's eastern shore, the king, the prime minister, and the rest of the gentlemen at court have been under immense stress and harbor a desperate desire for change."



CHAPTER 36

◆ A SIMPLE PROBLEM ◆

Audrey recalled the language her father and elder brother used in their conversations about the situation and put her own spin on it. “They believe the government’s current structure is too disorganized. After every election, if the ruling party changes, the entire government is replaced from top to bottom. It creates chaos and dramatically reduces efficiency. Not only did it lead to a military defeat, but it also brought great inconvenience to the people.”

Klein knew well that without a precedent to follow, the Loen Kingdom had yet to develop a system in which citizens could join the civil service through official examinations. The institution of party rule was still in its infancy; therefore, after every electoral victory, many routine positions would be awarded to the winning party’s members and supporters.

Hmm, Emperor Roselle didn’t invent a civil service system in Intis? That doesn’t seem very in line with his character... Could it be that he diverted his focus to other things later in life?

As Klein pondered this, Alger interjected with a soft chuckle. “They believe? Then their reactions are a little slow. Perhaps they will only feel the itch a year after being bitten by black mosquitoes.”

Black mosquitoes were insects that resided in the south of the Loen

Kingdom. Their stings were particularly virulent, causing an itch that made victims want to rip their skin apart.

Audrey covered her mouth with her hand for a moment, then, ignoring The Hanged Man's mockery, stated her main point: "Unfortunately, they are unable to find a good replacement for this system at the moment."

Klein listened carefully and felt that the topic fell within his "expertise." He smiled faintly and said, "That's a simple problem." China and the United Kingdom, which had learned from it, had achieved considerable success and advanced experience in this arena.

"Simple?" Audrey asked, a little taken aback.

Although the education she received at home did not include politics, she often sat in on the discussions between her father, brother, and others. She had a solid understanding of related matters.

Klein felt as though he were back in an old-school forum. With a composed smile, he said, "An examination, just like a university entrance exam. Hold an exam open to the public. It can be split into two or three rounds. Use the most objective method to select candidates based on merit."

"But..." Audrey could vaguely foresee what sort of objection this would elicit.

Before she had the chance to gather her thoughts, Klein continued, "After which, use these candidates with merit to staff the routine positions within the cabinet, county governments, city governments, and various towns. Yes, in positions that handle matters directly, such as that of the Cabinet Secretary. Based on the different requirements for each position, the second or third rounds of examinations can be further divided. Jobs that require expertise must be left to the experts. As for political positions such as ministers, councilors, or mayors, they will be left to the parties that win the election, as a reward for their success."

Alger, who lacked interest in such matters, cocked his head unconsciously and listened carefully. Audrey frowned a little as she fell into deep thought.

"There's no hurry in replacing everyone at once. The cabinet and various levels of government would be crippled if that happened. You can have an examination every year or every three years, gradually replacing the staff. Finally, based on the kingdom's expansion and the vacancies brought on by resignations and retirements, you can develop a more systematic way of allocating spots."

Having fully demonstrated his talent as a keyboard politician, Klein then spread his palms out and said, "Such a design can incorporate the kingdom's brightest into the government, and regardless of which party is in power or who the major ministers are, the civil service will allow the kingdom to maintain basic and efficient operations."

Of course, a side effect was the birth of bureaucracy, an undying devil.

While considering the suggestion, Audrey asked doubtfully, "Does that mean that even if those ministers turn into curly-haired baboons, it wouldn't have much impact on the country?"

"No," Alger interjected suddenly. "I believe that baboons are a better choice than the present ministers." He paused before adding, "After all, baboons only need to eat, sleep, and mate. They would not come up with foolish ideas and insist on brainless projects."

Mr. Hanged Man, it sounds like you have quite a terrible superior... Sitting at the head of the table, Klein shook his head in silent amusement.

Audrey ruminated over the suggestion Mr. Fool had offered and, after a while, said in surprise, "It sounds like it actually might work... It's a simple but very effective solution!"

She looked at Klein and sincerely praised, "Mr. Fool, you must be a wise elder with extraordinary intelligence and a wealth of experience in life!"

...The corners of Klein's mouth twitched slightly as he looked at The Hanged Man and Justice for a few silent seconds. "Let's end today's gathering here."

If Miss Justice is able to influence her family and push for change on

this matter, I can guide Benson ahead of time and give him a chance to become a civil servant.

Benson is indeed suitable for such a career.

However, it's unlikely Justice would take the initiative on it because The Hanged Man and I can easily determine which noble made the suggestion and effectively guess her real identity.

But of course, she can do it secretly in a roundabout manner.

"As you wish." Audrey and Alger stood up together.

Klein leaned back slightly and severed the connection. He saw Justice's and The Hanged Man's illusory figures shatter and dissipate instantly.

Above the gray fog, in the magnificent palace befitting a god, he was the only one left sitting silently at the head of the bronze table.

Klein did not immediately plunge into the gray fog and leave as he had before because, now that he was a Beyonder, he still had enough energy to stay.

He had ended the tarot gathering early. Now that he had learned what the Nighthawks truly thought of the Antigonus notebook, he decided to pretend he was diligently searching for it later instead of going straight to sleep. Doing so would prevent Dunn Smith from becoming suspicious of his activities at home.

He had already reaped enough benefits this time.

Klein sat on the high-back chair at the head of the bronze table, his arms resting on the armrests and his fingers crossed as he carefully inspected the boundless gray fog with still eyes. He found the place silent and vast, as though no one had stepped into it for millions of years.

When he established the connection to summon The Hanged Man and Justice, he acutely noticed something: As a Beyonder, he now had enough excess energy to touch another crimson star!

Which means...I can summon one more to this place?

Klein recalled the feeling from before and muttered in confirmation.

However, he had not made an impulsive attempt earlier since he wouldn't have known what kind of newcomer he might drag in or

how they would react to this situation. After all, not everyone was like Justice or The Hanged Man—individuals with unique personalities who easily acclimated, acquired what they needed, and were willing to keep a secret. If he dragged in someone like Dunn Smith, then the underground society he had just established would be instantly exposed to the scrutiny of the church.

And as the big evil boss behind such a “cult,” his future would be precarious.

Klein knew that the gray fog was special. He knew it was not something a Beyonder at Dunn Smith’s Sequence rank could see through. But now the problem was if supernatural powers like those of a Beyonder existed in this world, he had no choice but to consider the existence of the gods.

At the moment, Klein took the conservative stance that the seven orthodox gods existed in reality. Of course, he was inclined to believe that these gods were only slightly more powerful than high-Sequence Beyonders. Furthermore, they must be subject to strict limitations. At the very least, ever since the beginning of the Fifth Epoch, they had exhibited no signs beyond a few divine revelations.

Heh, forcibly pulling people here isn’t a good idea anyway. No one likes to be dragged into supernatural incidents for no reason... Better to wait and see...

Klein sighed and stood up.

He withdrew his spirituality and sensed his body’s presence. Then he began recreating the heavy sensation of a rapid drop.

The view changed before his eyes. The gray fog and crimson stars were immediately left in the distance. Klein felt as though he had broken through endless layers of water-like membranes before finally emerging into the real world, his eyes falling upon his darkened room.

This time, he was fully awake and paid close attention to the entire experience.

Strange... There were still some differences between the gray fog and the spirit plane... Klein moved his limbs and felt the physical presence of his body.

After carefully reflecting on the experience, he shook his head, walked to the desk, and pulled open the curtains.

Whoosh!

As the curtains were drawn back, sunlight poured in, illuminating the room.

Looking at the street outside the bay window and the pedestrians walking about, Klein took a deep breath and muttered quietly.

Time to get to work.

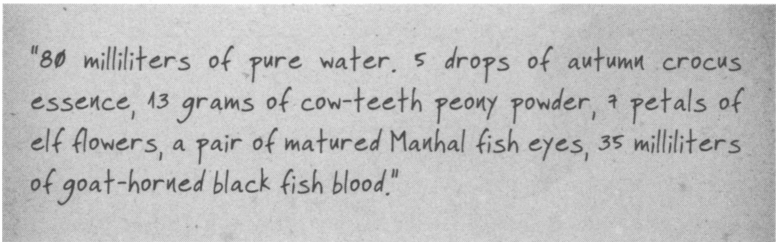
How should I act as a Seer?

I can't rush this... All I can do at the moment is use spirit vision...

...

In Empress Borough, Backlund, Audrey Hall looked at herself in the mirror in her room. She saw her cheeks flushed pink with excitement and her eyes so bright that they might have intimidated anyone from looking directly at them.

But she didn't have time to linger as she hurriedly recalled her memories. She picked up the ruby-studded fountain pen and began writing down the formula for the Spectator potion on the exquisite goatskin parchment.



"80 milliliters of pure water, 5 drops of autumn crocus essence, 13 grams of cow-teeth peony powder, 7 petals of elf flowers, a pair of matured Manhal fish eyes, 35 milliliters of goat-horned black fish blood."

Phew... Audrey heaved a sigh of relief as she read it a few more times to confirm that she had not made any mistakes.

She had the urge to dance again but reminded herself to remain restrained.

After some thought, she began writing various chemical substances and ingredients around the potion's formula, disguising the page as a set of complicated and messy chemistry notes.

Yes, as long as no one reads it carefully, anyone who casually flips through it will not discover the hidden details... Excellent!

Audrey praised herself and turned her mind toward acquiring the materials.

I'll first search our vaults, then try to exchange items for the missing ingredients with others...

If I still can't gather them all, I can only seek help from Mr. Hanged Man or Mr. Fool at the next gathering... But what can I offer as payment?

After some thought, Audrey closed the notebook and placed it on the small bookshelf in her room. Then she briskly walked to the door and pulled it open.

A golden retriever was sitting obediently outside.

Audrey broke into a radiant smile.

"Susie, you've completed your mission perfectly! In the serialized stories in the newspapers, the detective always had a capable assistant. I think that behind a real Spectator, there should also be a large dog."

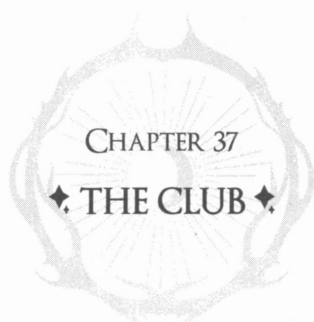
...

In the underground chamber lit by a single flickering candle, Alger Wilson raised his palm and studied it carefully.

At length, he let out a sigh. "It's still so inexplicable. I was unable to figure out anything at all..."

Despite having made sufficient preparations, he failed to understand how The Fool had accomplished his summoning...

Alger shifted his gaze down toward the goatskin parchment on the table in front of him. At the top of the yellowish-brown parchment, a sentence from Hermes was written in dark blue ink: *7. Seafarer.*



Under the scorching afternoon sun, Klein left his house.

Since he had to walk all the way from Ironcross Street to Welch's place, he wore a linen shirt instead of his formal attire of a top hat and leather boots. He traded his suit for an old brown coat, a matching round bowler hat, and a pair of worn leather shoes. This way, he didn't have to worry about sweat contaminating the rather expensive suit.

He strolled down Daffodil Street toward Ironcross Street. As he passed the square on the corner, he subconsciously glanced at it.

The tents were already gone. The circus troupe from before had long departed after finishing their performance.

Klein had originally imagined that the animal trainer who had helped him read his fortune was secretly a powerful master. He believed she had purposely appeared to guide him after discovering something unique about him and that they would surely meet again for her to provide hints about his future. However, none of that happened—she had followed the troupe to the next stop on the tour.

How can there possibly be so many clichéd tropes...? Klein laughed to himself as he shook his head, then turned onto Ironcross Street.

Ironcross Street was not a single street. As its name suggested, it was formed by two roads that crossed each other. With the intersection

at its core, it split into Left Street, Right Street, Upper Street, and Lower Street. Klein, Benson, and Melissa had previously lived on Lower Street.

However, the residents of his former flat and the surrounding area did not consider it Lower Street. Instead, they coined the term Middle Street, thereby drawing a clear distinction between themselves and the clusters of poor houses two hundred meters down the road.

There, one bedroom could be occupied by five or six people, and sometimes even up to ten.

Klein walked along the periphery of Left Street, his mind wandering. He recalled the Antigonus family's notebook and its mysterious disappearance. He remembered its importance to the Nighthawks—and the deaths that had resulted from it.

His heart slowly grew heavy, and his face darkened.

At that moment, a familiar voice sounded in his ears. "Little Klein."

Oh... Klein turned his head curiously and found himself outside Smyrin Bakery. Mrs. Smyrin, her head a crown of gray hair, greeted him with a wave and a warm smile. "You seem a little...unhappy?" Wendy asked genially.

Klein rubbed his face and said, "A little."

"No matter how bad it gets, there's always tomorrow," said Mrs. Smyrin with a grin. "Here, try out my new sweet iced tea. I'm not sure if it suits the palate of the locals."

"Locals? Are you not a local, Mrs. Smyrin?" Klein shook his head in amusement.

Trying something out means it's free, right?

Wendy Smyrin raised her chin slightly and said, "That's right. I'm actually a Southerner. I came to Tingen with my husband, but that was more than forty years ago. Heh-heh, back then, Benson was not even born. Even your parents did not know each other. I've always been a little unaccustomed to Northern cuisine, and I always miss the food of my hometown. I miss pork sausages, potato bread,

roasted pancakes, vegetables fried in lard, and grilled meat with specialty sauces. Oh, and I also miss sweet iced tea..."

A smile spread across Klein's face. "Mrs. Smyrin, this sure is a topic that makes one hungry... But I feel a lot better now. Thank you very much."

"Delicious food is always a good cure for sorrow." Wendy handed him a cup of brownish-red liquid. "This is sweet iced tea I made from memory. Try it and tell me if it tastes good."

Klein took a sip after thanking her. It reminded him of the iced black tea from his home, though it was less stimulating. Its flavor was stronger and more refreshing, instantly dispelling the scorching heat.

"It's excellent!" he praised.

"I'm glad to hear that." Wendy's eyes crinkled as she grinned; her kind smile shined as she watched him finish the cup of tea.

After chatting with Mrs. Smyrin about their move, Klein returned to the street he knew best. There were far fewer streetside hawkers in the afternoon—they would gather here again after half past five. Those who remained looked drowsy and listless.

The moment he entered the area, Klein's heart suddenly felt overwhelmed by darkness. It felt inexplicably heavy and gloomy.

What's happening? he thought sharply, sensing that something was amiss with him. He immediately stopped and scanned his surroundings yet saw nothing out of the ordinary.

After a moment's thought, Klein raised his hand and tapped the center of his brow as if deep in thought. Instantly, his field of vision transformed. The auras of the hawkers and pedestrians appeared before him.

Before he could discern the colors that might indicate their vitality, his attention was drawn to the gloomy hues that represented their moods.

He couldn't determine the exact thoughts of those he observed, but the despondence, apathy, and pervasive gloom left a deep impression on him.

As he surveyed the area, he realized that not even the sun could disperse those dark colors.

It was a sense of gloom that had stained them over untold months and years of repression.

Upon seeing this, Klein instantly understood the reason.

Just as Old Neil said, activating his spirit vision could easily make him feel discomfort in unfamiliar environments. It was also easy for him to be affected by the emotions of others.

A similar principle could be applied to an ability like spiritual perception. This was an ability he had naturally acquired after becoming a Seer—a passive sense that could not be declined. It allowed him to directly detect the existence of anything out of the ordinary.

There was bound to be a level of interaction when perceiving things; therefore, in the eyes of a Beyonder similar to a Spirit Medium, the intensity of everyone's spiritual perception was as obvious as a fire in the night. Hence, people with high spiritual perception were naturally more affected by the atmosphere of anything abnormal and intense. Only through repeated practice in commanding and controlling their abilities could they adapt to such changes.

Such a repressed hue would probably have to be formed over extended periods of time, right?

Klein sighed as he shook his head, feeling somewhat affected. He tapped his brow twice again and tried hard to rein in his spirituality.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Klein walked toward his old flat one step at a time, trying to sense any unusual presences or subtle connections while also scanning for any signs of the Antigonus family's notebook "he" had hidden.

The streets were the same as usual. There was sewer water and trash on the roads. It only cleared up when he neared the entrance to the building.

Klein pushed open the half-closed door and wandered about the ground floor in the darkness that sunlight hadn't reached.

Then he went upstairs, the wooden stairs creaking constantly with every step.

The second floor was as dim as always. Klein unleashed his spiritual perception as he looked straight into the darkness. However, not only did he fail to discover any clues about the notebook, but he also failed to see any invisible spiritual bodies.

If it was so easy to encounter them, most ordinary people would have already sensed the existence of the supernatural...

Klein sighed in reflection.

He understood now that most "spirits" did not exist in the form of spiritual bodies but in the form of spiritual energy. Only a Spirit Medium could effectively communicate with them.

After circling the third floor once, Klein left the building and retraced the familiar path in his memory toward Welch's place.

He walked for a full hour but did not discover anything along the way.

Standing outside the house, Klein looked up at the building through the locked iron gates and mumbled to himself, "There's no need for me to search Welch's place, right? Captain and Ms. Daly must have done a thorough search of the place... Besides, I don't have the key. They can't expect me to climb the walls, right...?"

I'll try another route to get here tomorrow...

I've walked so much today, but there are no step counter rankings...

As he grumbled to himself, Klein returned to a nearby street. He planned on taking a coach carriage to Blackthorn Security Company to retrieve his daily allocation of thirty bullets. He needed to make use of his time and practice.

A Seer's lack of quick and effective attacks could only be compensated for by his revolver and walking stick!

The neighborhood around Welch's residence was relatively clean. Shops with clean and bright windows lined the sides of the street. After turning around the corner, Klein was just about to seek out the carriage stop when his gaze swept past a few signboards on the second story across the street:

HARROD'S DEPARTMENT STORE.

MILITARY VETERANS' LOUNGE.

DIVINATION CLUB.

...

Divination Club... As Klein silently repeated the name, he suddenly recalled that he was meant to “act” as a Seer.

Yes, I should go take a look... Maybe it'll give me new ideas...

As a myriad of thoughts swarmed his mind, Klein crossed the street and climbed to the second floor. He entered the main foyer to see a beautiful female receptionist before him.

The woman, her saddle-brown hair held in a high bun, sized up Klein before smiling and saying, “Sir, do you wish to have your fortune told, or do you wish to join our club?”

“What are the conditions for entry?” asked Klein casually.

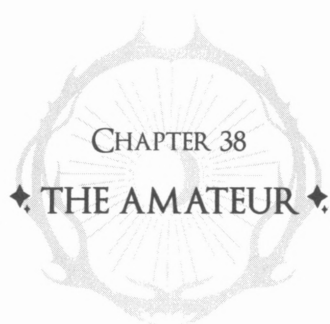
The woman explained with great familiarity, “You have to fill in your particulars and pay an annual membership fee. The first year is five pounds, and subsequent years will be one pound a year. Don’t worry, we are not like those political or business associations that only allow entry through recommendations from formal members.

“Members have free access to the club’s meeting room and various divination rooms and tools. They can enjoy complimentary coffee and tea and read the newspapers and magazines we subscribe to. They can buy lunch, dinner, and alcoholic beverages at cost price, as well as books and materials needed for divination.

“In addition, we invite a famous fortune teller for a seminar at least once a month to answer any questions. Most importantly, you can find a bunch of friends with the same interests and be in a community where you can share knowledge and experiences.”

It sounds pretty good, but... I don't have money...

Klein gave a self-deprecating smile before asking, “Then what if I want my fortune told?”



Upon hearing Klein's question, the beautiful lady with elegantly coiffed hair showed no sign of losing her patience. She maintained her smile and said, "Our members are free to perform divination for others in the club and set their own prices. We take only a very small cut of the fee. If you wish to have your fortune told, you can take a look at this album. It contains introductions and rates for the members who offer divination services.

"However, since it's Monday afternoon, most of our members are busy at work. We only have five here today..."

As she continued, she invited Klein to take a seat on the sofa beside a window. She then sat before him and flipped through the album, pointing out the club members in attendance today.

"Hines Vincent is a famous Tingen fortune teller and the club's resident mentor. He's skilled in various forms of divination. He charges four soli per session."

So expensive... That's enough for two lavish dinners for Benson, Melissa, and me...

Klein mentally clicked his tongue and did not reply.

When the woman noted his lack of a response, she continued flipping through the pages, introducing one member after another.

"...And the final one, Glacis. A member who joined the club only

this year. He is skilled in tarot divination and charges two pence per session.

"So, sir, which of them would you like?"

Without putting on any airs, Klein answered, "Mr. Glacis."

"..." After a brief pause, the beautiful receptionist said, "Sir, I should remind you that Mr. Glacis is only considered a novice."

"I understand. I will stand by my decision." Klein nodded with a smile.

"...Then please follow me." The woman rose and led Klein through a door at the side of the foyer.

It was not a very long corridor, ending in a meeting room with its door open. The room was filled with sunlight and equipped with tables, chairs, newspapers, magazines, playing cards, and other items, and the faint aroma of coffee drifted out.

About two doors away from the meeting room, the receptionist gestured for Klein to stop as she quickened her pace and walked toward it. She called gently, "Mr. Glacis, someone wishes to see you for divination."

"Me?" A voice filled with surprise and doubt immediately rang out from within, followed by the sound of a chair moving.

"Yes, which divination room would you like to use?" replied the receptionist in an even tone.

"Topaz Room. I like yellow crystals." Glacis appeared by the meeting room's door and looked curiously at Klein, who was waiting nearby.

He was a man in his thirties with tanned skin, dark green irises, and soft, pale yellow hair. He was dressed in a white shirt and black waistcoat with a monocle hanging from his chest pocket and carried himself with an upright air.

The receptionist said nothing further as she opened the door to the Topaz Room, located next to the meeting room.

Inside, the curtains were tightly drawn, rendering the room dim. It seemed that only in such darkness could one receive revelations from the gods and spirits to achieve an accurate divination.

"Hello. I'm Glacis. I didn't expect you to choose me for your divination." Glacis gave a gentleman's bow, briskly stepped into the room, and sat behind a long table. "Frankly, I've only been attempting divination for others and do not have much experience. For now, I'm not a good fortune teller. You still have the chance to change your mind."

After Klein returned the bow, he followed Glacis into the room and closed the door behind him.

In the light seeping through the curtains, he smiled and said, "You certainly are an honest man, but I am someone who always stands by his choices."

"Please have a seat, then." Glacis pointed to the chair across from him and paused for a few seconds. "Divination is only my hobby. Heh-heh. In life, one often receives guidance from the divine, but the ordinary person cannot accurately decipher its meaning. That is why divination exists—and why I joined this club. In this respect, I do not yet have enough confidence. Let's conduct the divination as a conversation—a free conversation. What do you think? I'll cover the club's fee; it's only a farthing."

Klein neither nodded nor shook his head; instead, he smiled.

"I can see that you have a respectable, well-paying job." As Klein spoke, he leaned forward slightly and tapped his forehead twice with his fist.

"But that does not enhance the accuracy of my divination," Glacis replied humorously. "Does your head hurt? Do you wish to divine something health-related?"

"A little. I wish to divine the location of an item." Klein had already concocted an excuse as he slowly leaned back.

In his perception, Glacis's aura was plain to see. The orange hues around his lungs were dim and sparse, even affecting the brightness in other areas.

This is not merely a symptom of fatigue... Klein nodded imperceptibly.

"You're searching for a lost item?" Glacis mused for a few seconds before saying, "Then let's perform a simple determination."

He pushed the neatly stacked deck of tarot cards on the table toward Klein.

"Calm down. Think of that item and ask yourself, 'Can it still be found?' While doing so, shuffle and cut the deck."

"All right." Klein didn't actually remember what the ancient notebook looked like. All he could do was silently repeat one question to himself: Can the Antigonos family's notebook still be found?

While he repeated the thought, he skillfully shuffled and cut the deck.

Glacis picked the topmost card and pushed it in front of Klein, face down and horizontal. "Rotate it clockwise until it's vertical. Then turn it over. If the card is inverted—meaning the picture is upside down to you—it indicates that the item cannot be found. If the card is upright, then we can continue the divination and seek its actual location."

Klein followed his instructions, turning the horizontal card vertical before pinching its edge and flipping it over.

It was an inverted card.

"What a pity," Glacis sighed.

Klein remained silent, his attention fixed on the tarot card before him.

The inverted card depicted a figure dressed in lavish clothes and wearing a splendid headdress—The Fool!

The Fool again? This can't be a coincidence, right...? According to The Hanged Man and Old Neil, divination results from the communication of spiritual energy, the spirit plane, and the higher-dimensional "self." Tarot cards were merely a convenient tool to interpret symbolic revelations. In theory, the divination tool shouldn't affect the outcome... Klein frowned as he pondered for a moment.

"Can it be divined whether the item is already in the hands of others?"

"Of course. Follow the same procedure and do it again." Glacis nodded with interest.

Klein shuffled and cut the deck again while thinking of his question.

He drew a card and placed it horizontally, then turned it vertical in a clockwise motion, accomplishing each step with earnest concentration.

Taking a deep breath, Klein reached out and flipped over the card. *Please do not be The Fool again...*

As he silently prayed, he suddenly relaxed at the sight before him—the card was The Star, and it was inverted!

“From the looks of it, the item has not been taken by others yet,” interpreted Glacis with a smile.

Klein nodded and raised his right hand. He tapped his brow as if deep in thought, then took two copper pennies from his pocket and pushed them toward Glacis.

“Didn’t I say it was free?” Glacis asked with a frown.

Klein smiled as he rose. “This is respect for the art of divination.”

“All right then. Thank you for your generosity.” Glacis stood and extended his hand.

After shaking it, Klein took two steps back and turned toward the door. As he twisted the doorknob, he suddenly looked back and hummed, “Mr. Glacis, I suggest that you see a doctor as soon as possible—about your lungs, specifically.”

“Why?” asked Glacis in surprise.

Are you cursing me because you aren’t pleased with your divination results?

Klein paused before replying, “It’s a symptom based on the appearance of your face. You... Well, there is a darkness at the center of your brows.”⁶

“A darkness at the center of my brows...,” Glacis repeated, clearly hearing such a description for the first time.

Klein offered no further explanation as he walked out of the room with a smile and closed the wooden door behind him.

“Is he an unlicensed physician or a country apothecary?” Glacis

⁶ In traditional Chinese medicine, a darkness in the center of one’s brows is a sign of grave illness and is often referred to in fiction when one wishes to speak ill of another.

mused, shaking his head in amusement. He then picked up the silver mirror he used for divination.

On closer inspection, he realized that the space between his brows was indeed dark.

But it was an environmental issue: In the darkness created by the closed curtains, not only was his brow dark but his entire face was shrouded in shadow!

"A rather disagreeable joke," Glacis muttered. Worried, he proceeded to divine his own health to ensure everything was all right.

...

After leaving the Divination Club, Klein formulated an additional plan for the future.

He had to save as much money as possible to pay the annual membership fee for the club; only then could he begin acting as a Seer.

Why not do it independently? Because he temporarily lacked the necessary resources and connections. He couldn't bring himself to stand on the streets as a hawker. After all, he was a gentleman and cared about appearances.

A few minutes later, a coach carriage arrived at the stop. Klein spent two pence on the fare and reached Jutland Street, which was not very far off. Pushing open the door to Blackthorn Security Company, he did not see the familiar brown-haired girl. Instead, he found the dark-haired, green-eyed Leonard Mitchell, sitting behind the reception desk with his usual poetic demeanor.

"Good afternoon. Where's Rosanne?" Klein asked after removing his hat and bowing.

Leonard pointed at the partition with a smile. "It's her shift tonight at the armory."

Without waiting for Klein to ask another question, Leonard spoke as if deep in thought, "I have a question that has been puzzling me, Klein."

"What is it?" Klein replied, his expression blank and confused.

Leonard stood up, smiling as he spoke in a relaxed tone, "Why did Welch and Naya commit suicide on the spot while you returned home?"

“It’s likely that the mysterious entity wanted me to take the Antigonus family’s notebook and hide it,” Klein answered, citing the official theory.

Leonard paced a few steps before turning to look directly into Klein’s eyes. “If the purpose of silencing all three of you by forcing suicide was to wipe out any evidence, why weren’t you compelled to destroy the notebook at the scene?”



The truth is I don't know if the notebook was destroyed or hidden...but if it was supposed to be destroyed, it could have been done on the spot. There was no need for me to take it away and destroy it elsewhere...

Hearing Leonard's question, Klein instantly shifted into his keyboard detective mode and deliberated, "Perhaps the mysterious entity that Welch, Naya, and I made contact with enjoyed the sacrifice of life but also wished for similar things to happen again. Therefore, since the suicides would no doubt be discovered, I was made to take away the notebook and hide it in preparation for the mysterious entity's second round of enjoyment. Only, some mishap occurred during the process, and I failed in my suicide."

This was a reasoned guess Klein formed from his consumption of articles, novels, movies, and TV series involving cult sacrifices. As for the mishap that occurred midway, he knew very well that it was due to the unexpected variable of his transmigration.

"Not a bad explanation, but I believe there might be other possibilities. Welch and Naya's ritual sacrifices might have enabled the mysterious entity to descend on this world while the notebook served as a vessel or incubator for the evil being. It forced you to take it away to hide it out of concern that we would destroy it if we discovered

it before its birth—before it became strong.” Leonard Mitchell described this other possibility.

Having said that, he stared into Klein’s eyes and offered a slight smile. “Of course, perhaps the notebook has already been destroyed, and the goal was to hide its contents and conceal the real vessel or incubator of evil. That would be a convincing reason for your failed suicide.”

What does he mean? Is he suspicious of me? Does he suspect the original Klein’s body to be a vessel or incubator for evil? Nah. The entity he’s serving as a vessel for is a transmigrator... Although “incubator” isn’t that far off.

A little stunned, Klein secretly grumbled to himself as he deliberated, then said, “I will not try to defend myself because I’ve really lost my memories from that time. But whether it’s Captain or Ms. Daly, they’ve all confirmed that I’m fine. If this is your idea of a joke, it isn’t very funny.”

“I’m only considering this as a possibility. It’s also possible that the mysterious entity suffered a setback upon its arrival, which resulted in your failed suicide. We must believe that the Goddess is always watching out for us.” With a smile, Leonard changed the subject. “Did you make any discoveries this afternoon?”

Following their exchange—and what had happened before—Klein became extremely wary of Leonard. Still, his face remained a mask as he answered, “No. I plan on trying a different route tomorrow afternoon.” Then he pointed to the partition and said, “I’m heading to the armory to pick up my bullets.”

Jutland Shooting Club stayed open until nine at night; after all, many of its members were only available after work.

“Goddess bless you.” Leonard smiled as he gestured a circle on his chest—the sign of the crimson moon.

Leonard watched Klein pass through the partition and listened to his footsteps down the stairs. His smile gradually vanished as a look of doubt appeared in his verdant eyes. He whispered something under his breath, sounding displeased.

...

Down the stairs, Klein followed the gas lamps illuminating the corridor that led to the armory and archives.

The iron door was wide open, and the brown-haired Rosanne stood in front of a table, talking to a middle-aged man with a thick dark beard and a short top hat.

“Good after— Oh, no. Good evening! It always feels like night here. Klein, I heard from Old Neil that you’ve become a Beyonder? You’re a...a Seer, now?” Rosanne fixed her eyes on him and spoke rapidly. She did not hide her curiosity and concern.

Klein nodded with a smile. “Good afternoon, Miss Rosanne. It’s indeed always night here, but that brings a sense of tranquility. What you just said isn’t quite right. Technically, the Sequence potion I consumed was called Seer.”

“So you still chose to become a Beyonder after all...” Rosanne sighed before falling silent.

Klein looked at the middle-aged man beside her and asked politely, “And this gentleman is...?”

Another Nighthawk team member? Or one of the other two civilian staff I have yet to meet?

Rosanne pursed her lips and said, “This is Brett, our colleague. He wanted to change shifts with me so he could have the night after tomorrow off. He plans on going to the grand theater in Northside with his wife to watch *The Prideful One*. It’s to celebrate their fifteenth wedding anniversary. He’s such a romantic.”

Brett smiled as he extended his hand. “With Miss Rosanne here, I don’t have to repeat anything. Nice to meet you, Klein. I never expected you to become a Beyonder so quickly. As for me, heh, I might never have that courage.”

“Perhaps I’m a prime example of how the ignorant know no fear,” Klein said self-mockingly as he shook Brett’s hand.

“That’s not a bad thing,” said Brett, shaking his head. “A Beyonder once told me on his deathbed never to investigate those strange and dangerous matters. The less you know, the longer you live.”

Rosanne interjected, "You don't need to be too concerned, Klein. I heard from Old Neil that people who choose the Seer potion are mostly assigned as support. It's relatively safe as long as you don't try to make contact with mysterious and unknown entities. But why are you dressed like that? It's so unbecoming of a gentleman! What are you here for anyway?"

"I'm here to pick up my thirty bullets." Klein did not answer Rosanne's first question.

He believed the young lady would quickly forget the matter.

"All right." Rosanne pointed at the table and said, "Brett, it's all yours. You know where the keys and bullets are. Oh, Old Neil really is stingy. He didn't even leave his hand-ground coffee behind. He promised me that I could drink my fill today..."

She continued to prattle on as Klein received his bullets.

The two left together and went their separate ways along Jutland Street—one took a coach carriage home while the other walked into Jutland Shooting Club.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Klein repeated the process over and over—drawing the gun, raising his arms, shooting, opening the cylinder, ejecting the empty casings, and inserting new rounds. He familiarized himself with the routine and built it into his muscle memory.

Of course, he took a few breaks in between to review and correct his technique.

After his practice, Klein used the range's space to do push-ups and various other exercises. He worked hard to condition his body and improve his physique. When he was done, he took an untracked coach home. Only then did he realize it was nearly seven o'clock and the sky was already dark.

Just as Klein was planning to head to the market or to a streetside hawker to buy ingredients for dinner, he saw the front door open. Melissa had returned with her book bag and, in addition, was carrying quite a lot of groceries.

“...I thought you and Benson would be home a little later, so I took one soli from the place where you stash your money this morning.” Upon seeing her brother’s questioning look, Melissa explained in her usual serious manner.

“Since you took the money, why didn’t you take the coach to school?” This reminded Klein of a thought from earlier that morning.

Melissa said with a frown, “Why take a coach? It costs four pence to get to school. A round trip equals eight. Including you and Benson, we’d be spending twenty-four pence on transportation daily—that’s a whole two soli! In a week, hmm, without counting Sunday, that’s still twelve soli. It’s almost equal to our rent!”

Stop, stop, stop! Don’t flaunt your mathematical prowess...

Klein raised his palm in a placating gesture, amused.

Melissa paused for a moment before adding, “It’s nice walking to school. Our teacher said everyone should exercise frequently. Besides, I can often pick up some scrappy components along the way.”

Klein chuckled and said, “Then let’s do the math again. The coach costs twelve soli a week, and the rent is twelve soli and three pence. That comes to a total of one pound, four soli, and three pence. Benson’s salary is more than enough to cover that—with plenty of change left over. Hmm, he’s already received last week’s salary... As for me, I can still bring home one pound ten soli every week. Even if we eat meat every day and factor in expenses like gas, coal, firewood, and condiments, we’d still have some left over if we’re relatively frugal with lunch. We can even subscribe to the morning post for just one penny a day.

“In two months, when I finish paying back my advance, I can start saving money for new clothes for you and Benson.”

“But...but we have to prepare for rainy days,” Melissa insisted.

Klein smiled at her and said, “Then we can eat less meat. Don’t you think spending fifty—no, a hundred—minutes on the road every day is a waste of your time? You could use that time to study and review your schoolwork so you can improve your grades. That way,

Melissa, you'll graduate with excellent grades and find a job with a decent salary—and when that happens, what's there to worry about?"

“...”

Drawing on his experience debating people on internet forums, he finally convinced Melissa to take the coach to school.

Phew, I've finally suckered her into it. No. How can that be called suckering? It's called reasoning..., Klein thought to himself as he gathered up the groceries Melissa had bought. With a sigh, he said, “Remember to buy beef, mutton, or chicken tomorrow... Only if you eat enough and eat well will you have a healthy body and a clever mind that can meet the demands of your studies.”

Just mentioning it makes me drool...

Melissa pursed her lips. After a few seconds of silence, she answered, “All right.”

...

The next morning, after ensuring that Melissa had boarded the coach, Klein and Benson separated at the intersection and went to their respective workplaces.

The moment Klein stepped through the door, he saw Old Neil and Rosanne chatting by the reception desk. Old Neil was still wearing his traditional black robe, unconcerned with the stares of others, while Rosanne had changed into a lightweight, cream-colored dress.

“Good morning, Mr. Neil, Miss Rosanne,” Klein greeted as he removed his hat.

Old Neil gave him a mischievous look. “Good morning. You didn't hear anything you weren't supposed to last night, did you?”

“No, I slept very well.” Klein was quite puzzled by Old Neil's remark; he could only attribute it to his dull spiritual perception...

“Ha-ha, don't worry about that. Actually, it wasn't that easily overheard.” Old Neil pointed to the partition and said, “Let's go to the armory. We'll continue our mysticism lessons this morning.”

Klein nodded and followed Old Neil down the stairs, arriving at the armory to replace Brett, who had been on duty overnight.

“What will we be learning today?” Klein asked curiously.

Old Neil hummed thoughtfully before replying, “The complicated stuff, as well as the fundamentals. But before that, let me teach you a neat trick.” He pointed at the silver chain wrapped around his wrist, at the end of which hung a pure white crystal.

CHAPTER 40

♦ MYSTICISM LESSON ♦

“A neat trick?” Klein asked, his curiosity clearly evident.

Old Neil chuckled and said, “I’m going to make my rounds of the armory, storeroom, and archives. Use the two cups on the table to prepare two cups of coffee. Then put something unpleasant in one of the cups. As for what it is, you can decide for yourself—use your imagination. My only request is that you don’t waste too much coffee. I ground it myself from specialty beans grown on the Feynapotter plateau!”

“All right.” Although Klein was unsure of Old Neil’s exact intentions, he happily agreed.

Klein watched as Old Neil unlocked the iron gates to the armory with a copper key, then heard his echoing footsteps inside. Slowly, he set the cups on the table and confirmed that there was still hot water in the kettle. Removing the lid from the silver tin can, he used a small metal spoon to scoop a spoonful of rich, aromatic coffee powder into each cup. Then he poured in the hot water and stirred it.

As a transmigrator from an era of abundance, he was no stranger to coffee—though his experience was limited to the instant variety.

Having done all this, Klein paused for a moment before sitting down. He propped his right leg on his left knee and pinched some of the mud clinging to the bottom of his boots, placing it in the cup

on his left. Then he carefully stirred the contents until the colors and aromas of the two cups were indistinguishable.

A few minutes later, Old Neil emerged from the armory, keys swinging, and closed the iron gates with a clang. "Are you done?" he asked, turning his slightly turbid maroon eyes toward Klein across the table.

"Yes," replied Klein with a nod.

Old Neil chuckled as he unwrapped the silver chain from around his wrist and sat down. His expression quickly turned serene. He held out his left hand, allowing the silver chain to dangle vertically over the coffee cup on his right, the white crystal nearly touching the liquid.

Amid the calm, the white crystal suddenly trembled, causing the chain to spin in a counterclockwise direction. "This cup is the one with the unpleasant thing," Old Neil stated confidently.

Without waiting for Klein's confirmation, he tucked away the silver chain, picked up the other cup of coffee, and took a sip. "Do you prefer black coffee? I'm used to having mine with a spoonful of sugar and a spoonful of milk."

Klein didn't answer the question; instead, his interest was piqued as he asked, "Your divination was indeed correct. Was it because of the crystal? That's a white crystal, right?"

"This is known as pendulum dowsing in divination—also called spirit dowsing. It relies on your astral body's connection with the spirit plane and the cosmos, harnessing the communication between your spiritual energy and natural materials, such as crystals, gems, or special metals, to divine the positive and negative aspects of things. Now, let us talk about the two cups of coffee. A counterclockwise motion means bad, while a clockwise motion indicates good. If it doesn't move, it signifies neutrality. Write a statement on a piece of paper. It needs to be a statement, not a question." As Old Neil explained in detail, he set his coffee cup down.

Klein asked contemplatively, "Does that mean I shouldn't use questioning sentences?"

“Yes, you want to avoid things like, ‘Is so-and-so willing to be my fiancée?’ Instead, you should phrase it as, ‘So-and-so *is* willing to be my fiancée.’ Write it on a piece of paper and place it flat on the desk. Then use your nondominant hand to hold the pendulum chain. It must be your nondominant hand.” Old Neil chuckled as he spoke. “Keep your arm straight and adjust the chain’s length until the crystal hangs just above the paper, nearly touching your statement. Then close your eyes and repeat the sentence seven times in your mind. Open your eyes when you are done to see if the spirit pendulum turns. If it doesn’t, close your eyes and repeat the process until it does.”

Klein nodded slightly and asked, “Counterclockwise means no, and clockwise means yes?”

“It can also be interpreted as success or failure,” corrected Old Neil before proceeding to teach Klein the other usages and details of pendulum dowsing.

Klein reflected on the information several times and realized that it was a very useful divination technique. For instance, he could quickly use it in an unfamiliar environment to determine whether a food was poisonous—without needing additional knowledge of field biology.

Of course, such divination methods were overly simple. The answers they provided were limited to two or three outcomes, leaving no room for deeper investigation or nuanced interpretation. For example, while some substances might be harmful to the body, they could become beneficial after proper processing. Certain foods might be mildly damaging yet would still be worth eating if the alternative was starvation. These were subtleties that spirit dowsing alone could not discern.

“I’ll have to save money as soon as possible to buy crystals or pure silver to make a spirit pendulum...” Klein sighed.

Old Neil looked at him in dismay. “You can apply for one directly. It’s standard-issue for Beyonders, especially for those of us who take on a supporting role. There’s still a spirit pendulum in the armory with a yellow crystal and a pure silver chain.”

“But I’m not a formal member of the team yet...” Klein’s heart palpitated in excitement, though he still felt a bit hesitant.

Old Neil chuckled and said, "For Beyonders, whether formal members or not, we're provided with certain conveniences to make up for the lack of a pay raise."

Maybe the word "benefit" is more suitable. I'll submit an application to the captain right away!

Klein secretly clenched his fists as he made up his mind. How was he to know if the captain would approve his request if he didn't try?

"All right," said Old Neil with a smile. "Let us officially begin our mysticism lessons. One of the fundamentals of mysticism is called 'symbolism.' Do you know what symbolism means?"

Klein recalled fragments of conversations he'd overheard and things he had seen and heard from the spirit plane and above the gray fog. He deliberated and said, "Whether it's the spirit plane, the illusory cosmos, or realms unknown to us, they all exist beyond the comprehension of our mundane senses. They cannot be accurately described by what our ears, nose, and eyes perceive. Instead, we receive indescribable sensory revelations and experiences that manifest as abstract characters and glyphs. Therefore, these symbols represent various things and carry different meanings."

"Very accurate. As expected of a Seer." Old Neil nodded solemnly. "Only once you've mastered interpreting symbols will you truly step into the world of mysticism. The images on tarot cards—and every element within them—are all symbols. They're man-made tools that help us understand and interpret the revelations as they are."

He pulled out a piece of paper and a fountain pen, then drew a short curve. Next, he added a few vertical lines beneath the curve. Looking up at Klein, he asked, "Do you know what this represents?"

Klein studied it for a long moment before hesitatingly replying, "Eyelashes?"

"..." Old Neil exhaled. "This is the symbol of the Bountiful Harvest constellation. This represents the Thunder constellation, and this is the Frost constellation..."

He casually drew a few more symbols.

As Klein memorized them, he couldn't help but remark, "The

names of these constellations are certainly...pragmatic." *How rustic and primitive...*

A smile appeared on Old Neil's face. "That's what Emperor Roselle thought, too, back then. He always wanted to change the constellation names to something like Virgo, Cancer, and Scorpio. Unfortunately, he didn't have the strength to go against tradition. At the very least, the ancient names and their corresponding dates can serve as guides for sowing and harvest."

"I have to say that Emperor Roselle sure had ideas," Klein murmured, at a loss for words.

Yes, Emperor Roselle had likely been a respectable person...

Unable to grasp Klein's humor, Old Neil continued explaining the various fundamental symbols—those of the different constellations, the sun, the crimson moon, the Brown Planet, the Scarlet Planet, and the Blue Planet.

While discussing these, he interwove instructions on how to draw the divination star chart and what to consider when creating a crystal ball, including the materials required and the proper incantations. The teachings overwhelmed Klein. If not for the discovery that the Seer potion had slightly improved his memory, he might have asked Old Neil to pause long ago so he could process everything.

"That's all for today's lesson. Think it over and ask me if you have any questions." Old Neil took out a gold pocket watch and snapped it open to check the time. "Don't forget to read the historical literature I prepared for you. To be frank, just looking at it instills a fear in me."

"Okay." Klein took the pieces of paper filled with symbols that Old Neil had drawn. He quickly reviewed all the mysticism knowledge he'd learned today to ensure he wouldn't forget any key concepts.

Old Neil sipped a newly brewed cup of coffee and said, "Memory alone isn't enough. You have to use it often until the knowledge becomes part of you. Also, meditate every day. Only through frequent practice will you truly master the power of the potion, uncover its hidden mysteries, and dissolve any unpleasant effects."

This made Klein think of acting the part and the Divination Club.

Hesitantly, he started explaining himself. "My potion's abilities are related to divination. Practicing by myself won't suffice. I need to interact with many people and divine for them in order to master it quickly. I plan on joining the Divination Club on Howes Street on the Northside as soon as I have some spare cash. Then I'll become a real fortune teller."

This wasn't something he could hide from the Nighthawks in the future; it was better to broach the topic now.

"Your idea is very similar to Daly's. She has always clamored to be a *real* medium." Old Neil shook his head and laughed. "But why wait until you have spare cash? You can write an application to Dunn and ask him to approve the expense, ha-ha.

"A Divination Club is also the sort of place where cultists or members of nefarious organizations might turn up. As a clerk of the Nighthawks and a Beyonder, your membership makes it easier for us to monitor them. It's part of the job! We used to regularly patrol these places, but since we lack manpower, we can't keep watch on them for long. Now you can do it."

Is that allowed? Klein was entirely flabbergasted, staring at Old Neil's serious expression.

That's openly and proudly making an expense claim for private matters! I can't believe how little I know about such things... No wonder I'm just a keyboard warrior...

"Or what, you want to spend your own money on this?" Old Neil grinned when he saw the look on Klein's face.

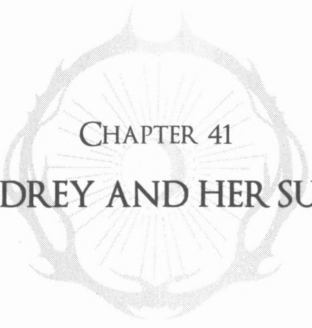
Klein immediately shook his head and answered firmly, "I'm going to report to the captain right away!"

Old Neil nodded in satisfaction and glanced at the cup of coffee containing the unpleasant substance. It had not been poured away.

"What did you put in there anyway?" he asked.

Klein smiled, a little embarrassed. "Just some dirt from underneath my boots. It's almost the same color as your coffee."

Old Neil froze for a moment with his hand clasped over his mouth, then suddenly roared, "Why haven't you poured it out yet?!"



CHAPTER 41

◆ AUDREY AND HER SUSIE ◆

After pouring out the coffee and returning to the armory to pick up the thick stack of historical documents and explanatory transcripts that Old Neil had set aside for him, Klein followed the lanterns on the wall up the staircase to Blackthorn Security Company.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

His footsteps echoed in the sealed, quiet underground.

Leaving the staircase, he pushed open the door and reoriented himself before heading straight for the second office across the corridor.

After two days, he was generally familiar with the layout of Blackthorn Security Company. The entrance brought visitors into a spacious reception area furnished with a table, chairs, and a set of sofas. Past the partition lay the inner offices, and on the left of the corridor were three doors. From nearest to farthest, they were Mrs. Orianna's accounting room, a respite room containing what looked like several sofa beds, and the staircase that led underground.

On the right were three more doors. From nearest to farthest, they were Captain Dunn Smith's office, a clerk's office equipped with typewriters, and the recreation room for formal members of the Nighthawks team.

Klein had previously seen Leonard Mitchell and two other teammates playing cards together in the recreation room. He guessed

they were playing Fight the Landlord. Of course, Emperor Roselle had already given it a new name—Fight the Evil—but its rules were identical to the game Klein remembered.

Brett was entitled to a full day's sleep after a night shift. Rosanne was at the reception desk. Cesar Francis, the carriage driver who was also in charge of procuring necessities and gathering supplies, was out as usual. When Klein opened the door to the clerk's office, the three desks inside were empty; only the mechanical typewriters sat there quietly.

"Ackerson Company's typewriter, model 1346..." Klein muttered to himself, recalling similar objects in his mentor's office and Welch's home. He felt that the intricate mechanisms inside were imbued with the beauty of machinery.

He walked to a desk with a typewriter. After some mental preparation, he began typing, as if rehearsing his keystrokes in the air.

In the beginning, he instinctively converted the local language into romanized Chinese, or "pinyin." Only after he became familiar with the key layout did he "digest" the corresponding memory fragment of the original Klein and stop making mistakes.

Clack! Clack! Clack!

The rhythmic tapping on the typewriter sounded like a melody forged from metal and industry. Accompanied by this mechanical music, Klein quickly finished typing his expense reimbursement application.

However, he was in no hurry to see Dunn Smith. Instead, he focused his mind and intently began reading the materials Old Neil had given him. They were both for review and new content.

When it was almost noon, he stretched and put away the documents. He then reviewed the notes from his mysticism lesson that morning, consolidating everything he had just learned.

Only after that did he take his application to the office next door and gently knock on the door. Dunn was waiting for his lunch to be delivered. When he saw the document Klein handed him, the corners of his mouth curved upward in amusement. "Did Old Neil teach you this?"

"Yes." Klein did not hesitate for a second to sell out Old Neil.

Dunn picked up his dark red fountain pen and signed the document. "I happen to be applying for funding from the church and the county police department for the months of July, August, and September, so I'll just add yours in. Once it's approved, you can get the money from Mrs. Orianna. And you can pick up the spirit pendulum this afternoon."

"Okay," Klein answered simply and energetically, his tone and eyes tinted with obvious joy.

Before bidding Dunn farewell, he asked casually, "Shouldn't the budget for July, August, and September be applied for by June?"

Who waits until July to apply for the funding for July?

Dunn fell silent for a few seconds before picking up his coffee and taking a sip. "We encountered three consecutive cases in June. I was...I was so busy that some things were forgotten."

As expected of the captain and his poor memory... Klein knew he had asked a question he shouldn't have. He chuckled dryly before quickly taking his leave.

With that, he resumed his simple, routine life. He would spend half an hour in the early morning in a trance, followed by two hours of mysticism lessons and an hour and a half studying the historical documents. After lunch, he'd take a short nap in the respite room to regain his energy.

Following that, he would pick up his daily allotment of bullets and head to Jutland Shooting Club. After finishing his practice, he would stroll over to Welch's residence, which was not too far. He would then take an alternative route back to Ironcross Street, saving on the coach fare. If time permitted, he would practice his spirit vision and pendulum dowsing and buy groceries along the way.

...

In a private chemistry laboratory equipped with all the standard apparatus and tools, a tall, golden-haired Audrey examined the cup in her hand. Countless bubbles drifted upward, calming the room's atmosphere and lending it a serene quality. Finally, the liquid in the cup condensed into a sticky silver substance.

Ha-ha, I'm so talented in mysticism. I succeeded on my first try! I was so worried about failure that I even prepared two sets of materials!

The girl muttered to herself in delight.

She put away the remaining materials—either taken from her family's vault or obtained from trading with others—then took a deep breath and prepared to close her eyes and drink the Spectator potion.

At that moment, a series of barks sounded from outside the laboratory. Audrey frowned instantly.

She quickly hid the cup of silver liquid in a dark corner, then turned and walked to the door.

"Susie, who's here?" Audrey turned the doorknob and asked the golden retriever sitting in front of the door.

Susie wagged her tail in an obsequious manner. Annie, her lady's maid, had appeared in the nearby corridor.

Audrey stepped out of the laboratory and closed the door behind her. She looked at Annie and said, "Didn't I tell you not to disturb me when I'm running chemistry experiments?"

Annie replied, a little stressed, "But there's an invitation from Duchess Della."

"Duke Negan's wife?" Audrey asked as she took a few steps forward.

"Yes. She has managed to hire the palace's baker, Mrs. Vivi, and invites you and the lady to afternoon tea," Annie explained.

Audrey discreetly puffed her cheeks and said, "Tell my mother that I'm feeling faint. Perhaps I am a little dehydrated from the scorching sun. Please ask her to convey my sincere apologies to the duchess."

As she spoke, she adopted a frail act.

"But, miss, it's not only afternoon tea. There's also a literature salon," Annie added.

"But that won't cure my dizziness. I need rest," Audrey insisted firmly.

At the same time, she thought to herself, *If they insist, I'll swoon for everyone to see. The etiquette teacher said I could do it perfectly... Wait, did I hear something...?*

"All right," Annie said with an exhale. "Do you need me to help you back to your room?"

"There's no need. I'll clean up the laboratory first." Audrey yearned to return immediately and consume her potion, but she suppressed her impatience. She waited until Annie had receded into the distance before returning to the laboratory's door.

Suddenly, she realized that Susie, the golden retriever who was supposed to be waiting outside, was gone. Moreover, the laboratory door was half open.

I forgot that Susie can open doors with knobs... What was that sound? Not good!

Audrey heard brittle sounds coming from within, and a thought suddenly occurred to her. She charged into the laboratory.

All she saw were cups shattered on the floor. The big dog Susie was lapping up the final drop of silver liquid on the ground.

Audrey stood rooted at the entrance like a statue.

Susie immediately sat down and looked at her owner innocently as she wagged her tail.

...

In the seas beyond Pritz Harbor, there was an island perennially enveloped in storms. An ancient sailboat was docked at its harbor.

A man with light blond hair, dressed in a robe adorned with lightning motifs, was staring at Alger Wilson. He asked, perplexed, "Alger, you could have returned to the kingdom and become a captain of a Mandated Punisher team or even a reputable bishop. Why did you choose to set sail and become the captain of the *Blue Avenger*?"

Alger wore a stoic expression on his rough-hewn face. He replied solemnly, "The sea belongs to the Storm. This is the Lord's kingdom. I abide by the Lord's will and monitor this corner of His kingdom."

"All right." The blond man clenched his fist and struck his chest. "The Storm be with you."

"The Storm be with you," Alger returned the salute perfectly. He stood on the deck where only a few crew members were present

and watched his companion leave the ship, disappearing into the distance.

"Sainz, you do not understand because you do not know enough..." Alger muttered quietly.

Meanwhile, Audrey finished concocting her second potion in a panic-stricken state.

When she confirmed the silver-white potion looked exactly the same as the first, she was nearly moved to tears.

With small gulps, she quickly tipped back the Spectator potion.

...

On Friday, a rainstorm visited Tingen. Heavy rain pounded on the windows of every household.

Inside Blackthorn Security Company, Klein, Rosanne, and Brett sat on the sofa in the foyer, enjoying their lunch.

There was only a kettle for boiling water and no way to heat up leftovers. Since Klein could not bring himself to eat rye bread day in and day out, nor did he want to take the carriage home every day—after all, walking from Ironcross Street to the Welch residence in the afternoon usually meant taking a coach back, which was a waste of money—he began joining Rosanne and his colleagues in eating the so-called "office fare."

Old Will's, a nearby restaurant, would punctually send a waiter at half past ten every morning. The waiter would take their orders and, after confirming the details, deliver the food at half past twelve. The meals were served in containers resembling lunch boxes. At three in the afternoon, the waiter would return to collect their dinner orders and retrieve the lunch utensils.

The meals included meat, vegetables, and bread. Although the portions were modest, they were just barely sufficient. The cost of a meal ranged from seven to ten pence, depending on the premium level.

Klein always opted for the meal costing seven pence: typically, half a pound of oat bread, a morsel of meat cooked in various ways, a ladle of vegetable soup, and tiny bits of butter or margarine.

"We actually only have one Nighthawk member here today..."

Rosanne remarked as she delivered a spoonful of soup into her mouth.

"I heard there was a case with religious elements in Golden Plane, so the police department requested two Nighthawks," Brett added as he set down his bread.

Klein used his last chunk of oat bread to sop up the remaining meat juices before stuffing it into his mouth. He said nothing.

Peeking out from inside his left sleeve was a silver chain with a yellow crystal hanging from it.

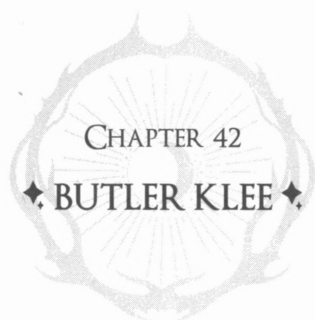
At that moment, a series of knocks sounded from outside the main door, which hung ajar.

"...Please come in." Rosanne set her spoon down, a little surprised. She quickly dabbed at her mouth with a handkerchief and stood up.

The door opened to reveal a man in a short top hat; the sides of his hair were silvery white, and the left shoulder of his black suit was wet from the rain. Holding his closed umbrella, he said to Klein and the others, "Is this the former mercenary squad?"

"You could say that," replied Rosanne like clockwork.

The lanky man coughed and said, "I'd like to hire you for a job."



Hire us for a job...? You might've come to the wrong place... This security company's sign is really just a sign...

Countless retorts bubbled up inside Klein as soon as he heard the visitor's words. How he yearned for a message board with bullet comments in this world so he could share his thoughts. But he soon recalled that he had once asked a similar question—the captain's answer being, "Why not take on the jobs if you have time? The money earned can be set aside in the team's petty cash fund, and there'd be bonuses for the participants."

Rosanne's eyes darted around, and after a moment of thought, she said, "Our security personnel are all out on missions. The soonest they'll return is in about an hour. If your matter isn't urgent, you can consider our services."

Among the six formal Nighthawk members, Captain Dunn Smith had been invited to the cathedral by the bishop to discuss some business. Leonard Mitchell was guarding Chanis Gate in his place. Corpse Collector Frye and Sleepless Royale Reideen had already headed to the Golden Plane area to assist the police in investigating a robbery case with possible links to cults. Kenley White, the other Sleepless, was on leave, while Seka Truan, another Midnight Poet, had gone to Raphael Cemetery in the suburb outside Northside on her daily patrol.

As for the remaining two Beyonders, Old Neil was frail and advanced in years, having not taken any missions in a long time, and Klein was still a novice—truly inadequate in every aspect.

“They are all out...” The man, holding his umbrella in one hand, dropped his expression. He removed his hat and bowed, “Apologies for the intrusion. Good day.”

He turned and walked out, descending the stairs and leaving 36 Jutland Street amid spattering rain and howling winds.

“What a pity,” Rosanne sighed regretfully as she watched him leave. Though she wouldn’t get any share of the commission, she would have enjoyed a sumptuous meal.

“There’s nothing we can do about it. Chanis Gate needs to be guarded at all times,” Klein said, putting down his cutlery in satisfaction. Even though he didn’t care for the soup with its mixture of turnips and vegetables, he still ate every last drop. “Don’t tell me you want Brett to go on the mission? Or go yourself?”

Rosanne turned her eyes to him and giggled, “Brett can’t, but you can. Our Mister Seer...”

The moment the words left her mouth, she instantly realized that her comment might expose their secret; the front door was only half closed. If anyone passing by or visiting overheard anything about Beyonders, it would be a problem.

“Good thing Captain isn’t around...” Rosanne looked out the door and secretly stuck her tongue out. “Or I’d have to go to confession again!”

Brett and Klein laughed in unison. Exchanging a knowing look, they began putting away the cutlery.

After everything was done, Klein decided to stay at Blackthorn Security Company until the rain stopped, mostly because he had not brought his umbrella. He grabbed a newspaper and sat on the soft, bouncy sofa, leisurely beginning his “siesta.”

“The airship route from Backlund to Desi Bay is now in service...”

“The complete anthology of Great Detective Munson will soon be available in print...”

“An advertisement for Lagolas Weapons? A standard-model

six-round revolver for three pounds and ten soli... A double-barrel hunting rifle for two pounds..."

...

Flipping through Tingen City Honest Paper, a particular piece of news suddenly caught Klein's eye:

"...The suspects wanted for the deaths of Mr. Welch and Ms. Naya have all been apprehended. No doubt, this provides a much-needed reprieve from the horror that has gripped Northside, Golden Plane, and Eastside... Mr. McGovern, Welch's father and a banker, has escorted his youngest son's body back to Constant where a grand funeral will be held..."

After reading it a few times, Klein suddenly sighed. It appeared that Welch's father had bought the police's explanation and had not hired a private investigator to look into the matter...

His grief from losing his youngest son can't be greater than that of my parents who lost their only child...

In a sullen mood, Klein sat there motionless for a long time. He didn't find it odd that he was not invited to either Welch's or Naya's funerals, and it didn't sadden him.

Once everything calms down, I'll find a chance to visit their graves and offer a bouquet of flowers...

Klein was about to take a nap in the respite room when a knock sounded on the front door again.

"Please come in," Rosanne said as she suddenly jolted awake in the midst of dozing off.

The half-closed door was pushed open, and the lanky man with white hair from before walked in once again.

"Would you mind if I wait here? Your mercenaries—no, your security personnel—should be back soon, right?" he asked sincerely, doing his best to mask his anxious expression.

"Sure. Please have a seat," Rosanne said, gesturing toward the sofa nearby.

Out of curiosity, Klein asked, "Where did you hear about our security company? Did someone introduce you to us?"

He had made two trips here despite the heavy afternoon storm and was even willing to wait?

Yes, it must be because the Nighthawks can easily resolve missions that seem too difficult for others, and they've accrued quite a reputation...

The man left his umbrella leaning outside the door. As he walked to the sofa, he replied with a rueful smile, "I have visited every mercenary—uh, security company and private investigator—on every street in this area. You are my only hope. The others are all out of manpower to take on any further missions... To be frank, if it weren't for the waiter I ran into outside, I never would've imagined there was another security company here."

...That's entirely different from what I imagined... Klein froze in surprise.

Rosanne interjected with a question, "They're all very busy? Are there really that many missions?"

The man sat down and sighed. "Since you are a mercenary team—no, a security company—you must have heard of the armed burglary and murders on Howes Street?"

Howes Street... Armed burglary, murders... Oh, right. Unfortunately, I'm one of the people involved...

Klein nodded with a slightly heavy heart. "Yes."

"Due to the brutality and ruthlessness of the criminals, the wealthy gentlemen living on the neighboring streets—and even across all of Tingen—are terrified. Apart from expanding the size of their security details, they have contracted many security personnel and private detectives, which has led to a shortage of supply in your line of work," the man explained clearly.

A standard chain reaction... Klein and Rosanne exchanged glances and shared a self-deprecating smile.

The security industry had entered a brief golden age. Yet Blackthorn Security Company was completely out of the loop. One could see from this how poorly they were doing as a business. Of course, to a certain extent, it was also proof of the Nighthawks' successful disguise.

After waiting another twenty-plus minutes, it looked as if the storm was coming to an end, so Klein got ready to leave. He planned on going to Jutland Shooting Club for his practice.

Just then, the dark-haired, green-eyed Leonard Mitchell walked through the partition. He looked inquiringly at the sofa. "And who might this gentleman be?"

"A client. Is the captain back?" Rosanne asked happily.

"Back?" The lanky man looked a bit confused. He had been sitting there, staring at the door. How did he not notice someone had returned?

Rosanne's expression immediately froze as she chuckled to cover her slip. "As a security company, of course, we have more than just a front door."

"Oh, that makes sense," the man nodded in enlightenment.

He was also not surprised that she used the term *captain*. Security companies were the modern equivalent of the private military contractors or small-scale mercenary guilds of old. It was only normal that they would have a captain.

Leonard's white shirt was untucked, and his black waistcoat hung loosely. He took one glance at the lanky man and suddenly snapped his fingers before saying, "I'm a member of the security personnel at Blackthorn. How should I address you? And how may we be of assistance?"

Perhaps it was because he had long heard tales of unrestrained mercenaries, but the man did not feel disrespected. Instead, he let out a relieved sigh as he organized his words. "My name is Klee, a butler of Mr. Vickroy, a tobacco merchant. His only son, little Elliott, was kidnapped this morning. We have already informed the police, and the matter has been given high priority. However, Mr. Vickroy remains uneasy. He wishes to investigate the case from a different angle through merc—uh, security personnel like yourselves who understand Tingen—so that little Elliott can be rescued safely.

"If you are able to find where the kidnappers are hiding, Mr. Vickroy will be willing to pay you one hundred pounds. If you have the

means to successfully rescue Young Master Elliott, he is willing to double the reward to two hundred pounds.”

Leonard Mitchell gave an easy smile. “Mr. Vickroy seems to only wish for us to find the kidnappers’ hideout. Otherwise, he wouldn’t think his only son was worth only a hundred pounds. A tobacco merchant with close ties to the southern plantations can surely come up with far more than two hundred pounds.”

“No, Mr. Vickroy is only an ordinary merchant. He’s not particularly wealthy. Besides, he believes the police will be more professional when it comes to rescuing his son,” Klee answered frankly.

“All right. No problem.” Leonard snapped his fingers again. Then he turned his green eyes on Rosanne. “My beautiful lady, if I could trouble you to write up a contract?”

“Don’t act like a poet all the time. In fact, all you do is recite other people’s works.”

Rosanne quipped, momentarily forgetting the presence of the client. She was used to bantering with Leonard like this.

Of course, Blackthorn Security Company didn’t really care about its clients. It was great to have them, but it was equally fine if they didn’t.

Rosanne left the reception counter and entered the clerk’s office. Soon, the clack-clacking of the typewriter filled the air.

The corners of Klein’s mouth twitched as he watched the scene. He was a little stunned at how unprofessional it all was. They didn’t even have a standard template for a contract!

What a tragedy... And even more saddening is the fact that I’m working at such an unprofessional company...

As these thoughts swarmed in his mind, Rosanne had already completed a simple contract with only a few clauses. Then Klee and Leonard Mitchell signed it together. After Klee stamped it, she took the contract to the accounting room so Mrs. Orianna could affix the Blackthorn Security Company’s stamp—one that was practically useless. Typically, Dunn left it in Mrs. Orianna’s possession for

safekeeping; on Sundays, it was usually passed on to Rosanne and the others.

"I'll wait for your good news." After receiving one copy of the contract, Klee stood up and bowed, hat off.

Leonard was quiet, seemingly lost in thought. Suddenly, he turned toward Klein with a smile. "I need your help."

"Huh?" Klein was taken aback.

"What I mean is, you and I can carry out this mission together." The corners of Leonard's mouth lifted as he explained, "I'm good at combat, shooting, climbing, sensing, and even singing, not to mention some support roles. But that doesn't include tracking people. You don't expect Old Neil to go out in this weather, do you?"

When he mentioned "sensing," his voice dropped to a mumble, barely audible.

"All right." Klein felt the urge to test out his new abilities, though he still felt a bit wary of Leonard Mitchell. He exhaled.

Let's hope we can complete it successfully... I wonder how useful my Seer abilities will be...



Leonard nodded at Klein, a smile lighting his green eyes. “Then what do you need from them?”

He knew from past experience that divination required a conduit, especially when the person being divined was not present.

Klein thought for a moment before saying to Klee, “I need some of Elliott’s recent clothes that haven’t been washed yet. It would be even better if you have any accessories he used to wear.”

He tried to ask for ordinary items as conduits—nothing that would arouse suspicion among ordinary people.

But even so, Klee looked puzzled. “Why?”

Regardless, he added, “I have a picture of Young Master Elliott on me.”

Why? Because we are divining his location...

Klein wasn’t sure how to answer. If he answered truthfully, putting aside for the moment that it violated the confidentiality clause, Butler Klee would likely storm out immediately, ripping apart the contract while cursing, “Bunch of cheats! If that worked, I might as well go to the most famous spirit medium in Awashire!”

Leonard Mitchell snickered nearby. “Mr. Klee, my partner—um, colleague—keeps a unique pet. Its sense of smell is sharper than that of a hound. That’s why we need clothes that little Elliott wore and

items he always kept on him to aid us in finding him. And, as you know, we also need that picture to know what little Elliott looks like.”

Klee accepted the reason with a slow nod. “Will you wait here, or would you like to go with me to Mr. Vickroy’s residence in the city?”

“Let’s go together. It saves time,” Klein replied simply.

Not only was he eager to test his abilities as a Beyonder, but he also had a simple desire to save the child.

“All right, the carriage is outside.” As Klee spoke, he took out a black-and-white photograph from his pocket and handed it to Leonard.

It was a picture of Elliott Vickroy by himself; a boy of about ten, with slightly long hair that nearly covered his eyes. Aside from the obvious freckles, his features were unremarkable.

Leonard glanced at it and passed it to Klein.

Klein studied the photograph carefully before stashing it in his pocket. Then he took his walking stick, put on his hat, and followed the two out of Blackthorn Security Company to board the carriage downstairs.

The carriage’s interior was spacious and lined with thick carpet. A small table stood in the middle, holding various objects.

Since Klee was present, Klein and Leonard did not exchange words. They quietly absorbed the experience of steadily traversing the pooling roads in a carriage surrounded by a gentle drizzle.

“The carriage driver is quite good,” Leonard eventually broke the silence, offering praise with a smile.

“Ah, yes,” Klein replied half-heartedly.

Klee forced a smile. “He is honored to receive your compliments. We’re almost there...”

Fearing that any discussion might alert the kidnappers, the carriage did not stop outside the Vickroy residence; instead, it halted on the side of a nearby street.

Butler Klee opened his umbrella and departed alone. As they waited, Leonard resumed talking to Klein. “I didn’t mean anything

by my deduction last time. I was just trying to tell you that the notebook will definitely reappear—perhaps soon.”

“That sure isn’t a happy deduction.” Klein jutted his chin toward the front of the carriage, signaling that they shouldn’t discuss sensitive topics with outsiders around.

Leonard whistled and turned his head to look out the window. A raindrop streaked across the glass, leaving behind a hazy mark that turned the world outside into a blur.

After a while, Klee returned with a bag of items. Since he had hurried, the hems of his trousers were completely soiled, and his shirtfront was wet.

“These are the clothes Young Master Elliott wore yesterday. This is the protective Storm Amulet he used to wear.”

Taking the bag, Klein glanced inside. It contained a miniature set of gentleman’s formal attire—a small shirt, waistcoat, bow tie, and so on. The Storm Amulet was cast from bronze, carved with symbols representing gales and sea waves, though none of these triggered Klein’s spiritual perception.

“I’ll recount in detail the events leading up to Young Master Elliott’s kidnapping. Hopefully, it will help you narrow it down...” Klee sat down and described the nightmarish experience of that morning, hoping that the painstakingly hired helpers would prove useful.

Klein and Leonard showed little interest in the details of the process. They cared only about the number of kidnappers, whether there was anything unusual about them, and if they were armed. “*Three*,” “*normal*,” and “*armed with firearms...*” were the answers they needed. After obtaining the desired information, they bade Klee goodbye and hired a two-wheeled light carriage nearby.

Unlike coaches, carriages for hire came in four-wheel or two-wheel variants, with fares charged either by time or distance. For distance, the rate was four pence per kilometer within the city and eight pence per kilometer outside. If charged by time, the carriage cost two *sol* per hour, with the price remaining the same even if it

was under an hour, plus additional charges of six pence per quarter hour after the first hour. In inclement weather or urgent situations that demanded extraordinary speed, the fare could be even higher.

Klein had heard from Mr. Azik that in the capital, Backlund, carriage drivers were notorious for quoting outrageous prices. To him, hiring a carriage felt like lavish spending. However, he needn't worry at the moment since Leonard had already tossed two one-soli notes directly to the driver.

"Charge by the time," Leonard instructed, then closed the carriage door.

"Where would you like to go?" the driver asked, delighted yet puzzled as he held the two notes.

"Wait a moment." Leonard cast his gaze at Klein.

Klein nodded slightly, then took out Elliott's clothes. He spread them out on the carriage's floor and wound the Storm Amulet around the head of his walking stick. Holding the black cane vertically, Klein stood it on top of Elliott's clothes.

He gathered a sphere of light in his mind until his thoughts rapidly stilled. His brown eyes darkened as he entered a half-trance. He felt his body's spirit growing lighter, untethered, and caught glimpses of the omnipresent plane of spirits. Silently, he recited in his mind, *Elliott's location*.

After repeating it seven times, he released his grip on the cane—but it did not fall. Despite the carriage's movements, the cane remained standing in front of him.

Minute, shapeless stirrings swirled around him. Klein felt as if unseen pairs of eyes were coldly watching him. Over the past few days, he had occasionally sensed this feeling when in a trance or using his spirit vision.

Despite the mild eeriness, he fixed his deep, dark eyes on the cane and recited once more in his heart:

Elliott's location.

When he finished, the cane fell to the ground, pointing straight ahead.

"Straight," Klein said in a low voice and picked up his cane. His tone carried an almost ethereal quality, as if his words could penetrate into an unknown world.

This was one of the divination methods he'd learned: rod dowsing. The tool of choice must be wooden, metallic, or a combination of both.

Normally, this would require two genuine dowsing rods, held like a straight steel wire with a right-angle bend. He would hold onto the shorter side and rotate it to ascertain the correct direction. But as a Seer, Klein had learned through practice to search for people using this method. He could also use his walking stick in place of dowsing rods—the direction in which the cane fell would indicate the location of the item he sought.

As for the Antigonus family's notebook, Klein had no memory or impression of it whatsoever, so there was no way for him to find it.

"Go straight," Leonard instructed the carriage driver loudly. "We will tell you when to turn."

The driver didn't understand why they were doing this, but the money in his pocket and the willingness of his passengers to pay kept him silent. He simply followed the strange instructions.

The carriage proceeded slowly, passing one street after another. As they traveled, Klein used rod dowsing several times to correct their course.

Finally, after the carriage circled a building once, Klein determined that Elliott was inside. It had been only thirty minutes since they'd bid Klee farewell.

After sending off the carriage driver, Klein no longer used Elliott's clothes. Instead, he placed the cane—with the Storm Amulet wrapped around its head—directly on the ground. His eyes turned dark once again as the raindrops around him began to spin.

The cane tipped diagonally forward. Klein pointed at the door to a staircase and said, "There."

"At times, I really envy Old Neil. Similarly, I envy you now," Leonard lamented with a smile.

Klein shot him a glance and replied evenly, "This isn't difficult. If you're willing to learn, you'll be able to master it. I'm sure you have very high spiritual perception."

Leonard nodded and chuckled, "That's not a good thing." He quickened his pace and walked into the building as the storm finally neared its end.

Afraid of drenching his formal suit, Klein practically jogged behind him.

The building had only three stories and was structured like an apartment building in China, where each flight of stairs in the building led to its own set of apartments, two to a floor. Klein repeated his rod dowsing on the first and second floors, but the cane remained completely still and erect.

Quieting their footsteps, they arrived at the third floor. Klein once again set his cane upright on the floor.

Whoosh!

A gentle breeze swept through the stairwell as his irises changed colors—so dark they seemed capable of pulling in one's very soul.

Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!

Sobs seemed to echo all around them.

Klein relinquished his grip, and the cane, with the Storm Amulet entwined around it, magically stood erect. He silently recited *Elliott's location* again, then watched his black cane drop silently to the ground, pointing to the door on the right.

"They should be in there." As Klein picked up his cane, he tapped twice on his brow. Various colors deepened as he gazed through the door at the auras inside.

"One, two, three, four... Three kidnappers and one hostage. The numbers match... One of their auras is short, so it's probably Elliott... Mr. Klee said that they have two hunting rifles and a revolver..." Klein whispered.

Leonard chuckled and said, "Let me sing them a song. Why be a kidnapper? Why not be a civilized person?" He put down the bag

with Elliott's clothes and took two steps forward. His expression suddenly turned serene and melancholic.

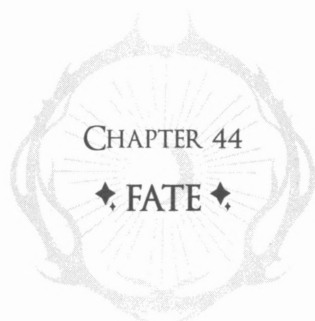
A deep, magnetic voice gradually spread through the air:

"Oh, the threat of horror, the hope of crimson!

One thing at least is certain—this Life flies;

One thing is certain and the rest is Lies;

The Flower that once has bloomed forever dies..."



Leonard's voice flowed like a lullaby, gently resonating between the two doors on either side and through the wooden stairwell.

Klein felt as if his mind were in a daze, as though he were gazing at silent moonlight reflecting on a serene lake. His eyelids grew heavy, as if he might fall asleep while standing.

Amid these indistinct sensations, he felt a strange, formless, indifferent gaze from behind him. He felt as though he were wandering the spirit world.

A baffling sense of *déjà vu* suffused him until he suddenly regained his train of thought. With his powerful spiritual perception and thorough meditation practice, he managed to escape the influence of the Midnight Recital. Still, his mind remained quiet, unable to generate any other emotions.

Soon, Leonard stopped singing and turned his head with a smile. "I'm considering putting in an application for a Feynapotter lute. How can I sing without accompaniment? Heh-heh, just kidding. They're all asleep now."

The dark-haired, green-eyed Nighthawk—Leonard, with his poetic demeanor—briskly approached the door that separated them from the kidnappers and hostage. Suddenly, he swung his arm and threw a punch at the lock on the door.

Crack!

The wooden board around the lock shattered, the sound somewhat muffled.

"This requires precise control," Leonard said as he turned, giving Klein a smile. Then he reached his hand through the hole and opened the door from the inside.

Klein, who had regained full consciousness, was not as confident. He reached into his shoulder holster and drew his gun. He turned the cylinder to ensure he could shoot at a moment's notice.

As the door swung open, Klein saw a man slumped unconscious over a table with a gun on the floor by his feet. Another man was rubbing his eyes in a daze while trying to stand up.

Bam!

Leonard lunged forward and, with a punch, knocked the dazed man unconscious.

Klein was just about to follow Leonard inside when something suddenly tickled his senses. He turned abruptly toward the stairwell.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Footsteps echoed from below, growing clearer as they approached. A man in a brown coat with no hat was coming around the turn in the stairs, climbing toward the third-floor landing. He clutched a paper bag of bread to his chest.

Suddenly, he stopped. He saw the glistening metallic barrel of a gun pointing at him from above. His eyes reflected a young man in a short top hat, black suit, and matching bow tie, as well as the cane resting along the rail and the dangerous revolver.

"Stop what you're doing and put your hands up. Three, two, one..." Klein's voice was low and relaxed.

He held the revolver with both hands, imagining the man as a target from his practice sessions.

Amid the tense atmosphere, the man in the brown coat dropped the bag and slowly raised his hands. "Sir, has there been a misunderstanding?" he asked, staring intently at the finger Klein rested on the trigger, forcing a smile.

Klein, temporarily unsure whether the man was an accomplice of the kidnappers or merely a neighbor, maintained a stern expression. In a deep voice, he continued, "Do not resist. Someone will be here shortly to determine if this is indeed a misunderstanding."

At that moment, Leonard, having finished dealing with the kidnappers inside, walked out and noticed the man in the stairwell. He said casually, "So it seems the kidnappers have another accomplice responsible for purchasing food and making external contact?"

The man's eyes narrowed. Lifting his foot, he kicked the bag of bread up in an attempt to obscure Klein's vision.

Seemingly unfazed, Klein calmly pulled the trigger as he did during his practice.

Bang!

A cloud of blood sprayed from the man's left shoulder. He staggered and rolled away, attempting to flee to the second-floor landing. However, Leonard had already pushed off the handrail and vaulted over it, descending onto the man from above with a dull thud.

After the man passed out, Leonard swatted away some blood spatters and looked up at Klein, chuckling. "Not a bad shot."

I was trying to hit his legs...

The corner of Klein's mouth twitched just before he caught the faint smell of blood. Despite lacking any enhancements to his visual, auditory, or tactile senses after consuming the Seer potion, he realized he could still "see" objects behind obstructions and "hear" faint footsteps, allowing him to make preemptive judgments.

Is this within the scope of spiritual perception?

Klein nodded contemplatively as he watched Leonard search the man and discover a sharp dagger before dragging him through the door on the third floor. With his gun in one hand and his cane in the other, Klein followed him inside. Elliott Vickroy had jolted awake at the sound of the gunshot. Slowly, the boy sat up straight.

Leonard had securely tied up the three kidnappers with the rope they'd originally used on Elliott. Where the rope wasn't long enough, he compensated by tearing strips from their clothes. The bundled-up

captives were thrown into a corner. Leonard was busy bandaging the shoulder of the unconscious man who had been shot; seemingly against the idea of getting his hands too dirty, he didn't even bother to extract the bullet.

"A-are you...?" Elliott stammered in surprised delight as he looked on.

"Yes, you guessed right. Absolutely correct," Leonard answered casually, still crouching.

Who would have thought that this guy could have a sense of humor...?

Klein lowered his revolver and said to Elliott, "We are mercenaries hired by your father. You can also call us security personnel."

"Phew, really? Have I been saved?!" Elliott exclaimed, his voice trembling with joy as he dared not move.

It was evident that he had suffered more than a little in the few short hours since his kidnapping; he didn't even exhibit the impulsiveness expected of someone his age.

Leonard then stood up and faced Klein. "Go downstairs and find a patrolling policeman. Tell them to inform the tobacco merchant. I don't want to walk out of here with the child and four idiots, looking like a kidnapper."

Klein, still pondering the aftermath, nodded. He put away his revolver, picked up his cane, and headed for the staircase. As he descended, a nagging feeling told him he had forgotten something. In addition, he heard Leonard say to Elliott, "Don't be nervous. You'll see your father, mother, and your old butler, Klee, soon enough. Why don't we play a round of Quint?"

...

Klein suppressed a laugh as he walked out onto the street. After asking for directions, he found two patrolling policemen.

He didn't use his badge or identification as a member of the Special Operations Department; instead, he identified himself as part of a professional security company and recounted everything that had transpired.

As for his gun, he wasn't worried. He had obtained an all-purpose weapons permit the day before yesterday. The approval process had been quick, thanks to internal channels.

The two policemen exchanged glances before one left to gather reinforcements and inform the Vickroy family while the other followed Klein to where the kidnappers were held.

After another forty minutes, Leonard signaled to Klein with his eyes when the policemen's attention waned, and Klein stealthily slipped out of the room after him.

"Trust me, going to the police station would be an extreme waste of time. Let's go," Leonard explained nonchalantly.

Since Leonard would take responsibility should there be any repercussions, Klein had no reason to refuse, so he followed.

Almost five minutes later, several carriages rushed to the front of the building where the kidnappers were held. Klee, the old butler, disembarked along with his portly master, Mr. Vickroy.

Up until this moment, Klein was still in a daze. He could scarcely believe that the good news had come so fast. It felt like a dream.

Suddenly, he heard a crisp snap. Instinctively, he turned toward the sound.

A two-wheeled carriage drove past with its windows open. The dark-haired, green-eyed Leonard snapped his fingers again.

After passing by Vickroy's carriage, Leonard closed the window, turned around, and looked at Klein. He raised his right hand and said, "It was a pleasure working with you!"

"I don't think we're that close..." Klein replied, politely slapping his palm.

He hadn't expected the kidnapping case to be resolved so quickly. All he could do was quietly marvel at the abilities of Beyonders. Even though he was just a newly minted Sequence Nine, he was already capable of many incredible feats.

"This is a celebratory gesture aristocrats like to do after a round of fencing," Leonard explained with a smile.

"I know." Klein had many aristocratic classmates.

Glancing outside the window, he said with a frown, "Shouldn't we confirm with Mr. Klee? If he thinks the police rescued Elliott, our commission will be halved."

A total of one hundred pounds!

Although there was no doubt they had provided the kidnappers' whereabouts, due to their "meeting" just now, the commission might suffer.

"Don't worry. For people like us, money isn't that important," Leonard chuckled and shrugged.

... To people like me, it's very important!

Klein forced a polite smile and said, "Many poets die early from poverty."

Leonard laughed. "I believe Elliott wouldn't lie about this. I can tell he still has some innocence left in him. However, you won't get much of the two-hundred-pound commission anyway."

"How much would I get?" asked Klein immediately.

"As the unspoken rule goes, half of the commission is handed to Mrs. Orianna as additional funding. The remainder is split among the participating team members. It's a pity you aren't a formal member yet—you'll only get about ten percent of that remaining half."

Ten pounds? That isn't bad, either...

Klein pretended not to feel the pinch as he pressed on, "Aren't you worried that the kidnappers will realize they were under the influence of a Beyonder's powers when they wake up?"

"They won't suspect a thing. They'll only think the weather was too conducive for sleep, which is why they dozed off. They might even believe that the song existed only in their dreams. This is something we've verified before," Leonard answered confidently. "But rather, it's your demon-hunting bullets that might arouse some suspicion. Of course, you being a peculiar person with an affinity for mysticism makes that a perfectly reasonable explanation."

"I see." Klein felt relieved yet couldn't shake the feeling that he had forgotten or overlooked something.

...

After returning to Jutland Street, Klein did not wait for Klee's arrival but continued with his routine. He strolled to the Welch residence and took a different route home. On the way, he bought some beef and cabbage for dinner.

The meal was enjoyable as always, accompanied by the same leisurely conversation between the siblings. Only this time, there was an unexpected visitor at the door—a worker responsible for collecting pennies from the gas meter.

As evening fell and darkness deepened, the siblings bade each other good night and returned to their rooms.

Klein was sleeping soundly when he was suddenly awoken by a shuffling sound outside. Puzzled, he opened his door and walked to the unoccupied bedroom. Pushing open the mottled door, he saw a gray desk inside. On the desk lay a notebook, its cover made of hard cardboard and entirely black in color.

An inexplicable sense of déjà vu washed over him as he approached and opened the notebook. The page he flipped to featured a drawing: a figure dressed in lavish clothes and wearing a splendid headdress—The Fool!

Beneath the drawing was a line of text in Hermes:

Everyone will die, including me.

Startled, Klein suddenly noticed that the corners of The Fool's mouth were curving upward!

Gasping for breath, Klein bolted upright in bed and saw the crimson moonlight filtering through his curtains, dimly outlining the shapes of his bookshelf, desk, and the rest of his room. Only then did he realize it had been a nightmare.

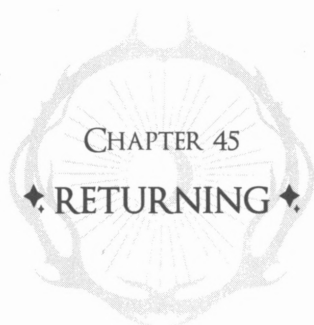
As a Seer, he knew that dreams were revealing. He began to carefully reflect on the dream. As he recalled the details, Klein suddenly froze. He knew what he had missed out on today!

While he was immersed in Leonard's singing, he had sensed a cold, formless gaze from behind him—a feeling of being observed unlike

anything he usually experienced during his trances or when he used his spirit vision. It evoked a strong sense of déjà vu.

According to Captain Dunn, if he ever felt anything similar, it probably meant...

Klein suddenly straightened up. He knew what it was. *Yes—it's that notebook! That Antigonus family's notebook!*



The Antigonus notebook was in the apartment across the landing!

Although it was a striking coincidence, Klein believed his intuition was correct. He immediately got out of bed and quickly changed out of the old clothes he wore to sleep. Picking up the white shirt beside him, he slipped it on and began buttoning it from top to bottom.

“One, two, three...,” he counted, then suddenly realized he’d missed one. Worse yet, the left and right sides didn’t seem to match.

Upon closer inspection, Klein realized that he had made the mistake at the very first button, causing the front of his shirt to twist out of shape. He shook his head helplessly, took a deep breath, and slowly exhaled, using his meditation techniques to restore his composure.

After putting on his white shirt and black trousers, he calmly attached his shoulder holster. Then he pulled out the revolver he’d hidden under his soft pillow and holstered it. With no time to affix his bow tie, he draped his suit jacket over his shoulders, grabbed his hat in one hand and his cane in the other, and walked to his bedroom door. After donning his short top hat, Klein gently twisted the door handle and stepped into the corridor.

He carefully closed the wooden door behind him and tiptoed down the stairs like a thief. Using the fountain pen and paper in the

parlor, he left a note for his siblings, explaining that he'd forgotten to mention the previous night that he had to be at work early today.

The moment he stepped outside, Klein felt a refreshingly cool breeze. All at once, he felt much calmer.

The city street was dim and silent, devoid of pedestrians; gas lamps quietly provided most of the illumination.

Klein took out his watch from the inner pocket of his jacket and snapped it open. It was just six in the morning. The crimson moonlight had not completely receded, but a soft sliver of light was already visible above the horizon.

He was about to seek out an expensive for-hire carriage when he noticed a two-horse, four-wheel trackless coach coming down the street.

"There are coaches this early in the morning?" Klein was taken aback as he flagged it down.

"Good morning, sir," said the coach driver, stopping the horses skillfully. The fare collector beside him covered a yawn with his hand.

"To Jutland Street," Klein replied, pulling out two pennies and four halfpence from his trouser pocket.

"Four pence," the fare collector confirmed without hesitation.

After paying the fare, Klein boarded the coach and found it completely empty. A profound loneliness settled over him amid the dim morning.

"You are the first passenger," said the driver with a smile.

The two brown horses began trotting, briskly picking up pace.

"To be honest, I didn't think there would be a coach so early in the morning," Klein remarked, sitting near the driver to engage in idle chatter and distract himself from his tense thoughts.

The driver replied self-deprecatingly, "From six in the morning to nine at night. But I only make one pound a week."

"You don't get any days off?" Klein asked, shocked.

"We take shifts to rest once a week," the driver explained somberly.

The fare collector added, "We work from six to eleven in the

morning, then take our lunch and a break. Near supper time, at six in the evening, we come back to replace our colleagues... Even if we don't need rest, the horses do."

"It wasn't like this in the past, but ever since some needless accidents, like drivers losing control due to fatigue and overturning their carriages, they've implemented shift work... Why else would those bloodsuckers suddenly become so kind?" the driver scoffed.

In the light of dawn, the coach moved steadily toward Jutland Street, picking up only seven or eight more passengers along the way.

After Klein had relaxed somewhat, he closed his eyes and replayed yesterday's experience frame by frame, checking if he had missed anything.

By the time the sun had risen fully and the skies were bright, the coach finally arrived at Jutland Street.

Klein kept his left hand on his hat and jumped hurriedly off the coach. He quickly stepped into 36 Jutland Street, ascending the stairs until he reached the door of Blackthorn Security Company.

The door was still closed.

Klein took out the ring of keys on his belt, found the corresponding one, and inserted it into the keyhole, twisting with a *click*.

Slowly pushing the door open, he saw the dark-haired, green-eyed Leonard Mitchell sniffing a cigarette—a recent trend, apparently.

"To be honest, I prefer cigars... You seem to be in a rush?" the poet-like Nighthawk asked in a relaxed tone.

"Where's the captain?" Klein inquired instead of replying to the comment.

Leonard pointed at the partition. "In his office. As a Beyonder who used to be a Sleepless, he only needs two hours of sleep during the day. I believe those factory owners and bankers would love potions like that."

Klein nodded and quickly passed through the partition. He saw that Dunn Smith had already opened his door and was standing in the doorway. Dressed in his black trench coat and holding his gold-inlaid cane, the captain wore a solemn, stern expression.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“I experienced that feeling—the sense of *déjà vu*. It’s probably the notebook...the Antigonus family’s notebook,” Klein replied, striving to suppress his nerves and keep his answer clear and logical.

“Where is it?” Dunn Smith’s expression remained impassive.

Klein sensed, with his spiritual perception, that a subtle, invisible something stirred within him—a flash of his spirit or a change in his emotions. “It’s in the office where Leonard and I rescued the hostage yesterday, across the landing from the kidnappers’ room. I didn’t notice it then until I had a dream and received a revelation.”

Leonard, who had walked up to the partition, chuckled, “Sounds like I missed out on making a very big contribution yesterday.”

Dunn Smith nodded gravely. “Get Kenley to replace Old Neil at the armory. We’re taking Old Neil and Frye with us.”

Leonard reined in his frivolity and immediately went to notify Kenley and Frye in the Nighthawks’ recreation room—Kenley was a Sleepless, and Frye an Corpse Collector.

Five minutes later, the two-wheeled carriage used by the Nighthawks drove down the sparsely populated morning streets.

Leonard wore a felt hat, a shirt, and a waistcoat, standing in temporarily as the carriage driver, flinging out the riding crop from time to time with a crisp crack.

Inside the carriage, Klein and Old Neil sat on one side, and Dunn Smith and Frye occupied the other.

The Corpse Collector’s skin was so pale it looked as if it had never seen sunlight, or as though he suffered from severe anemia. He looked to be in his thirties, with black hair, blue eyes, a tall nose bridge, thin lips, and a dark, chilly demeanor; a faint odor, likely from years spent around corpses, lingered about him.

“Tell me again what happened in detail.” Dunn adjusted the collar of his black trench coat.

Klein rubbed the yellow crystal dangling in his sleeve and began recounting their mission, starting from accepting the job up to his haunting dream. Beside him, Old Neil chuckled and said, “Your fate

seems somehow entwined with that notebook, to encounter it again in such a manner.”

That's right. It's too much of a coincidence! Klein thought. *If Leonard hadn't mentioned that the preliminary interrogation of the kidnapping case revealed no manipulations by hidden powers or mysterious forces and that it was solely a money-motivated crime, I would have suspected someone had deliberately arranged for this to happen...*

Klein found the situation rather odd.

It was too much of a coincidence!

Dunn offered no commentary, lost in deep thought, and Corpse Collector Frye, also clad in a black trench coat, maintained his customary silence.

Finally, when the carriage stopped outside the building, Dunn broke the silence. “Let’s go upstairs. Klein, you and Old Neil stay behind us. Remember, be very careful.” He alighted from the carriage and withdrew a strange-looking revolver with an overly long, thick barrel, tucking it into his right coat pocket.

“All right.” Klein didn’t dare take point.

After Leonard found someone to watch their carriage, the five Beyonders filed into the building. Treading quietly, they reached the third-floor landing.

“Is this the place?” Leonard asked, pointing at the apartment across from where the kidnappers had been hiding.

Klein tapped his brow twice to activate his spirit vision. In that state, his spiritual perception was enhanced; he felt the door was familiar, as if he had entered it before.

“Yes.” He nodded.

Old Neil activated his spirit vision as well, and after careful observation, he said, “There’s no one inside. No spiritual glows of magic.”

Corpse Collector Frye added in his hoarse voice, “No evil spirits.”

Even without activating his spirit vision, Frye could see many spiritual bodies, including evil spirits and resentful ghosts.

Leonard stepped forward and, as he had yesterday, punched the door’s lock with his fist. This time, not only did the surrounding

wood shatter, but the lock itself flew out and clattered noisily to the ground.

Klein felt an invisible seal vanish instantly. Almost immediately, a powerful stench reached his nose.

“Corpse. A rotting corpse,” Frye stated coldly, unfazed.

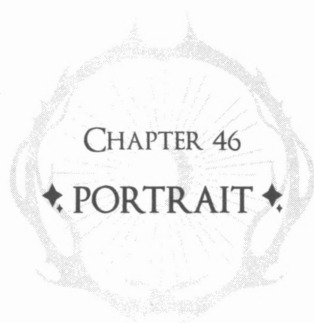
Dunn reached out his black-gloved right hand and slowly pushed open the door. The first thing they saw was a fireplace. In the warm days of early July, an abnormal, stuffy heat permeated the room.

In front of the fireplace was a rocking chair. An old woman dressed in black and white sat in it, her head hanging low. Her body had enlarged abnormally. Her skin was blackish-green and so bloated that it looked almost shiny—as if a simple prod could make her explode and spew forth a foul, rotting stench. Maggots and other parasites squirmed between her flesh, blood, and rotting juices, within her clothes and their wrinkles. When viewed through spirit vision, they appeared as pinpricks of light, swarming around a body of extinguished darkness.

Plop! Plop!

The old woman’s eyeballs dropped to the floor one by one and rolled a short distance, leaving behind yellowish-brown streaks.

Klein felt bile rising in him. Unable to tolerate the putrid stench any longer, he bent over and vomited.



Blegh! Blegh!

Klein crouched there, vomiting involuntarily. He soon finished heaving everything he had since he had yet to eat breakfast.

At that moment, a tin-colored, square flask that resembled a cigar box appeared in front of him.

When uncorked, the opening emitted a smell reminiscent of a mixture of tobacco, disinfectant, and mint leaves. It cleared Klein's nose and refreshed his mind.

The powerful odor continued to linger around him, but Klein no longer felt nauseous. He soon stopped vomiting.

His eyes followed the flask upward and saw a hand so pale it did not seem to belong to a living person. He saw the cuff of a black trench coat, then Corpse Collector Frye with his chilly, dark bearing.

"Thank you." Klein had now recovered and, with his hands on his knees, stood back up.

Frye nodded without expression. "You'll be fine once you are used to it."

He replaced the flask's stopper and slipped it into his pocket, then turned and walked up to the highly decomposed corpse of the old woman. Without wearing any gloves, he began his examination. Meanwhile, Dunn Smith and Leonard Mitchell paced slowly around

the room, occasionally touching a table's surface or the pages of a newspaper.

Old Neil pinched his nose and stood outside the door, grumbling in a nasal tone, "This is disgusting. I'll have to apply for additional compensation this month to make up for this!"

Dunn turned his head as he touched the dust on the wall beside the fireplace with his gloved right hand. Looking at Klein, he asked, "Does this place look familiar?"

Klein held his breath and conjured the image of his silver pocket watch in his mind to calm down. Since his spirit vision was already activated, he immediately sensed something different. A scene from the deepest recesses of his memories flashed before his eyes.

Fireplace, rocking chair, table, newspapers, iron nails on the door mottled with rust, tin cans inlaid with silver...

The scene was dark and dull, like an old documentary he had watched back on Earth, but even more blurry and illusory.

The image in his mind quickly overlapped with the scene before his eyes. The feeling of déjà vu and of having been here before presented itself clearly. An illusory, ethereal scream once again pierced an invisible wall to his ears:

"Hornacis... Flegrea... Hornacis... Flegrea... Hornacis... Flegrea..."

"It feels a little familiar," Klein answered honestly. He felt a stabbing pain in his brain, so he quickly tapped his brow twice to turn off his spirit vision.

Hornacis... The Hornacis mountain range mentioned in the original Klein's diary?

That's content that was deciphered from the Antigonus family's notebook...

The murmurs just now were very similar to one from a previous instance that also mentioned the word "Hornacis"... Is...this a form of enticement?

Gripped by sudden horror, Klein didn't dare pursue the thought any further, fearing he was on the path to losing control.

Dunn nodded slightly and walked up to a cabinet. He suddenly reached out and pulled open the wooden door on the upper half.

The bread inside was moldy, with seven or eight dead gray rats lying next to it, their bodies already stiff.

"Leonard, go downstairs and fetch the policemen on patrol. Find out what happened here," instructed Dunn.

"Yes, sir." Leonard turned and left the apartment.

Following that, Dunn opened the door to the two bedrooms and conducted a careful search.

By the time Dunn confirmed there were no clues or any sign of the Antigonus family's notebook, Frye also stood up. He wiped his hands with the white handkerchief he always carried and said, "The time of death was more than five days ago. There are no external injuries, nor are there any obvious signs of supernatural powers. Further examination is necessary to ascertain the exact cause of death."

"Did you find anything?" Dunn asked, turning to look at Old Neil and Klein.

The two shook their heads in unison, having long turned off their spirit vision.

"Apart from the corpse, everything else is normal. Actually, there was an invisible energy field sealing the apartment in the beginning. As you know, we usually use a similar process when we perform ritualistic magic," Old Neil added after a few seconds of thought.

Dunn was just about to say something when he suddenly gazed out the door. Only a few seconds later did Klein and Old Neil sense something as well, and together they turned to look at the stairwell.

After another few seconds, faint footsteps grew louder as Leonard walked up the stairs with a policeman in tow.

As soon as the policeman caught the noxious smell, his expression changed. He immediately cooperated with his colleagues from the Special Operations Department and knocked on the doors of the residents on the second-floor landing to get a better idea of who lived on the third floor.

Moments later, the officer with two silver chevrons on his shoulder returned. Looking at the corpse in the rocking chair, he said, "This is Katy Stefania Bieber, aged between fifty-five and sixty. She's widowed and has been renting this apartment with her son, Ryer Bieber, for more than ten years. Her late husband was a jewelry maker. Her son is about thirty years old and unmarried. He inherited his father's trade and earns about one pound fifteen soli a week. According to their neighbors, they have not been seen for more than a week."

Before the policeman could continue, Klein already knew the key piece of information would be.

The missing, or to be more precise, the unknown whereabouts of Ryer Bieber! The ancient notebook could very well be with him!

"Do you have a photograph of Ryer Bieber?" Dunn asked the police officer. His role was that of a high-ranking inspector—a position he actually held, as evidenced by his listing on the police department's roster. His salary and various allowances were paid according to his rank, though this did not include the portion from the church.

The police officer shook his head nervously and said, "I'm not sure... I'll have to return to the station to search for it. It's not typical for us to keep photos of every single person."

"I see. Continue questioning the residents on the first floor. Be as detailed as you can," Dunn ordered.

Watching the officer leave, he closed the door and turned to Old Neil. "I'll leave the rest to you. Otherwise, I will have to put all the residents in this building to sleep and look for Ryer Bieber's face in their dreams. Hmm, I don't really trust sketches based on verbal descriptions."

Old Neil nodded. He pulled a few thumb-sized bottles from a pocket in the belt of his black robe and scattered the liquids on the floor in a specific order.

Following that, he took a handful of powder and scattered it in a circle around himself. A strange, sharp smell spread through the air, unaffected by the nauseating odor already lingering in the room.

Klein suddenly noticed an invisible forcefield had formed around Old Neil, isolating him from the environment and everyone else. It was as if the room had reverted to its previous state.

Old Neil half-closed his eyes as his lips moved, mumbling a low, indiscernible incantation. With no preparation, Klein only vaguely heard the words, "Goddess, give me strength," and "I look forward to the protection of the Evernight..."

Whoosh! A sudden gust of wind tore through the windows, scattering the powder into the air.

Klein's heart quaked as goosebumps spread over him. He sensed an unbearably terrifying, indescribable odor rapidly permeating the area. His mind grew confused and tense, unable to relax. It felt just like finishing a set of highly advanced math problems in school.

Suddenly, Old Neil's eyes snapped open, now pitch-black. He pulled a fountain pen from his pocket and began sketching on a scrap of paper on the table. He worked so quickly that his whole body shook with each movement.

Klein focused on the paper and saw a face with deeply recessed eyes and a tall nose bridge rapidly emerge. When Old Neil finished drawing the short, curly hair, he wrote a line of text beneath the portrait: *Black hair, deep blue eyes. One ceramic tooth implant on the left side of his teeth.*

Clack! The fountain pen fell from Old Neil's hand onto the paper as his body convulsed.

"This is the image of Ryer Bieber, according to the traces left in this room," Old Neil whispered as the color of his eyes quickly returned to normal.

Then he walked back to his original spot and slowly turned in a full circle. The invisible forcefield that had isolated him immediately dissipated into a breeze.

"Praise be to the Lady." Old Neil tapped four spots on his chest, forming the shape of the crimson moon.

Klein's taut nerves relaxed as he examined the portrait. He found nothing extraordinary in Ryer Bieber's features. The man had a

relatively mild bearing. The only notable detail was that the smile lines on either side of his nose sagged noticeably.

"I'll try using rod dowsing," Klein said, picking up the portrait and rummaging through the bedroom for male clothing, which he then spread on the ground. Neither Dunn, Leonard, nor Old Neil stopped him as he placed his cane atop the clothes and portrait. Frye remained as silent as always.

Klein's eyes changed from brown to black as he finished his recitation, and then he released his grip. The black cane stood silently, as if embedded in the ground.

Ryer Bieber's location. Klein silently repeated to himself.

Amid the whistling wind, the cane toppled. Yet as it fell, it kept changing direction until finally, it began spinning in a small circle. Without any external help, the black cane righted itself once again.

Klein repeated the ritual a few more times to no avail, so he shook his head at Dunn and Old Neil.

A mysterious power was interfering with his divination...

Dunn removed his black glove and said to Leonard and Klein, "Take Ryer Bieber's portrait and question the residents here for a final confirmation. After that, we will issue a warrant of arrest against him for the murder of his mother."

"All right." Klein took his cane and bent down to pick up the portrait.

Once the neighbors confirmed that the man on the portrait was indeed Ryer Bieber, Dunn instructed Leonard and the police officer to complete the paperwork at the station while he and Frye headed to a few bars around Tingen to conduct their search via other channels.

Klein and Old Neil returned to Blackthorn Security Company on a coach. It wasn't even eight in the morning by the time they got back; Rosanne hadn't arrived yet.

After closing the door, Klein cocked his head at Old Neil and, partly out of confusion and partly to learn, asked, "Why...? Why would I deliver the Antigonus family's notebook to Ryer Bieber's home?"

This was in a totally different direction from Ironcross Street, where Welch lived.

Old Neil walked over to the sofa and chuckled. "Isn't that obvious? Who knows what powers inside the notebook you three invoked. Or maybe out of curiosity, you carried out some ritual described within and ended up provoking a strange existence you shouldn't have. Meanwhile, the goal of this mysterious entity was to deliver the notebook to Ryer Bieber and erase all clues to prevent anyone from discovering it.

"While you were chosen to carry out this task, Welch and Naya both committed suicide at the scene. And...to be frank, I still have no idea how you managed to survive."

"I would like to know, too..." Klein replied with a deliberately wry smile as he sat down. "I've also thought about what you just said regarding how it happened, but there's one thing I don't understand. Why did I *have* to give the notebook to Ryer Bieber?"

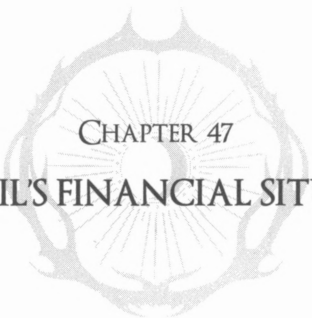
Old Neil shrugged and said, "Perhaps his Life Path Number⁷ matches the requirements, or maybe he's one of the last remaining descendants of the Antigonus family. In short, there are too many possibilities... There may be similar reasons, like why the notebook was sold to Tingen in the first place."

"I think the descendant theory is more likely." Suddenly enlightened, Klein soon sighed again. "Unfortunately, I didn't realize it immediately. Now both Ryer Bieber and that notebook are gone."

Old Neil laughed. "That's something for Dunn to worry about. As for you, it's a good thing."

"Why do you say that?" Klein frowned.

⁷ A Life Path Number was proposed by Pythagoras. It is established from the date of birth and describes the nature of one's journey through life.



CHAPTER 47

◆ OLD NEIL'S FINANCIAL SITUATION ◆

Old Neil rubbed his temples and said, “I believe we have a general idea of why the three of you committed mass suicide. That notebook is now purportedly in Ryer Bieber’s hands, and the matter has already come to light. Regardless of whether you are alive or dead, it will hardly influence subsequent developments. I think—no, I believe that the strange entity, or rather, the mysterious power that caused all of this, will not pay you further attention, just as you wouldn’t pay any heed to the ants on the ground. Heh-heh, as long as you do not try to make Him recall you.

“And our arrest warrant for Ryer Bieber will quickly reach the Secret Order. They will also deduce that it is related to the Antigonus family’s notebook. Believe me, a secret organization that has been in existence for more than a thousand years has many channels to obtain information. Therefore, their focus will be diverted to Ryer Bieber’s whereabouts in a bid to find the notebook before us. They will not continue to harass, stalk, or target you.

“Young man, congratulations on stepping out from the shadows of the past. You will soon welcome a brand-new journey filled with light.”

Klein nodded vehemently at this. With joy and relief, he said, “I hope so.”

It seemed the dark cloud that had hung over him ever since his transmigration was finally dissipating...

However, Klein still felt apprehensive. There seemed to be a connection between him and the notebook—to the point that he would even discover lingering traces of it by coincidence on a normal hostage rescue mission.

He was afraid that there would come a day when a courier would suddenly hand him a parcel, only for him to open it and find it contained the Antigonus family's notebook!

Let's hope everything will go as Old Neil described..., he prayed silently.

Old Neil chuckled upon hearing his reply. "You don't seem to be a devout believer of the Goddess. At this moment, shouldn't you be drawing the sign of the crimson moon on your chest and saying, 'Goddess bless us'?"

"Mr. Neil, you don't seem like one, either. A real devotee would not say, 'You will welcome a brand-new journey filled with light.'" Having studied mysticism under Old Neil for some time, Klein had established a decent rapport with him, so he unceremoniously returned a sarcastic remark.

The two locked eyes for a moment and laughed. At the same time, they tapped their chests four times and said simultaneously:

"Praise the Lady!"

At that moment, they heard the sound of cylinders and pins turning as the main door to Blackthorn Security Company opened.

The elegant Mrs. Orianna, with her fashionably coiled hair, stepped into the foyer, her light green dress swaying.

"Good morning, Mr. Neil. Good morning, Klein," she greeted them with a warm smile, a small leather handbag in her hand. "It's another bright and sunny day. A lovely day."

"Good morning, Orianna. You are as beautiful as you were ten years ago," replied Old Neil with a grin.

Orianna's eyes narrowed into a scowl. "Mr. Neil, your compliments

are still as infuriating as they were *ten years ago*.” She emphasized the last few words.

“Is that so?” Old Neil looked at Klein in confusion, clearly perplexed.

Never mention anything that might remind a lady of her age... As a keyboard warrior who knew a little of everything, Klein instantly understood what had irked Mrs. Orianna. He chuckled and said, “Good morning, Mrs. Orianna. You are as beautiful as always.”

“Thank you, our outstanding Khoy University graduate.” Orianna nodded with a smile before adding, “That old butler has already paid the compensation for the mission. According to the captain’s rules, half of it will go into our funds, and the other half will be split between you and Leonard. But since you aren’t a formal Nighthawk member, you will only receive ten percent of that half. You can come by later to sign for it.”

“How much did he pay?” Klein asked happily, even as his heart ached.

“Two hundred pounds. He even said, ‘Lord, oh Storm above! I never imagined or dared dream that it could be resolved just like that! This is even more unbelievable than a dream! Why is your security company so unknown? It’s an insult to the entire industry!’” Mrs. Orianna mimicked Klee’s slightly southern accent.

Klein thought seriously for a few moments before saying humorously, “It *was* a little unfair to those kidnappers.”

Two Beyonders had swiftly resolved the problem in a way that could only be described as easy and breezy... It was just like a fully armored adult bullying a handful of kids...

“They were just unlucky and must have fallen out of favor with the gods,” said Orianna with a soft laugh. “I told the butler that we were only lucky that one of our informants happened to see the kidnappers bring the child into the hideout. Therefore, do not place too much hope on us. We really are just a very ordinary security company.”

Typically speaking, the more you emphasize that something is ordinary, the more extraordinary it becomes..., Klein thought to himself, smiling, as he watched Mrs. Orianna walk through the partition and enter the accounting room.

Next to him, Old Neil smacked his lips and said enviously, "You really are a lucky lad. You've only just joined us recently, and already you've encountered a job worth two hundred pounds."

"Is that very rare?" Klein asked, puzzled. Prior to this, he had either been studying history and mysticism or wandering aimlessly outside, hoping to find clues with his spiritual perception.

"According to Orianna's accounts, it's more common to not get a single job in an entire week. And most jobs are worth less than twenty pounds." Old Neil rubbed the white crystal by his wrist and sighed.

He looked at Klein with subtle anticipation. "If you encounter any similar jobs in the future, remember to inform me."

Hearing Old Neil's words, an odd feeling arose in Klein. He asked bluntly, "Mr. Neil, you seem to be very short on money... How much do you get paid a week? If you aren't comfortable telling me, just ignore my question."

Old Neil leaned back onto the sofa and laughed. "That needn't be a secret. I've been here for so many years. At present, I receive a salary from both the church and the police department every week—a total of twelve pounds."

"A weekly salary of twelve pounds?" Klein blurted.

A weekly salary of twelve pounds for fifty-two weeks a year means more than six hundred pounds a year!

He remembered reading in *The Tingen Morning Post* and *The Honest Paper* that high-level barristers earned eight hundred to one thousand pounds a year—and those were the best lawyers! Even the managers at Benson's import-export company only made six pounds a week, which already made them very dignified.

"Yes, such a salary is actually quite generous, and we do not need to pay any taxes," added Old Neil with a smile.

Klein had heard from Benson that one had to pay E-class taxes when weekly salaries exceeded one pound. In other words, government and corporate employees had to pay 3% on the portion between one and two pounds, 5% on the portion between two and five pounds, 10% on the portion between five and ten pounds, and 15% on the portion between ten and twenty pounds, with a 20% tax on any amount over twenty pounds.

Apart from that, he had also read about the four other types of income tax in the newspapers: A-class was related to value appreciation on land, housing, and other assets (including any rent collected); B-class was a tax on agricultural earnings; C-class was a tax on profits from bonds, funds, and equities; and D-class taxed commercial, financial, or professional income.

"A delightful benefit of the job," Klein agreed with Old Neil's words.

"However," Old Neil shook his head, "such a salary is rarely sufficient for Beyonders like us who must frequently explore hidden mysteries, as well as practice and attempt rituals."

"Aren't all materials obtained via official application?" asked Klein in puzzlement.

Old Neil scoffed. "There's a limit to that, and we often have to provide a legitimate reason for why we need them. If you want to learn more and experiment in the field of mysticism, you can only buy materials at your own expense, either internally or on the black markets."

Hearing this, Klein was instantly invigorated. He asked, "There are extraordinary materials for sale in black markets? I assumed the churches would not permit their existence."

A channel to obtain supernatural materials was exactly what he needed at the moment. With the mysterious organization in its nascent stages behind him, he couldn't very well fulfill all his needs internally via the Nighthawks.

"There's no way to regulate such things. From the viewpoint of mysticism, all beings are sentient, and all beings stem from the same

source. The materials we use are not limited to those from extraordinary creatures but also include ordinary animals, plants, and minerals. For example, the hemlock, gold mint leaves, and night vanilla in your Seer formula are items we encounter frequently in our daily lives. They might not have any extraordinary properties, but they possess unique characteristics of their own. Through concoction and synthesis, they can achieve certain effects. Therefore, the church cannot simply ban trades like these,” explained Old Neil in detail.

Before Klein could say a word, Old Neil continued, “Besides, it’s not only the essence of extraordinary beings that is useful to us. Take the Rava octopus, for example. Apart from its blood, its eyeballs, skin, and tentacles are all excellent materials. Unless the church plans to capture it all themselves, it would be a tremendous financial burden to completely corner the market and control any outflows. The lower the grade of the extraordinary material, the more true this is. They can only do their best to prevent the more unique materials from flowing out.”

Old Neil suddenly laughed. “There’s another important reason. Better the black market we know than the black market we don’t. As long as secret organizations have not been fully exterminated, this remains a decent strategy.

“Besides, it can help us obtain the materials we lack. Of course, with such markets, contraband goods will inevitably exist as well. As long as they aren’t too excessive or dangerous, we will turn a blind eye. At most, we might use them to enrich our vaults.”

“Is it also because the major churches serve as checks and balances for one another, so none of them can take drastic action?” Klein guessed.

Old Neil acknowledged tersely but did not elaborate.

“I’m a Seer, so I’ll definitely need extensive practice in the future and, therefore, require more materials. Mr. Neil, can you take me to the black market to have a look?” Klein asked, offering a perfectly valid reason.

Old Neil seemed to be in a quandary. “Well, most of the people

active in those places are not Beyonders. Some of them might be aristocrats with an interest in mysticism or rich people with similar inclinations... Oh, but I have a thirty-pound bill that needs to be paid soon. I can't go there for the time being."

"All right..." Klein never expected the reason to be Old Neil's unpaid debt.

Moments later, he said deliberately, "Mr. Neil, do you need me to lend you money? I just earned a commission of ten pounds."

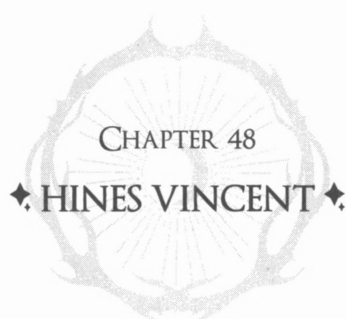
"Ha-ha, there's no need. I have my way of resolving it." Old Neil patted the sofa and slowly stood up. "Ah...age is truly the invincible nemesis of living beings. I'm exhausted from last night's shift. Hmm, spend this morning reviewing what I've taught you before. Continue reading the literature. Tomorrow, I'll teach you the foundations of ritual magic."

"Okay." Klein rose and took off his hat to bid him goodbye.

By noon, when Captain Dunn did not return, Klein pretended he was still searching for the notebook and went out to roam the streets again.

Having earned ten pounds, he no longer needed to wait for his next paycheck. He could head directly to the Divination Club!

The murmurs appeared occasionally during his trance, and his spirit vision made him desperate to begin his "acting."



In the Divination Club on the second floor of 13 Howes Street, Northside of Tingen, Klein saw the beautiful receptionist again.

Her ash-brown hair was still pulled up in a neat bun, lending her a mature and elegant appearance. It was hard to tell her age.

“Good afternoon. Mr. Glacis isn’t here today. Would you like to try a different fortune-telling session?” asked the beautiful lady with a smile.

Hearing that, Klein—who had just taken off his silk hat and put it back on—was stunned. “You still remember me?”

That was five whole days ago!

The woman pursed her lips into a smile.

“You are the first customer to seek Mr. Glacis’s services, and so far, the only one. It’s hard not to have a deep impression of you.”

Was that impression one of him being penny-wise and pound-foolish? Klein wondered as he deliberated a question. “When was the last time Mr. Glacis came to the club?”

The lady shot him a glance and answered slowly, as if trying to recall, “To be honest, we don’t have a set schedule for our members. They come and go as they please. However, I do believe Mr. Glacis hasn’t been here since the day he divined for you.”

I wish him the best of luck. May the Goddess bless him...

Klein prayed silently and did not press further. Instead, he said with a smile, "I'm not here for divination services this time. I'm here to join the club."

"Really? That's our pleasure," the lady replied, her face lighting up with pleasant surprise. "For the first year as a member, the fee is five pounds. After that, it will be one pound a year. I believe there's no need for me to explain the details again?"

Klein took out a five-pound note he had just received and watched as Henry Augustus I's portrait grew ever more distant.

After diligently checking the anti-counterfeiting watermark, the woman carefully put away the note and handed Klein a form.

"Please fill in your detailed information. I will prepare a receipt for you."

There's a receipt? You should bill it to Blackthorn Security Company...

Amused by his own thoughts, Klein picked up a dip pen from the desk. Dipping it into the dark blue ink, he filled in his name, age, current address, and company information. However, he deliberately left his date of birth blank. To a Seer, that detail was akin to his Life Path Number—something that might reveal too much personal information.

After providing the receipt and registering Klein as a new member, the lady extended her right hand and said, "Congratulations on joining Tingen's Divination Club. I'm Angelica Barreheart, your dedicated server. Here are your member cufflinks. They bear special inscriptions that will identify you as a member."

"Hello, Ms. Angelica," Klein replied as he gently shook her hand and accepted the dark gold cufflinks.

He noticed that the special inscription used the Hermes root word for "fortune teller."

Angelica retracted her hand and thought for a few seconds. "Might I ask which divination arts you specialize in? Or perhaps you'd like to learn some divination methods from the club? We sometimes invite

renowned fortune tellers to give classes and introduce members with similar expertise for a pleasant exchange.”

“I know a bit of every method. There’s no need for any special considerations,” Klein replied with a touch of embellishment. Then he inquired, “Can I begin now? I’m not a total novice.”

He was there to act as a Seer, not to learn the basic fortune-telling methods any ordinary person could master.

Angelica maintained a polite smile as she said, “You may provide your divination services in the club at any time. However, until we confirm your skill level, we will not promote you to our patrons when they ask. How much would you like to charge for your fortune-telling?”

“Two pence,” Klein decided, relying on his economic advantage while remaining relatively unknown.

“According to our custom, we will take a one-eighth cut of your fee, which comes to a quarter of a pence...,” Angelica explained the rules before writing Klein’s information into the album of fortune tellers for patrons to choose from.

After all that was done, she pointed to the meeting room at the far end of the corridor with a smile.

“Mr. Hines Vincent is currently holding a seminar on star chart divination. You can find a quiet spot to listen in and ask questions if you have any.”

“All right.” With his interest piqued, Klein walked toward the meeting room, eager to hear how Hines Vincent’s insights differed from what Old Neil had taught him.

Just then, Angelica chased after him and whispered, “Mr. Moretti, would you like coffee or tea? We provide Cibo black tea, Southweir coffee, and Desi coffee.”

Klein, who had been perusing the papers, knew that these coffees and black tea were of lower-middle grade, but he also knew they were definitely better than what his family had at home. After a moment’s thought, he said, “A cup of Southweir coffee, please, with three teaspoons of sugar and no milk.”

The Loen Kingdom's Southweir County was famous for its beer and red wine; many important figures were fond of them. However, their coffee was relatively unknown.

"Of course. I'll bring it shortly," Angelica replied, pointing toward the meeting room.

Klein slowly walked to the half-open door and heard a voice with a thick Awashire accent say, "Star chart divination is a rather complex technique, even among all the divination arts..."

But that's only for ordinary people..., Klein silently mused.

Inside the meeting room, five or six long tables were arranged in a semicircle around a middle-aged man in a classic black robe—Hines Vincent. The gentleman had noticeable dark circles under his eyes. His chocolate brown hair was thick and stubborn, each strand standing up like the spines of a porcupine. Apart from that, there was nothing particularly unique about him.

Upon seeing Klein enter, Hines Vincent nodded gently without pausing his lecture. He only slowed his speech slightly.

Klein, one hand in his pocket and the other holding his walking stick, found a seat on the side and sat down, leaning back comfortably. In the warmth of the brilliant afternoon sun, he scanned the room and saw six people in the audience—four men and two women. Some were attentively taking notes, some engaged in quiet conversation, and others returned Klein a rueful smile.

After setting down his walking stick, Klein adjusted his short top hat and tapped twice on his brow. Then he cast his gaze at Hines and observed the various colors, brightness, and thickness of his aura.

"Dark red, so he's a little anxious... Actually, every other part of his aura is healthy. I wonder what's wrong..." Klein muttered to himself as he listened leisurely to the class.

Suddenly, he balled his right hand into a loose fist and covered his mouth to stifle a laugh. His thoughts and actions just now made him feel a bit like a quack.

He was rather pleased with his spirit vision these days. Although

he could only make a general judgment and couldn't discern specific details, it provided him with plenty of useful information.

After scanning the room a second time, he tapped his brow again as though pondering what Hines had just said.

Star chart divination was part of astromancy, though ordinary people could also attempt to decipher it. For instance, the most basic birth chart horoscope used the positions of the sun, moon, Blue Planet, and Scarlet Planet, among others, and their corresponding placements in the sky at the time of the inquirer's birth—matching the representative symbols to the star chart and factoring in the situations of various constellations.

This required the fortune teller to calculate the positions of the planets and constellations retroactively, which was rather complicated. Of course, there were publications that aided people in looking up the values; some even simplified it by providing a general interpretation of the constellations.

Klein listened quietly without interjecting or asking any questions. From time to time, he caressed the yellow crystal in his sleeve or took a sip of the Southweir coffee Angelica had brought in.

After some time, Hines pinched the center of his brow and said, "Perhaps you'll need to try drawing your own star chart. Come to me if you have any questions. I will be in the Moonstone Room."

After he left, a young man in a white shirt and black waistcoat got up with a smile and walked to Klein's side.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Edward Steve."

"My pleasure. Klein Moretti," Klein replied as he stood up and returned the bow.

"Star charts are much too complicated. Every time I hear about them, I can't help but doze off," said Edward self-deprecatingly.

Klein grinned and said, "That's because Mr. Vincent can't help but dump all the knowledge he possesses on us at once. It's like an entire Intis feast in one sitting—amazing but not good for digestion."

"If it were me, I'd be able to finish the Intis feast. They like to serve tiny bites of food on a huge plate," Edward chuckled before taking

a seat. He then asked, "Are you new? I haven't seen you in the two years I've been here."

"I just joined the club today," Klein answered frankly.

"What's your area of expertise? I'm best at tarot and poker divination," Edward casually asked.

"I know a little of everything, but only a little." Klein offered the familiar description he'd used before. He wasn't being modest; there was simply too much mystical knowledge in the domain of divination that he had yet to grasp.

Just as other members began approaching to discuss star chart divination with them, Angelica walked into the meeting room.

"Mr. Steve, someone would like you to read their fortune."

"All right," Edward said with a smile as he stood up.

"It seems that you are an excellent fortune teller," Klein remarked, looking at him.

"No, it's because my fee is the most suitable," Edward chortled. "When ordinary people come to have their fortunes told, they absolutely won't choose the most expensive option. And unless they've been kicked in the head by a donkey, they wouldn't dare choose the cheapest one, either. You'll have the most opportunity if you're in the middle of the pack."

I'm one of those who got kicked in the head by a donkey...

Watching Edward leave, Klein suddenly shook his head with a wry smile.

It seems that I've made a mistake in setting the price...

He stood up, picked up his walking stick, and left the meeting room. He found Angelica again.

"I wish to change the price of my divination...hmm...to eight pence."

Angelica studied him for a long moment and said, "We will abide by your request, but do note that we do inform our patrons when someone has only recently joined the club."

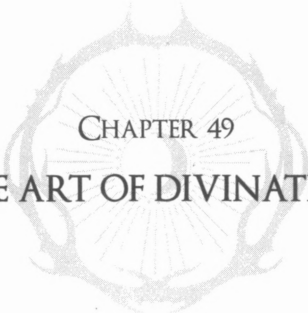
"No problem," Klein nodded. He didn't mind. Sometimes, mystery was an important element that drew customers to a fortune teller.

After updating his information, Klein returned to the meeting

room. Just then, he saw Hines Vincent walking out of the Moonstone Room. He held a silver-plated mirror in his hand. The famous fortune teller addressed the remaining five members in the meeting room, "I recently learned a new form of divination, mirror divination. Do you wish to learn it?"

Mirror divination? That's not safe...

Klein paused outside the meeting room and frowned.



CHAPTER 49

◆ THE ART OF DIVINATION ◆

As a Seer who had just stepped through the gates of mysticism, Klein did not dare claim he knew much; however, he was certain he knew far more than a layman. He understood that the various forms of divination could be split into three broad categories according to a standard—the standard being the different origins of revelations!

The first category of divination included tarot cards, poker cards, pendulums, cane dowsing, dreams, and so on. These methods used the revelations obtained from a connection between the inquirer's own spirituality and the spirit plane to interpret the result. However, spirit pendulums and cane dowsing required very high levels of spirituality, soul body, and astral body; non-Beyonders were unable to obtain precise and clear revelations. Meanwhile, card divination made use of fixed symbolic elements, providing a visual representation of the vague impressions sensed by ordinary people. Dreams fell somewhere in between the two.

The second category included spirit numerology and astromancy, along with their derivatives. In these methods, the fortune teller used either the inquirer's personal details or objective information based on changes in nature for calculation, inference, and interpretation. With this method, the key did not lie in the inquirer but in the fortune teller.

The third category involved an external third party, separate from both the inquirer and the fortune teller. The Ouija boards that Klein remembered from his previous life belonged in this category. Using certain rituals, one could ask for answers directly from an unknown, mysterious entity. However, the average person was unlikely to succeed with these methods. And in the rare case they did manage to bridge a connection with malicious entities or beings capable of driving one mad from mere contact, it often led to tragic outcomes.

The mirror divination that Hines Vincent mentioned belonged to the third category. In mysticism, mirrors were seen as doorways to the unknown and mysterious, as well as to the spiritual world. Thus, Klein stopped outside the meeting room, intending to hear how the famous fortune teller would explain the divination and to decide if he needed to inform the captain to pay him a visit and check his gas meter in the middle of the night.

Of course, there was a safe way to perform mirror divination: One could ask for answers from the seven orthodox divinities. Even if it was almost impossible for the average person to receive any real revelations, they would not be in danger or suffer any negative effects.

Meanwhile, the mirror divination strictly controlled by the Night-hawks and Mandated Punishers sought help from wicked gods or mysterious entities worshipped by certain unsanctioned organizations. Furthermore, even completely fabricated idols posed a risk. A particular phrase or characteristic of the ritual could inadvertently invite the attention of some unknown being.

In a world where supernatural powers existed, such divinations often led to the worst possible outcomes. Klein even suspected that the original Klein, Welch, and Naya had committed such a forbidden divination by following whatever was written in the Antigonus family's notebook.

In the meeting room, Hines began to explain the principle behind mirror divination and described the detailed process.

"First, you choose a suitable time and date according to the deity you believe in. You can determine this using the Astromancy

Manual. For example, we all know that Sunday represents the Ever-night, as it is the embodiment of rest. Similarly, two to three in the early morning, nine to ten in the morning, four to five in the evening, and eleven to midnight are all times of the moon, making them the domain of the Evernight. Therefore, fortune tellers who pray to the Evernight can use mirror divination during these times on a Sunday."

Quite a solid foundation... Klein nodded to himself as he hid behind the half-closed door of the meeting room.

It had to be said that, with the seven major churches keeping each other in check, some mystical knowledge had indeed leaked out. For example, many of the meanings behind the symbolic representations could be found in the Astromancy Manual. However, without potions or extraordinary powers, it was almost impossible for the average person to achieve the desired effects.

"Second, we must carefully wipe the mirror clean. It must be one that's silver-plated. Place the mirror in the position in your home that corresponds to the moon..." Hines demonstrated with the prop in his hand.

No, what you need now is spirit dowsing. First, choose a position and recite the phrase, "This place is suitable for mirror divination," seven times in your head. Then observe which direction the pendulum turns. Clockwise for true, counterclockwise for false... Of course, if you are seeking answers from a mysterious or malicious unknown entity, the position would not matter. Rather, it would depend on whether the entity is interested in answering your questions...

Klein silently corrected him in his mind. At this point, he felt like a teacher auditing a class...

Hines Vincent continued to give out detailed instructions for the necessary preparations of the ritual in a normal voice since he could not hear Klein's mental quibbles.

When the other members finished taking notes, Hines continued explaining, "After taking your bath, confirm that you have drawn your curtains tightly and locked your doors. Then light a candle

and place it in front of the mirror before sincerely praying to the deity you believe in. Keep your questions simple—there's no need for complicated embellishments. After praying seven times, pick up your mirror and gently toss it on the ground. Be careful to be gentle... Remember how it shatters, as that is a revelation from the gods... I will explain the main symbolic representations in a second."

Phew, now that's orthodox mirror divination.

Klein heaved a sigh of relief as he walked into the meeting room and sat back down in his original seat. He finished the rest of his Southweir coffee in one gulp.

So-called "orthodox" divination meant that it was indeed possible to receive revelations but almost impossible to interpret them accurately. When Beyonders reached this step, if they received a response, they could look straight into the mirror and be shown images that translated into a relatively clear message.

Because the broken mirror could produce many potential symbolic representations, Hines spoke at length. He was not done even when Edward Steve returned to the room after finishing his divination.

Klein did not ask what method Edward used or what he divined since it was an unspoken rule among fortune tellers not to inquire about such things. As a Seer, Klein naturally had to abide strictly by that rule unless the other party initiated the conversation.

"I realized that often our interpretations are too vague, as though they're designed to meet different demands, allowing different people to find something that fits their own situation within the interpretation." Edward drank a mouthful of Cibo black tea and sighed as he said quietly, "For example, you have encountered too many adversities and misfortunes, but eventually, you will see the light. Heh-heh, but no one knows when that light of hope will come. And another example! Your journey might not be very smooth sailing, but you will surely arrive alive. Ha, the dead will not come back to rebuke me."

Since Klein hadn't listened from the beginning, he simply ignored Hines's mirror divination lesson.

"Survivorship bias," Klein added with a smile.

Survivorship bias referred to the error of concentrating on people or things that survived some phenomena and overlooking those that did not, leading to clearly biased conclusions.

"Exactly. Emperor Roselle really was a great philosopher," marveled Edward.

Speechless, Klein raised his empty cup and pretended to take a sip.

The members remained fully immersed in the studies of star charts and mirror divination throughout the afternoon. Occasionally, they came to discuss the content with Klein and Edward.

Whenever that happened, Klein would do his best to carry out his duty as an informal member of the Nighthawks. He strove to steer them away from anything related to extraordinary powers or danger. However, he failed at the one thing he wanted most. A few inquirers came and went, but none chose him to perform their divination.

Perhaps I have to be more proactive in courting them. Should I greet them with phrases like "You are plagued by misfortune," "Something bad will happen to you in the near future," or "Nothing you do will ever go smoothly?" No, that's not what a Seer does...

As these thoughts ran through his mind, Klein couldn't help but shake his head in self-mockery. He picked up his walking stick, rose from his seat, and left after bidding everyone farewell.

At half past five, when Edward Steve put on his coat to leave the Divination Club, he suddenly saw a familiar figure.

"Good afternoon, Glacis. Long time no see," he greeted with a smile. He noticed his friend—who shared a similar hobby—wearing his usual suit with a black bow tie and a monocle hanging in front of his chest.

But then Edward immediately noticed that his friend did not look well at all. Even his pale blond hair looked dull and brittle.

"Good afternoon, Edward... *Cough*," Glacis managed to say. Holding his hat in one hand, he covered his mouth with his fist and coughed several times.

"You seem to be ill," Edward asked, concern evident in his tone.

"A very serious illness. It even developed into pneumonia before.

If it wasn't for my wife, who happened to have met an impressive apothecary and gave me a magical remedy, you probably would have had to visit me at the cemetery." Glacis's tone mixed lingering fear with a trace of relief.

"Dear Lord, I can't believe it. You were so healthy. Look at you now—you look so frail! I remember when I divined for you last week. There was no indication that you would become so seriously ill!" Edward exclaimed, waving his cane.

"My own divination yielded the same result as yours. Perhaps we are not yet qualified fortune tellers. Besides...besides..." Glacis suddenly recalled something from Monday, and his expression turned a little somber.

It was then that the beautiful Angelica walked over and bowed to them with a pleasant smile. After exchanging greetings, she first expressed concern for Glacis's health and offered some suggestions. Then she mentioned in passing, "Mr. Glacis, the gentleman who requested your divination services last time—Mr. Moretti—has joined our club as well."

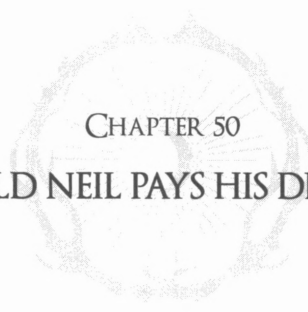
"The one who asked for me last time?" Glacis's eyes lit up immediately. "Good Lord, where is he?"

"He already left." Angelica and Edward exchanged puzzled glances, unable to comprehend Glacis's abnormal reaction.

Glacis paced a couple of steps in agitation and said, "The next time he comes, if I'm not here, please ask him when he will come again!"

"Glacis, what has happened? Did that Mr. Klein Moretti do something to you?" Edward asked, clearly puzzled.

Glacis waved his arm emphatically and met Edward's and Angelica's probing gazes squarely. In excitement, he declared, "He's a very, very, very incredible..." Gesturing with each "very," he finally said loudly, "...physician!"



CHAPTER 50

◆ OLD NEIL PAYS HIS DEBT ◆

It was half past seven in the evening. Sitting at the dining table, Benson picked up a potato from a dish of beef and potatoes. “Klein, why do you need to be at work so early as a consultant? Are urgent matters at a security company dangerous?” he asked with concern in his voice.

Klein carefully spat out the bones from a pan-fried fish and gave his prepared answer. “A batch of historical documents needed immediate shipping to Backlund. I had to be present to process the handover and make sure nothing was missing. As you know, those chaps who only know how to swing a fist can’t read any Feysac at all.”

Hearing his answer, Benson, who had finished chewing, couldn’t help but sigh. “Knowledge truly is important.”

Taking advantage of the moment, Klein took out the five-pound note he had left over and handed it to Benson. “This is the bonus payment I received today. It’s time you got some decent clothes, too.”

“Five pounds?” Benson and Melissa asked in unison.

Benson turned the note over in his hands. He said in both shock and doubt, “This security company sure is generous...”

His weekly salary was one pound ten soli, which amounted to six pounds exactly every four weeks—only one additional pound more than this bonus!

With that salary, he had managed to raise his siblings, giving them a

decent place to stay and allowing them to eat meat two or three times a week. They could even get a few new pieces of clothing every year!

"You don't doubt me?" Klein asked deliberately.

Benson chuckled. "What I doubt is that you have the ability or the guts to rob a bank."

"You're not a liar, Klein," Melissa answered seriously, pausing her fork and knife.

I...I'm someone who's used to lying now...

Klein immediately felt a twinge of shame. Although forced by circumstances, his sister's faith in him left him a little melancholic.

"The matter today was urgent and important, and I played a crucial role... That's why it was worth five pounds," Klein explained. In a way, what he said was the truth.

As for the five-pound salary he would soon receive—the one he planned to use to join the Divination Club—he intended to hide it from his family. Firstly, if he brought another five pounds home, he would truly frighten his siblings, making them suspect he was doing something illegal. Secondly, he had to save up to buy additional materials to learn how to be a Seer and master more mystical knowledge.

Benson took a bite of oat bread in satisfaction and thought for almost twenty seconds before saying, "The work I'm doing doesn't require such dignified clothes—or rather, high-quality fabric. The clothes I have at home are sufficient."

Without waiting for Klein to persuade him, he suggested, "With this additional income, we could truly have some savings. I plan on buying a few more books on accountancy for further study. Klein, Melissa, I do not wish for my weekly salary to remain below two pounds after five years. Heh, as you know, my boss and manager have shit for brains. It stinks the moment they open their mouths."

"Excellent idea," agreed Klein, seizing the opportunity to steer the conversation. "Why don't you read some of the grammar books in my room? To be truly dignified and to earn handsome pay, that's a critical element."

Perhaps, in the very near future, civil servant examinations would

appear in the Loen Kingdom. Preparing ahead of time would give him quite the advantage...

Benson's eyes lit up. "I'd indeed forgotten about that. Here, let's toast to a beautiful future." He wasn't drinking rye beer today; instead, he poured clear oyster broth into three cups and clinked them with his siblings.

After gulping down the clear broth, Klein chuckled as he looked at his sister, who was hard at work on her pan-fried fish. "Aside from Benson's books, I think Melissa needs a new dress, too."

Melissa looked up and shook her head fervently. "No, I think it's best—"

"To save it up," Klein finished her sentence.

"Mm-hmm." Melissa nodded in agreement.

"But honestly, if you don't insist on having the best fabrics and the newest designs, it wouldn't be too expensive. We can put the remainder into savings," Klein said firmly, leaving no room for disagreement.

Benson added in support, "Melissa, are you planning on wearing an old dress to Selena's sixteenth birthday party?"

Selena Wood was Melissa's good friend from school. Her family was decently well off. Her older brother worked as a solicitor, and her father was a senior employee at Backlund Bank's Tingen branch. Although the so-called party was only a dinner shared with friends, where they would chat and play cards, it was still an important occasion.

"All right." Melissa lowered her head and mumbled a response. Then she stabbed her fork forcefully into a chunk of stewed beef.

After a short silence, she suddenly recalled something and looked up abruptly. "Mrs. Shaud from next door sent her maidservant over with a calling card. She wishes to make a semi-formal call on us on Sunday—tomorrow—at four in the afternoon. She'd like to get to know her new neighbors."

"Mrs. Shaud?" Klein looked at his siblings, confounded.

Benson rapped the side of the table with his fingers and looked contemplative. "Mrs. Shaud from 4 Daffodil Street? I met her husband before. He's a senior solicitor."

“Senior solicitor... Perhaps he knows Selena’s brother,” Melissa said, hints of delight in her voice.

We live at 2 Daffodil Street...

Klein nodded slightly. “It’s imperative we get to know our neighbors, but as you know, I still have to be at work on Sunday. I won’t have time off until Monday. Please pass my apologies to Mrs. Shaud.”

With that said, he suddenly recalled the neighbors he had growing up in his previous life—as well as those from the flat on Ironcross Street—and he sighed lightly, amused. “A semi-formal call... Shouldn’t neighbors get to know each other organically, through natural interaction?”

“Ha-ha, Klein, you don’t understand. You’ve read a lot of newspapers recently, but you haven’t read those magazines catered toward families and women. They call families with an annual income of a hundred to a thousand pounds middle-class. They promote it as the backbone of the entire kingdom and praise how the middle class doesn’t have the arrogance of aristocrats or the crassness of the lower class,” Benson explained cheerfully.

“These magazines simplify many aristocratic customs and present them as marks of the middle class. That’s where the differences between intimate calls, semi-formal calls, and formal calls come from.”

As he spoke, Benson shook his head and chuckled. “Typically, gentlemen, ladies, and young misses who consider themselves middle-class will pay very particular attention to such details. They visit their neighbors and friends between two and six in the afternoon—it’s known as a morning call.”

“Morning call?” Klein and Melissa asked in surprise.

Why would a visit from two to six in the afternoon be called a morning call?

Benson set down his fork and knife, spread his hands, and smiled. “I don’t know, either. All I did was read the magazines my female colleagues brought. Hmm, perhaps it’s because they wear their morning gowns to make the call...”

Morning gowns were originally formal attire worn during mass or

official gatherings. Later, they became regarded as formal daytime wear, distinguishing them from evening gowns.

"All right. Remember to buy some good-quality coffee powder and tea leaves tomorrow morning and some scones and lemon cake from Mrs. Smyrin. We must present our best faces to our neighbors," Klein chuckled as he dipped his remaining bread into the meat sauce, added some potato, and put it into his mouth.

...

The next morning was Sunday morning.

Klein finished the last mouthful of low-grade tea, put down his newspaper, and donned his short top hat. Picking up his silver-inlaid walking stick, he sauntered out the door and took a coach to Jutland Street.

He greeted Rosanne, who had just finished her night shift and was heading to the break room for some sleep. Walking all the way down the stairs, he reached the basement.

After turning a corner, he ran into a Nighthawk member—Royale Reideen, a Sleepless. The lady looked cold and withdrawn, with long, slender brows atop large eyes and silky-smooth black hair.

"Good morning, Ms. Reideen," Klein greeted her with a smile.

Royale gazed at him with her deep blue eyes and nodded indiscernibly.

As the two quickly passed each other, Royale suddenly stopped and said, her eyes fixed ahead, "Ritualistic magic is a very dangerous thing."

Huh...? Klein was taken aback. By the time he turned around, all he saw was her back, receding into the distance.

"Thank you," he called quietly after Royale Reideen, frowning.

After taking a left turn, he quickly met Old Neil inside the armory. Unexpectedly, Brett was also there.

"Come on, let's go to my home. I've already gathered the necessary materials, and Brett has agreed to watch the armory for me," said Old Neil with a chuckle.

Klein was surprised. "We're not staying here?"

Holding the silver chest in his hands, Old Neil tutted, "There isn't enough space here to practice ritualistic magic."

Klein did not press further. He followed Old Neil out to the streets, and together, they took a coach to the suburbs in Northside.

Old Neil lived in a standalone house. The garden out front was filled with roses, gold mint, and other “materials.” Right inside the front door was a carpeted foyer furnished with two high-back chairs and an umbrella rack.

Beyond the foyer was a spacious drawing room. The walls were adorned with light-colored wallpaper, and the floors were a deep brown. In the center lay a floral-patterned rug with a heavy round table placed atop it. Surrounding the table were comfortable long benches, chairs, and even a piano.

“My late wife loved music very much,” Old Neil remarked, pointing at the piano. “The sofa and coffee table are in the drawing room... Let’s perform the ritualistic magic here in the sitting room.”

“All right,” Klein replied, though a little reserved.

After setting down the silver chest, Old Neil laughed and said, “Let me demonstrate a ritualistic magic for you. Make sure to observe and commit it to memory.”

As he spoke, he took out a faux-goatskin parchment from the chest. Using a specially made black ink that exuded a serene fragrance, he began to draw a strange picture on it. As Klein watched, he finally realized that Old Neil was, seemingly...likely...possibly...drawing an IOU!

When Old Neil filled in the corresponding field with the number 30 and the pound currency symbol, Klein couldn’t help but ask, puzzled and lost, “Mr. Neil, what kind of ritualistic magic are you doing?”

Old Neil coughed and answered very seriously, “I’m using magic to settle my debt of thirty pounds today.”

That’s allowed?!

Klein’s eyes widened as his mouth dropped open.

CHAPTER 51

◆ GROUNDED RITUALISTIC MAGIC ◆

Settling an IOU using magic?!

Is he trying to curse his debtor to death or create counterfeit notes?

I might not have a solution to the problem, but I can finish you instead?

...

All sorts of thoughts vied for space in Klein's mind. Even the look he gave Old Neil was a little strange. He began seriously considering the possibility of calling the police, no—of informing the Nighthawks.

Old Neil peered at him and said, peeved, "In your eyes, I see ignorance, foolishness, and a weak, shameless lack of faith. Didn't Dunn tell you the tenet of the Mystery Pryers? Do as you wish but do no harm! Although this principle originated from the secret and wicked Ascetic Order of Moss, Beyonders who choose the path of Mystery Pryers have proven its truth through their own lived experiences. As long as one strictly abides by it and shows the necessary reverence, the risk of losing control will be minimized—and the reverse has also been true. Your suspicion of me is an insult to Mystery Pryers!"

"I apologize," Klein said immediately, admitting his fault. He had indeed forgotten what Dunn Smith once said about the maxim.

Old Neil was not truly angry. He soon chuckled and said, "A pity.

Very few Beyonders choose to be Seers. There is no corresponding maxim to help you."

But I have Emperor Roselle's diary... Yes, strictly abiding by the maxim is itself a way of "acting"...

As the thought suddenly occurred to him, Klein nodded in contemplation.

Old Neil did not continue with the rebuke. Instead, he removed the vases and other items from the round table and placed them in a corner. Next, he took out two candles from the chest—a red one and a black one. He explained, "If ordinary people attempt ritualistic magic, they must follow the results from astromancy or check the corresponding manuals to choose a suitable date and time—for example, the Sunday that represents the Goddess and the moon hours that She presides over. But for us Beyonders, especially those with expertise in this domain, there is no need for that. Our strong sense for the spiritual and powerful astral bodies are the most important part. Of course, if you are not confident about the ritualistic magic you are attempting, it's best to choose a suitable date and time to increase the probability of success. Ah, right, you must also remember this one premise and strictly abide by it!"

Old Neil placed the two candles down and turned his body to look at Klein. In a very solemn voice, he said, "Low-rank Beyonders are not strong enough. Almost all the ritualistic magic they perform seeks help from external powers. Therefore, you can only consider orthodox deities like the Goddess or the Lord of Storms. Absolutely and under no circumstances should you attempt to communicate with unknown or unpredictable entities, even if people believe in them or the promises recorded in books seem enticing! Believe me, do not take any chances. If you only attempt it once, you will go down a slippery slope into the abyss with no return. Any work or resistance will only slow it down without changing its trajectory."

"I'll remember!" Klein said in a firm, deep voice, though inwardly he felt sheepish.

My luck-enhancement ritual seems to be asking for power from an unknown and unpredictable entity...

Furthermore, I have gained actual powers that even an experienced Beyonder like The Hanged Man finds unbelievable—capable of pulling people up above the gray fog. Well...at least I think he is an experienced Beyonder...

Thankfully, I haven't gone mad or exhibited any signs of losing control...

Worrying over this, Klein proactively changed the subject. "So the best option for Nighthawks is to seek the help of the Goddess?"

"No one will stop you if you pray to the Lord of Storms. However, He might not reply or would reply with malicious intent. That would cause our ritualistic magic to take an unpredictable turn." With his joking response, Old Neil successfully dispelled Klein's idea. There was no so-called "best" option; there was only one.

After his exhortations, Old Neil picked up the red candle and said, "Using candles made of moonflowers and crimson sandalwood in ritualistic magic points to the Goddess's identity as the Master of Crimson."

He pointed to the black candle and said, "Made of night vanilla and slumber flowers, representing the night."

As he spoke, he placed the black candle on the top left of the round table while positioning the red candle on the top right.

"Why do we symbolize the Goddess with only two candles? She is also the Mother of Secrets, Queen of Calamity and Fear, and Lord of Repose and Silence."

"That's right. I was hoping you'd ask that," Old Neil chuckled. "Before their fall, the Ascetic Order of Moss had a very good relationship with our church. Some of their beliefs and accomplishments in ritualistic magic have greatly influenced us."

"They believe that all objects are numeric and that every number has a spirituality. In ritualistic magic, zero represents the unknown and Chaos—symbolizing the state of the universe before it was born."

One represents a beginning, the first Creator. Two represents the world and the various deities born of His body. Three represents contact between the gods and the material world, when all things came into being. Here, we use two candles to represent the Goddess, while the third candle is for ourselves. Which two candles and which two symbols to use would depend on the intended effects of the ritualistic magic."

*Three begets all things? All things stem from three?*⁸

Klein could not help but recall certain concepts from his previous life.

Seeing Klein listen attentively, Old Neil took a third candle and said, "This is the candle that represents the 'me.' It's a very ordinary candle with just a hint of mint added. Remember that plants like roses, lemons, mint, moonflower, night vanilla, and slumber flower are all loved and favored by the Goddess.

"On the other hand, the three candles also represent the body, spirituality, and divinity in every person."

After finishing the description, Old Neil placed the third candle in the center of the round table. Next, he took out a bottle of concocted Full Moon Elixir, a large cauldron engraved with the Sacred Emblem of Darkness, a silver knife embellished with elaborate patterns, a cup of water, and a small plate of coarse salt.

"Beyonders whose expertise is not in ritualistic magic will also need a bell, a crystal ball, a silver cup, incense, and other supplementary items. However, Mystery Pryers and Seers have no need for those. These items are already sufficient."

Old Neil placed the faux-goatskin parchment drawn with the IOU beside the cauldron at the end of the round table closest to them and used a special quill to hold down one corner of it. He then turned to Klein and said, "Ritualistic magic needs a clean spiritual environment where you will not be disturbed. We need to create that

⁸ The first line of chapter forty-two of *Tao Te Ching*, a classic and foundational work of Taoism.

ourselves. The steps are to first enter into a trance, focus your mind, and use a supplementary item to guide your power outward—constructing it around us. For example, the Holy Night Powder I used at Ryer Bieber’s home and the silver ceremonial dagger I will be using now.

“Throughout the entire process, we must determine the appropriate symbolism and corresponding incantation based on the outcome we desire. Incantations are best performed in Hermes since ancient Hermes originated from nature. It’s akin to ancient Dragonese or ancient Elvish. Its effects are very direct, lacking the concealment and protection that other forms offer, which can easily put the caster in danger. This is also why it has been reformed over time. However, there’s no doubt that it is more effective.

“All right, I must focus on the ritualistic magic now. I won’t explain things any further. Pay close attention with your eyes and ears and remember any questions you might have. Ask me once everything is done.”

“Okay.” Klein took two steps back and fixed his gaze on Old Neil.

Old Neil’s eyes rapidly darkened as an invisible gust of wind began to swirl around him. He was silent for a moment. Then, proceeding in order from left to right and top to bottom, he used the friction between his psyche and the physical object to ignite the three candles in succession.

Next, he picked up the silver knife and jabbed it into the coarse salt while chanting the incantation in Hermes:

“I sanctify you, blade of pure silver!

“I cleanse and purify you, enabling you to serve me in this ritual!”

...

“In the name of the Evernight Goddess, the Master of Crimson...

“You have been sanctified!”

After those short but powerful words of ancient origin, Old Neil withdrew the silver knife and inserted it into the cup of clear water. Then he lifted it and pointed toward the space beyond the round table.

He aimed the tip of the blade at the periphery and took a step forward, slowly circling the table. With every step, Klein felt an invisible energy radiate from the silver knife. Filled with spirituality, it merged with the air and formed a completely sealed wall around the altar.

After completing one circuit around the table, the altar was entirely isolated from its surroundings.

Old Neil then stood before the round table and set the silver knife down. He picked up the vial of Full Moon Elixir and carefully dripped three drops onto each of the black, crimson, and ordinary candles.

Szzzzt!

A thin mist sizzled forth, and everything seemed to become shrouded in mystery.

Old Neil put down the glass vial and stared silently at the faux-goatskin parchment for two minutes. Then he picked up the quill and drew a symbol of containment—a square encompassing all the content on the page—indicating that he had “contained” the debt.

Following that, Old Neil drew a cross on the parchment, indicating that the IOU was canceled. Upon reaching this step, he picked up the parchment with one hand and tapped the center of his brow with the other to activate his spirit vision.

Another invisible, exuberant energy bloomed around him. He began chanting in a low voice:

“I ask for the power of the Evernight;

“I ask for the power of the Crimson;

“I ask for the Goddess’s loving grace,

“For the funds to pay this IOU.

“Night vanilla, herb of the crimson moon, please bestow your powers to my incantation!

“Moonflower, herb of the crimson moon, please bestow your powers to my incantation!”

...

Beside him, Klein was completely flabbergasted. A myriad of thoughts arose in him.

Does such an incantation really work?

Although it was recited and written in Hermes...

Isn't this way too simple, basic, and down to earth?

Wouldn't the Goddess be angry and multiply the debt severalfold?

At that moment, the candlelight suddenly flared!

After Old Neil finished his incantation, he closed his eyes for two minutes. Then he picked up the vial of Full Moon Elixir and dripped one drop onto each of the three candles again.

Next, he grabbed the parchment and held it close to the candle representing the "self." Once the parchment ignited, he immediately threw it into the cauldron. Old Neil closed his eyes once more, as if to feel the IOU burning away.

After a while, he opened his eyes and looked toward the cauldron. The parchment had been completely incinerated, leaving only ash behind.

"Praise the Lady!" Old Neil declared as he tapped his chest in four spots, forming the shape of the crimson moon. Then he extinguished the candles in the opposite order from which he had lit them.

After finishing everything, he used the silver knife to rip apart the invisible wall around him. As a giant gust of wind swept over them, Old Neil heaved an obvious sigh of relief.

"All done."

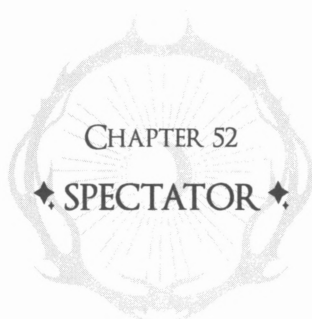
"That's it?" Klein asked, stunned. "Your debt has been settled? How?"

"I don't know, either. In any case, it will be settled in a reasonable manner," Old Neil replied with a smile, spreading his palms in a shrug.

What...?

Klein was at a loss for words. What should he say or do?

Will this actually work?



“Stop worrying about that bloody IOU. Let us discuss ritualistic magic.” Old Neil put away the candles, cauldron, silver knife, and other items with a relaxed expression.

Klein really wanted to shrug the way Americans did in his previous life, but ultimately, he refrained from such an ungentlemanly gesture. Instead, he turned his focus toward the ritualistic magic and asked questions about some details that puzzled him and received certain answers. For example, all incantations followed a set template. As long as that was satisfied and the key meaning of the request was expressed in Hermes, the rest could be left to one’s creativity. Of course, blasphemy or disrespectful descriptions were absolutely forbidden.

The mysticism class lasted until noon. Old Neil cleared his throat and said, “We must return to Jutland Street now.” Then he grumbled incoherently, “To get these bloody materials, I missed my beloved breakfast.”

Klein looked around, both amused and puzzled. “Mr. Neil, do you have a cook? Or a maidservant to cook for you?” A weekly salary of twelve pounds was enough to hire several servants! According to the newspapers, with board and lodging provided, hiring an average cook only cost anywhere between twelve to fifteen soli

a week—not even one pound. A maidservant to do miscellaneous housework was even cheaper; their weekly salaries ranged between three soli and six pence to six soli. Of course, one could not have high expectations of their culinary skills.

But...that's not right. With Mr. Neil's outstanding debt of thirty pounds, it's only natural he doesn't hire any cooks or servants...

It seems I've asked another inappropriate question...

While Klein wallowed in regret, Old Neil shook his head and seemed unbothered. "I often attempt ritualistic magic, research extraordinary items, and read corresponding documents at home, so I can't and won't hire ordinary people as my cook, footman, or maidservant. I only pay someone to come by regularly and clean up the place. And if they aren't ordinary people, do you think they'd be willing to do such jobs?"

"I seem to have asked a silly question. It's possibly because I will not do anything that involves mysticism at home," Klein explained in a self-deprecating manner.

Old Neil had long since stood up. He donned his bowler hat as he walked out the door, still mumbling, "I think I smell pan-fried foie gras... Once the IOU is completely settled, I'll definitely get some! I'm sure I can eat a whole roasted pork loin with apple glaze for lunch. No, that's not enough. I must also have a sausage with a side of mashed potatoes..."

You're making me hungry...

Klein swallowed his saliva. He caught up with Old Neil, and they headed to the nearby coach stop together.

After alighting at Jutland Street, Old Neil suddenly hummed in surprise. "What is that? Oh Goddess! What is that I'm seeing?" He dashed to the curbside, suddenly as nimble as a seventeen- or eighteen-year-old lad, and picked up an object.

Klein drew closer out of curiosity and looked carefully. He realized it was a finely crafted leather wallet. With his limited experience, he could barely tell if the dark brown wallet was made of cowhide or

lambskin, but he noticed a small light-blue crest embroidered on it. Above the crest was a white dove spreading its wings.

That was Klein's first impression. Upon a second look, his attention was drawn to the bulging wallet and the stack of paper notes inside. They were gray pound notes imprinted with black ink—at least twenty of them!

Old Neil opened the wallet and pulled out the notes. As he examined them carefully, he suddenly chortled. "Ten-pound notes depicting the honorable Founder and Protector of our country, William the First. Oh my Goddess. There are thirty of these, along with a few five-pound, one-pound, and even some five-soli notes."

More than three hundred pounds? That was an enormous sum in every sense of the word! He might not save that much even if he had ten years... Klein's breathing grew heavy involuntarily. Since gold pounds were immensely valuable, finding such a wallet was equivalent to stumbling upon a briefcase stuffed with cash in his previous life.

"I wonder who dropped it... He can't be an ordinary person," Klein analyzed calmly. Such a wallet clearly did not belong to a woman.

"There's no need to wonder who he is," Old Neil chuckled. "It's not as though we'd take money that doesn't belong to us. Let's wait here for a while. I believe the gentleman will soon return to look for it. This isn't a small sum by any means."

Klein heaved a sigh of relief, gaining a renewed understanding of Old Neil's character. He had been rather worried that Old Neil might use the Goddess's blessing as an excuse to pay off his debt with this money, so he had been trying hard to think of a way to stop him or persuade him otherwise. Now the maxim "do as you wish but do no harm" began to make a little more sense.

Their wait was brief. In less than a minute, a luxurious four-wheel carriage sped down the street toward them. On either side of its light-blue crest, a dove with outspread wings was visible. When the carriage halted, a middle-aged man dressed in a black suit with

a matching bow tie stepped out. He took one look at the wallet, removed his hat, and said politely, "Gentlemen, I believe that is my master's wallet."

"Your crest is proof of everything," replied Old Neil politely, "but I need to make additional verifications. This is to be responsible for all parties. Might I ask how much money is in the wallet?"

The middle-aged man was momentarily taken aback, but he quickly replied in a self-deprecating tone, "As a butler, I am not privy to the exact sum in my master's wallet. I'm sorry. Please allow me to inquire."

"Please go ahead," Old Neil said, extending his arm in a courteous gesture.

The butler walked over to the side of the carriage and conversed with the passenger inside through the window. A moment later, he returned, smiling. "The amount is more than 300 pounds but less than 350 pounds. My master does not recall the exact number."

Doesn't remember...? What a filthy rich bastard. If I had that much money on me, I would definitely be counting it over and over..., Klein thought, filled with envy.

Old Neil nodded and handed the wallet back. "With the Goddess as witness, this belongs to you."

The man took the wallet and roughly counted the notes before pulling out three ten-pound notes. "My master is Sir Dwyer. He said your character is commendable, and this is what an honest person deserves. Please do not refuse."

Sir Dwyer? The one who established the Dwyer Trust? The Sir Dwyer who provides cheap rental housing to bottom-class laborers? Klein immediately remembered the name. He was the nobleman his brother respected but did not believe to be very worldly.

"Please thank Sir Dwyer for me. He is a kind and generous gentleman," Old Neil said as he accepted the three notes.

Watching Sir Dwyer's carriage drive off, Old Neil made sure there was no one around before turning to Klein. Flicking the notes in his hand, he laughed and said, "Thirty pounds. My debt is settled.

Didn't I say it would be resolved in a reasonable manner? This is the power of magic."

...*Holy crap. It is the power of magic! Is this really allowed?!* Klein was once again flabbergasted.

A few minutes later, as he climbed the stairs to the security company, he wondered aloud, "Mr. Neil, why didn't you ask for a larger amount?"

"Don't be greedy. One must take special care not to be greedy when performing ritualistic magic. Self-restraint is a critical trait for every Mystery Pryer if they wish to live a sufficiently long life," explained Old Neil happily.

...

In a huge ballroom, candles burned on several chandeliers, emitting a fragrance that soothed the mind. Their sheer number produced a light in no way inferior to that of gas lamps. Long tables were laden with pan-fried foie gras, grilled steak, roasted chicken, pan-fried sole, Desi oysters, lamb stew, cream soup, and other delicacies. Bottles upon bottles of Mist champagne, Aurmir grape wine, and Southweir red wine glistened invitingly under the candlelight.

Servants in red waistcoats carried trays of crystal goblets as they shuttled between the extravagantly dressed ladies and gentlemen.

Audrey Hall wore a collared, high-waisted, off-white dress with leg-of-mutton sleeves. Her bodice was fitted, and her waist cinched tightly, while the voluminous layers of her skirt were puffed up perfectly with a cage crinoline. Her long blond hair was coiled in an elegant bun, and her earrings, necklace, and rings dazzled. On her feet, she wore white dancing shoes inlaid with roses and diamonds.

How many petticoats am I even wearing? Five? Six? she mused silently. With her right hand gloved in white silk, Audrey gently touched her crinoline. Her left hand held a glass of sparkling champagne.

Audrey did not place herself at the center of attention as she usually did. Instead, she avoided the bustle and stood quietly in the shadows of hanging curtains by the floor-to-ceiling windows. She sipped her

champagne and watched the crowd as though she did not belong among them.

Earl Woolf's youngest son is chatting with Viscount Conrad's daughter. He likes to wave his forearm emphatically when he speaks. Hmm, the larger the gesture, the more unbelievable his words. That is something gleaned from experience... He can't stop trying to elevate himself by putting others down, even when he feels self-conscious. His words and his body language say it all.

Duchess Della has repeatedly covered her mouth with her left hand while laughing. Ah, I see. She is showing off her dazzlingly ocean-blue sapphire...

Her husband, Duke Negan, is standing nearby, discussing the current political situation with a few Conservative nobles. Since the ball began, he has proactively searched for Duchess Della with his eyes only once...

They almost never make eye contact. Hmm...maybe they aren't as in love as they pretend to be...

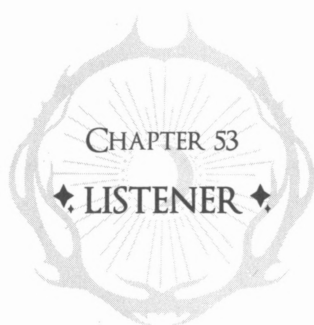
Baron Larry has made Lady Parnes laugh seven times already. That's very normal—nothing strange about it. But why does she look at her husband with guilty eyes? Ah, now they've gone their separate ways... That's not right. The directions in which they left both lead to the garden...

...

At this extravagant ball, Audrey noticed many details she never had before. There was a moment when she nearly believed she was watching an opera. *They're all such good actors...* She sighed silently as her eyes remained clear.

At that moment, she suddenly sensed something. She whipped her head around and cast her gaze toward a dark corner of the large balcony outside. In the shadows sat a large golden retriever, silently watching her with quiet eyes, half of its body hidden in darkness.

"Susie..." The corners of Audrey's mouth twitched as her expression instantly fell. She could no longer maintain her role as a Spectator.



An ancient, three-masted ship rocked among the waves in a tumultuous storm. It was neither large nor fast. Beneath the cataclysmic scene, where the sky and sea merged as one, the ship resembled a withered leaf torn from its tree. Yet regardless of how fiercely the storm raged or how violently the waves roiled, it continued sailing peacefully, without any sign of tilting.

Alger Wilson stood on the spacious deck, gazing at the towering waves and brooding over something.

"It'll be Monday again soon..." he muttered.

It was the day belonging to the Earth Mother—the beginning of a new cycle of waxing and waning. Yet to Alger, it meant something different: It belonged to a mysterious entity forever encased in grayish-white fog.

"At least I haven't devolved into a madman..." He chuckled self-deprecatingly.

At that moment, one of the few remaining crew members drew closer and asked reverently, "Lord Bishop, what is our destination this time?"

Alger surveyed his surroundings and replied calmly, "We are hunting down the Listener from the Aurora Order."

...

The storm subsided, but a lingering mist enveloped everything. Aboard a strange, anachronistic sailboat armed with cannons, a boy of about eight or nine with soft blond hair watched the disorderly pirates around him in fear. Some drank from large kegs of beer, others swung from ropes, some mocked each other, and a few even fought with their fists.

The boy turned to a black-robed man standing in the shadows and whispered, "Father, where are we going?"

Five days ago marked the first time he remembered seeing his father—a man who had proclaimed himself an adventurer. If it weren't for the oil painting his late mother left him, which confirmed his father's identity, and the open doors of the orphanage awaiting him, he would have been unwilling to leave his hometown to follow his only kin—a man who was nearly a stranger.

The man in the shadows lowered his head and looked at his son with an amiable expression. "Jack, I'm taking you to a holy place—the holy residence where the Creator once lived."

"Is that the Kingdom of God? We mortals can only enter by winning His grace..." Jack, well-educated by his mother, knew this much. He was both surprised and fearful at the prospect.

The man's chiseled profile was unforgettable, like a sculpture crafted by a master. He placed his hand to his ear as if listening to something, then replied in a voice that sounded almost like sleep-talking, "Jack, 'mortals' is a misnomer. The Creator created this world and is everywhere. He exists in every living being. Therefore, all beings are divine. Once their divinity reaches a certain level, they can become angels. The seven false gods we now worship are nothing more than powerful angels.

"See, I can hear the teachings of the Creator now. Ah, how extraordinary is this revelation! Life is but a tour of the mind. When the mind is sufficiently powerful and resilient, we can discover our own divinity and become one with even greater divinity..."

Jack, not fully understanding, shook his head and asked another question he previously did not have the chance to. "Father, I heard

Mother say that after the Creator made this world, He split into all beings and no longer exists in it. Then how can a holy residence exist?"

He already possessed sufficient logic even as a young child.

The man with the chiseled face was taken aback. He turned his head away, as though he'd heard even more murmurings.

Suddenly, the man dropped to his knees, prostrating himself on the deck. Green-black protrusions emerged from his exposed skin, as if ready to break out. Covering his head with both hands, his expression warped in agony as he shouted, "They're lying!"

...

After lunch, with a promise from Old Neil that he would bring his wallet the next time he visited the black market, Klein slowly returned to Blackthorn Security Company. He weighed two options: reading ancient documents in the staff office and practicing his new abilities or seizing the opportunity to work as a Seer in the Divination Club before Captain Dunn revoked his afternoon stroll privilege.

Before he could decide, he saw Dunn Smith walk in, clad in his usual black trench coat and short top hat.

"Captain, any updates?" Klein asked with concern, thinking about the whereabouts of the Antigonus family's notebook.

With no sign of fatigue in his gray eyes, Dunn replied, "Multiple sources have confirmed that the Antigonus family's notebook is in Ryer Bieber's hands. However, he has vanished without a trace. I've already informed the other Nighthawks teams via telegram and asked them to monitor the ports and train stations. The first batch of printed portraits was posted yesterday afternoon and will soon appear in several major newspapers."

How nice it would be if there were phones, fax machines, surveillance cameras, and big data... Unfortunately, I only know how to use them and, even then, only understand a little about how they work on a fundamental level... Klein sighed to himself.

"But regardless, we can consider ourselves as having found the notebook. And this is all thanks to you. Of course, it still needs

another round of confirmation. I've sent a telegram to the Backlund diocese, requesting that they escort Sealed Artifact 2-049 here. It was once a dangerous item of the Antigonus family and can help us determine if Ryer Bieber is a descendant."

A Grade Two Sealed Artifact... Dangerous... These must be used with care and restraint. Klein had originally wanted to ask about the Sealed Artifact, its special abilities, and the danger it posed, but he recalled that he lacked the necessary clearance. He had no choice but to let it go.

"May the Goddess bless us." Klein tapped four spots on his chest, drawing the sign of the full moon.

Dunn opened the door to his office and said with a slight nod, "The Goddess has always been watching over us. Klein, if you had not chosen Seer, you would have been able to take the Sleepless potion once this matter is confirmed and you become a formal member. What a pity... Frankly, I'm still puzzled by your choice of Seer. Although Corpse Collector might be a bit off-putting, you've seen Daly as well. You should know the incredible power of Spirit Mediums. As for Mystery Pryers, that's a good choice, too. At the very least, you have Old Neil as a role model, so your risk of losing control will be very low."

Klein had long prepared an answer for this question but had never had the chance to use it—until now. He organized his thoughts and said, "My considerations stem from the fact that Seers and Mystery Pryers are both Beyonders in supporting roles. They don't need to face enemies directly—that's too dangerous for me. Both you and Old Neil have said that in the domain of mystery and mysticism, curiosity and exploration often lead to terrifying outcomes. Therefore, the description of Mystery Pryers as seekers of secrets gave me pause. Heh, as you know, I was only an ordinary university student not long ago. A lack of courage is the only reason I made that choice."

"I must say, that is an unexpected but very reasonable answer," Dunn remarked, massaging his temples and chuckling. He turned halfway and sized up Klein with his gray eyes. "Continue to go out in the afternoons for a while. Do not limit yourself to the route from

Welch's residence to Ironcross Street. Who knows, maybe you'll happen to sense the notebook and help us narrow down Ryer Bieber's location."

"All right." Klein realized that he no longer needed to choose between his options. He bade Dunn farewell and began silently counting to himself.

Three, two...

"Hold on," Dunn called after him.

Klein turned his head and smiled. "Captain, is there anything else?"

Dunn cleared his throat and said, "Mm-hmm. Beyonders in support roles also have to fight their enemies from time to time. Although Seers can avoid such battles, we cannot let our guard down. You have to keep up your shooting practice and train your body."

"This is exactly what I'm working hard toward," Klein pointed outside. "Then...I'll be leaving."

"All right. Uh, wait a moment," Dunn called again. After a pause, he added, "Perhaps I have to consider hiring a combat trainer for you. Of course, that is only after you become a formal member."

Klein responded tersely, then asked cautiously, "Captain, is there anything else?"

"No." Seeing the disbelief in Klein's eyes, Dunn shook his head and smiled, emphasizing, "Really, I'm done."

Only then did Klein walk through the partition. He bade farewell to Rosanne and Mrs. Orianna and headed to the Jutland Shooting Club for target practice. After an hour of ambling about the streets and diligently completing the assignment the captain had given him, he went to the Divination Club, where the beautiful Angelica was leisurely reading a magazine.

Family... Klein silently read the title to himself. With his cane in hand, he walked over and greeted her with a smile, "Good afternoon, Ms. Angelica."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Moretti." Without haste, Angelica set her magazine aside, then stood up and said, "Not long after you left

yesterday, Mr. Glacis came by. He had just recovered from a major illness.”

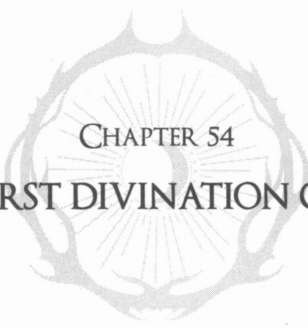
Klein heaved a sigh of relief and smiled. “That sure is something worth celebrating.”

Angelica, who had been secretly observing him, lowered her voice and asked with curiosity, “Mr. Glacis said that you are a very, very, very incredible physician. Is that true?”

Hub? Klein looked at her, wondering if he was hearing things.

What made him think I'm a doctor?

I haven't the faintest clue...



CHAPTER 54

◆ THE FIRST DIVINATION CLIENT ◆

Upon seeing Klein's surprised expression, Angelica suddenly wasn't so sure anymore.

"Is it not? Mr. Glacis said that you were able to tell of an ailment in his lungs simply by observation..." she trailed off.

Observation? The darkness between his brows? Klein was instantly enlightened as he shook his head with a chortle. "I believe Mr. Glacis has misunderstood."

He had planned on being perfunctory, but he recalled that no one had sought his divination services the entire afternoon yesterday—making his goal of acting like a Seer very unsuccessful. His mind whirled, and he explained, "It's actually a form of divination."

"Divination? But Mr. Glacis only mentioned that you observed his face. Is that also a form of divination?" Angelica asked, equal parts surprised and doubtful.

Klein smiled, composed. "As a member of the Divination Club, you should know about palm-reading, right?"

Palm-reading was by no means exclusive to his home country of China. Even on Earth, India and ancient Europe had independently developed their own methods—much less in a world with extraordinary powers.

"I know about it, but it seems you did not read his palms, either? Did you observe him in secret?" Angelica inquired curiously.

"I was reading his face," Klein fibbed smoothly. "The underlying principles aren't very different from palm-reading."

"Really?" Angelica's eyes filled with disbelief.

To develop his career as a fortune teller, Klein chuckled and pretended to be in thought as he tapped twice on his brow. He focused his gaze on Angelica, whose aura appeared before his eyes. Her head shined purple, her limbs glowed red, and her throat displayed blue hues. There were no signs of ill health, just certain colors that were a bit duller than normal—a sign of ordinary fatigue.

Klein then looked at her emotions and saw orange mixed with red and blue, indicating warmth with some excitement and pensiveness. *Thank goodness...* After confirming that nothing was out of the ordinary, Klein planned on deactivating his spirit vision. It was then that he suddenly spotted an intense, dull gray hidden in the depths of her emotions.

She's also missing a little white—an eagerness to improve... Klein nodded in thought.

"Mr. Moretti, are you reading my face?" she asked, half-curious and half-worried. The young gentleman before her had suddenly fallen silent while studying her with a serious expression.

Klein did not immediately reply. Instead, he tapped his brow again, as if deep in thought. Just as Angelica's unease grew, he said gently, "Ms. Angelica, if you have certain pains and sorrows, do not bury them in your heart."

Angelica's eyes widened, and her mouth fell open, but she could not utter a word. She looked at Klein's short top hat and apparent bookish demeanor. She heard him say, in a deep, comforting, and warm voice, "You need to go on a hike, play a game of tennis, or perform in a tragic play to physically exhaust your body through exercise. Let your tears flow uninhibited—cry and scream. Release all of these emotions. That should be very good for you."

The moment those words reached her ears, Angelica froze as if she

had turned to stone. She blinked hard and lowered her head in a flutter, murmuring, "Thank you for your suggestion..."

"It seems there are many members here today?" Klein asked, not continuing his divination. As if having done no divination at all, he turned and peered into the meeting room at the end of the corridor.

"Sunday afternoon... At least fifty members..." Angelica's voice came out hoarse, managing only the key words. After a pause, her voice gradually returned to normal. "Would you like black tea or coffee?"

"Cibo black tea, please." Klein nodded slightly, removed his hat, and slowly walked into the meeting room. Only after he vanished behind the door did Angelica slowly let out a long breath.

...

The Divination Club's meeting room was very large—nearly twice the size of Klein's high school classroom. In the past, only five or six members would be present, making the room look extremely empty. Now, dozens of fortune tellers sat in different spots, in groups of two or three, filling up most of the room. Sunlight streamed in through the bay windows. Some members were discussing softly among themselves or gathered around Hines Vincent, asking him questions.

Others were practicing divination or quietly sipping coffee and reading newspapers by themselves. Such a scene made Klein feel as if he were back in his school days on Earth—though back then it was noisier and more rowdy, lacking the tranquility of the meeting room.

He glanced around but did not see familiar faces like Glacis or Edward Steve. So he casually picked up a divination textbook, found a quiet corner, and began flipping through it leisurely.

Very soon, Angelica returned with a cup of tea and set it on the table before him. Just as she was about to leave quietly, she noticed Klein take out an exquisite silver chain from his left sleeve, with a pure yellow crystal hanging from one end.

What is he doing? Angelica slowed down subconsciously and focused her gaze on him.

Klein held the silver chain in his left hand, allowing the yellow

crystal to dangle above his cup of Cibo black tea, just barely skimming the surface of the liquid.

With a serene expression, he half-closed his eyes. In that instant, the atmosphere around him became quiet and still. The yellow crystal began moving ever so slightly, rotating in a clockwise direction along with the silver chain.

Angelica thought, *Mr. Moretti is truly mysterious.*

"The black tea is pretty good," Klein said softly after opening his eyes with a smile. He had done all of that intentionally, ensuring Angelica would see his divination in action. If he wanted people to choose him for their divination services, Angelica's recommendation as the club's receptionist was crucial.

Since he was going to act as a Seer, Klein no longer harbored any reservations. He was ready to devote himself completely to this persona.

"...Yes, Mr. Vaness is very picky about the quality of tea," Angelica remarked after a short pause.

Klein put away his spirit pendulum, winding it around his wrist. Then he lifted the patterned white porcelain cup and held it up politely toward her with a smile.

...

Angelica returned to the reception hall, but she was no longer in the mood for magazines. She sat silently, gazing into the distance, lost in thought. This continued until she heard knocks on the door. Startled, she hurried to the entrance, where a young lady in a light blue dress stood.

The young lady removed her cap adorned with a powder-blue ribbon, revealing a face heavy with melancholy.

"Good afternoon, miss. Would you like to join the Divination Club, or are you seeking a divination?" Angelica asked in her usual courteous tone.

"I want a divination," the girl replied, biting her lip. Her eyes were beautiful but tinged with sorrow.

Angelica guided her to a sofa and explained in detail how the

Divination Club worked. Then she handed over the club's album and said, "You may take your pick."

In her low spirits, the girl flipped through the album. With so many club members there that day, and too many choices, it left her a bit agitated.

"Can you recommend one from these few pages?" she gestured toward the middle section of the album—omitting fortune tellers priced above two soli and those below four pence.

Angelica took the album, examined it for a few minutes, and then deliberated before saying, "I recommend this gentleman."

The girl looked where Angelica was pointing and realized it was a fortune teller named Klein Moretti.

"...This Mr. Moretti has just joined the club... Is he reliable?" she asked, worried.

Angelica nodded with great certainty. "Another club member and I can say for sure that Mr. Moretti is an outstanding fortune teller. If he weren't so new, his fees would be much higher."

"I understand," the sad young lady replied, nodding. "I will choose Mr. Moretti for a divination, then."

"All right, please wait just a moment." Angelica took the album and walked toward the meeting room. Approaching Klein, she said quietly beside him, "Mr. Moretti, someone seeks your divination services. Which room would you like to use?"

That sure was effective. My very first customer is here. Klein put down his teacup and nodded calmly as he said, "The Topaz Room."

"Sure." Angelica walked slowly ahead of him, led him to the Topaz Room, and opened its wooden door.

Klein took his seat behind a table adorned with various instruments of divination. Less than a minute later, he saw a woman enter. She wore a long blue dress and had a melancholic air about her. Seizing the moment as she was closing the door, Klein tapped twice on his brow.

The yellow in her stomach seems a little dull... The darkness of her emotions is heavy, filled mainly with worry and anxiety...

Klein looked her over carefully and leaned back. He then tapped his brow again to deactivate his spirit vision.

“Good day, Mr. Moretti,” the woman in the light blue dress said as she sat down.

“Good afternoon. How may I address you?” Klein asked politely, not expecting much in return—he knew that many people preferred not to use their real names during divination.

“You can call me Anna.” She set her cap aside, meeting Klein’s gaze with a mix of anticipation and doubt. Then she continued, “I would like to divine about my fiancé’s situation. He traveled to the Southern Continent in March for business. On the third day of last month, he sent a telegram to his family and me, saying he was about to set sail and return. But it has been twenty days, and he hasn’t come back. At first, I believed his delay was due to bad weather on the Berserk Sea, but now it’s been over a month. The ship he took—the *Alfalfa*—still hasn’t arrived at Enmat Harbor.”

The ocean separating the Northern and Southern Continents, known as the Berserk Sea, was infamous for its frequent natural calamities and perilous currents. If not for Emperor Roselle—who sent ships to discover safer sailing routes—the countries in the Northern Continent would have still been struggling to enter the age of colonization, let alone laying underwater cables for a transoceanic telegraph.

Klein regarded his very first client as a Seer and asked carefully, “Which divination method do you wish to use?”



Anna hesitated for almost twenty seconds before speaking. “You may choose whichever method you believe will be most accurate. You are the fortune teller, while I’m not. Of course, apart from cards. Tarot, for instance. I’ve even tried studying them at home, and they always felt more like toys or a game.”

Klein considered her words for a moment, his wrists resting on the edge of the table as his hands steepled before his face. Then he said softly, with a peaceful gaze, “Then we shall use the star chart.”

He pointed to a dip pen and a stack of white paper on the table. “Please write down your fiancé’s name, his external features, his address, and his date of birth. It would be even better if you could remember the specific time he was born.”

From her clothes, makeup, and demeanor, Klein trusted that she was literate. Without a word, Anna reached for a piece of paper, dipped the pen in ink, and began writing, pausing occasionally to think. Two minutes later, she pushed the paper toward Klein.

Klein turned the page around. The information read:

Joyce Meyer. DOB: September 15, 1323, 2:00 PM. Tingen, Eastside, 8 Stevens Street. Short blond hair, aquiline nose...

With a brief glance, Klein quickly calculated her fiancé’s birthday number:

$$1+5=6$$

In mystical numerology, the single-digit sum of the day of birth was called the birthday number; it influenced the first twenty-seven years of life. The birth month number (calculated by adding the digits of the month) affected life from twenty-seven to fifty-four years old. Meanwhile, the birth year number (calculated by adding the digits of the year) affected life from fifty-four onward.

It was July 1349 today, so Joyce was not yet twenty-seven; thus, Klein immediately calculated his birthday number.

The number six signified a balanced and harmonious life, often with a decent, loving marriage or engagement. Next, he quickly computed Joyce's personal year number. The personal year number was determined by replacing the birth year with the current year and then adding that result to the birthday and birth month numbers to gain insight into the person's luck for the year.

$$1+3+4+9=17;$$

$$1+7=8;$$

$$8+9 \text{ (Birth Month Path Number)}+6 \text{ (Birth Day Path Number)}=23;$$

$$2+3=5.$$

Therefore, his personal year number is 5, signifying that he would meet with unexpected change and would need to take certain risks...

Klein silently judged the information and confirmed that Anna's details were correct.

He retracted his gaze from the paper and turned it toward Anna. "Mr. Meyer set off for his journey on the third day of June?"

"If he did not lie, that is indeed the case," Anna replied, biting her lip.

"All right." Klein took the pen and made a note of that detail. Looking into Anna's eyes with his dark brown gaze, he said gently, "I will begin drawing the star chart now. I'll need some time and absolute silence. Would you mind waiting outside? Angelica will provide you with a cup of tea or coffee."

"All right," Anna said. Knowing that some fortune tellers had their

eccentricities, she stood up without surprise. She took her cap with the light blue ribbon and left the Topaz Room.

Klein locked the door and returned to the table. Methodically, he set up the star chart using the dates and details Anna had given him. He included elements such as the horoscope and the positions of the corresponding planets and stars. Throughout the process, he rarely consulted the Astromancy Manual—completing the chart almost entirely from memory.

Over the past few days of his mysticism studies, Klein had discovered that he could quickly grasp new information about divination and turn it into instinct.

Perhaps that is the ability of a Seer...

Finally, he completed the star chart and felt a deep sense of satisfaction—as though his body, heart, and soul had relaxed considerably. As he examined the result, he followed the paths of the horoscopes and planets along with other supporting symbols, deducing roughly that Mr. Joyce Meyer would face misfortune—but ultimately, he would survive it.

At this point, the divination was technically complete. Yet, because this was his very first business transaction as a Seer, Klein placed great weight on its success. He hoped to build a solid reputation for future opportunities. So he picked up the pen again and wrote a statement in Hermes—the conclusion about Joyce Meyer's current situation.

He read the sentence silently, repeating it in his mind several times to ensure its accuracy. After reciting it seven times, Klein leaned back in his chair, holding the paper.

Imagining a sphere of light, his eyes grew darker as he slipped quickly into a trance.

The surroundings took on an ethereal quality as a formless, boundless fog stretched above him. Klein once again recalled all the contents on the piece of paper, then relaxed and fell into a deep sleep. He was using a dream divination technique! By repeating the question and

keeping the details in mind, he set his astral body free to roam the spirit plane in a dream to receive a revelation.

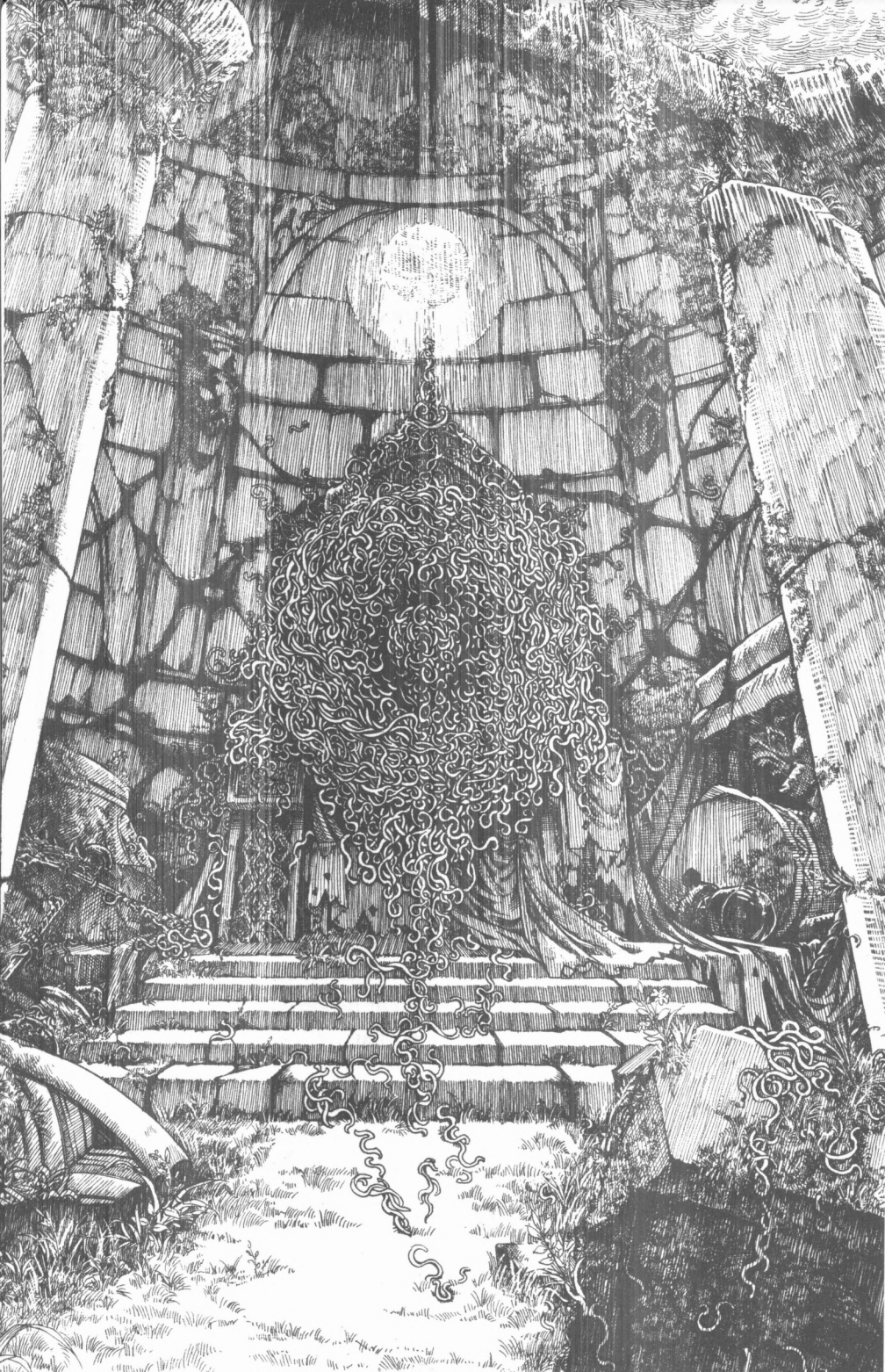
Ordinary people sometimes experienced such dreams, but their signs were often complicated and unclear, making recall upon waking difficult. A Seer, however, could see certain scenes with clarity. As Klein drifted between sleep and wakefulness, the surroundings blurred into hazy contours. In the contorted world of his dream, he saw a young blond man with an aquiline nose, swimming frantically in a sea of blood, nearly overwhelmed by crashing waves...but ultimately managing to escape to shore.

The image shattered and changed. Next, Klein saw a blue house with a small toy windmill in front of the door. That blond young man was walking slowly toward the house, his expression joyous. At that moment, the vision changed again, and Klein found himself inside a magnificent palace. Its walls were caved in and damaged beyond repair, with moss and weeds sprouting in multiple places. Through holes in the walls, he could glimpse distant mountain peaks and clouds nearly within reach.

At the very front of the palatial hall stood a giant stone throne adorned with gold and dull gemstones, as if not meant for a human. The throne was empty and mottled with marks, seemingly weathered by the tides of time.

Klein looked around in confusion, unable to understand why he was dreaming of such a scene. His turbid mind suddenly sharpened as he subconsciously walked out of the palace, attempting to ascertain where he was. Then he felt a gaze upon him—an intense, unnerving gaze coming from behind. Spinning around, he stared at the giant stone throne, only to see a writhing mass of countless translucent maggots slowly squirming and growing. Klein gasped and abruptly opened his eyes, waking from his dream.

The crystal ball, tarot cards, and the star chart filled his vision as reality swiftly replaced fantasy. *The initial scenes in the dream were the result of the divination, but what was the later one about? It seemed to be targeted at me.*



Klein put the piece of paper down and rubbed his temples, deep in contemplation. He could confirm that these visions were not merely fears projected by his subconscious, for he had performed the divination himself.

A palace on a mountain peak that wasn't meant for humans, a silent, intimidating stare, and the contorted image of maggots...

Silently recalling what happened in the past, Klein wondered if it was the same entity he had reached out to with his luck-enhancement ritual or a result of the Antigonus family's notebook...

Right, that notebook mentioned a Kingdom of the Night in the Hornacis mountain range! The palace in the dream was on a mountain peak!

After a brief interpretation, Klein felt a surge of relief that he had chosen the Seer potion. According to Old Neil, Mystery Pryers could also divine through dreams, but they weren't as effective as a Seer.

Sigh. I guess I haven't seen the last of it... All I can hope for is the early capture of Ryer Bieber... Collecting himself, Klein picked up the piece of paper with the star chart and slowly walked toward the door.

He opened it and headed to the reception area, where he saw Anna gazing out the window, completely ignoring her cup of black tea.

"Ah, Mr. Moretti, is there a result?" she called, noticing him peripherally. She stood up in a hurry.

Klein did not answer immediately. Instead, he inquired about the revelation from his dream, "Does your house—or Mr. Meyer's house—have a toy windmill in front of it?"

Anna's eyes widened, and she was struck silent for a long moment. Finally, she muttered, "That was a present he gave me. It's right outside my front door. How did you know that...?"

C-c-can this be divined, too?

Klein smiled gently and spoke in a warm tone, "Congratulations, Miss Anna. Mr. Joyce Meyer is currently visiting your home. If you rush back immediately, you should still be able to catch him. He has just survived a calamity—an unimaginably painful journey. What he needs now are not questions but consolation and a warm embrace."

"Really?" Anna asked in disbelief. The certainty in Klein's voice was unlike any fortune teller she had known.

"You'll find out once you go home," Klein replied in a gentle tone, smiling.

"Oh, Lord of Steam, is that true? Has my poor Joyce really returned? Are you certain? No, I cannot believe it..." Anna froze for a moment, then blurted out a string of words.

She produced a one-soli note from her purse without waiting for Klein to give her change and broke into a small run. She rushed out of the Divination Club and took a carriage home.

"Does this include my tip?" Klein remarked, looking at the note and shaking his head with a laugh.

...

A two-wheeled carriage sped quickly through the streets and entered Eastside. Anna watched the scenery sweep past her, feeling a mixture of unease, anticipation, and fear. It wasn't long before the toy windmill came into her view.

She alighted the carriage, hardly caring about her bearing as she hurried toward the door and rang the doorbell.

The door creaked open to reveal a young blond man in a black suit. Though haggard, his eyes glinted with joy, and his aquiline nose gave him a distinguished look.

"I thought I would miss you today," Joyce said with a smile.

"...Oh, Lord of Steam above, you really are back!" Anna exclaimed joyfully, rubbing her eyes in disbelief.

What the fortune teller said was true!

No, that was a real seer!

It was simply incredible!

Thoughts swirled in her mind as Anna pounced forward, tears welling in her eyes, and wrapped her arms warmly around her fiancé.

Outside the gray-blue house, the two stood silently together as the toy windmill slowly turned. In that quiet moment, all of their troubles seemed to have been left far behind.

CHAPTER 56

◆ ESCAPE FROM THE SEA ◆

In a rather spacious living room, Anna and Joyce—once they left each other's embrace—sat on separate sofas, with Anna's parents between them.

Joyce sighed with a satisfied expression and said, "By the Lord of Steam above, I am so lucky to be alive and to be able to see Anna again."

"My poor Joyce, what in the world happened to you?" Anna asked, unable to hide her concern.

Joyce glanced at his fiancée, and his expression turned grave. "I still feel terrified to this very day. I keep waking from my dreams again and again. Five days after the *Alfalfa* left Caesar Pier, we encountered pirates—terrifying pirates. The only consolation was that their leader's name was Nast."

"The one who calls himself the King of the Five Seas?" Anna's father, Mr. Wayne, asked in shock.

Although Joyce had arrived half an hour ago, he had not divulged details about his ordeal until now. He appeared fearful, perturbed, and uneasy. It was only after Anna returned and embraced him that he finally seemed to snap out of it.

"Yes—Nast, the King of the Five Seas, a self-proclaimed descendant of the Solomon Empire, adhered to a code forbidding the

killing of captives. Hence, we were robbed only of our money and belongings, not our lives. His subordinates even provided us with sufficient food,” Joyce recalled.

His body began to quiver, but he continued to recount his deepest and darkest nightmare:

“What I lost wasn’t much. I believed that my misfortunes were over, but as we continued toward our destination, a heated conflict erupted among the *Alfalpa*’s passengers and its crew. What began as a disagreement devolved into fisticuffs, brandished revolvers, and even drawn swords—they turned against each other... I saw nothing but blood in those few days. One after another, people around me fell with their eyes open, never to close again. Their limbs, hearts, and guts were scattered across the deck.

“Those of us who refused to descend into savagery—the rational ones—had nowhere to hide and no escape. We were surrounded by deep blue waves and the boundless ocean... Some wailed, some begged for mercy, and some even sold their bodies, yet their heads still hung from the masts.

“Anna, I was overwhelmed by despair back then. I thought I would never see you again. Fortunately, even within such a nightmare, a hero emerged. The captain led us to hide in the sturdy keel of the ship, and we relied on the stored water and food there until the maniacs reached their limits. Mr. Tris encouraged us, courageously leading us in an assault against those murderers...

“After a bloody battle I will never forget, we made it out alive. But the *Alfalpa* had strayed off course, and only a third of the original sailors remained.”

...

As he spoke of the darkest, most horrifying aspect of the human heart, Joyce couldn’t help but recall the “hero,” the man who called himself Tris. He had a round, amiable face. He was a little timid, almost effeminate, and always preferred to stay in a corner by himself. Only those who were very familiar with him knew how talkative he truly was.

Yet it was this unremarkable boy who determinedly stood before everyone during the worst and most hopeless days.

"Oh, by Steam, my poor Joyce, you endured such a heartrending ordeal. Thank God, praise be to God, that He prevented our eternal separation." Tears welled up in Anna's eyes as she continued drawing a triangle on her chest, the Sacred Emblem for Steam and Machinery.

Joyce revealed a faint, pale smile. "This is the reward for our faith. After that, the *Alfalpa* weathered storms, lost its course, and surmounted one challenge after another before we finally arrived at Enmat Harbor.

"Because of the bloody slaughter that took place on board, those of us who survived were held captive by the police and questioned separately. We didn't have a chance to send telegrams home to update our loved ones. When everything concluded—which was this morning—I immediately borrowed some money from a friend and took the train back. Thank the Lord for allowing me to set foot on the soil of Tingen again and to see all of you once more."

At this, he looked toward his fiancée in confusion. "Anna, when you saw me, I could feel your happiness and surprise, but I couldn't understand why you rushed to the door so excitedly right after you got off the carriage. Ha, I was planning to give you a big surprise."

Thinking about what had happened earlier, Anna said in disbelief, "It's nothing I can't tell you, Joyce. As I was worried about you, I went to the only divination club in Tingen today. That fortune teller—no, the seer—told me, 'Your fiancé has returned. He's in the house with a windmill.'"

"What?" the Wayne couple and Joyce exclaimed simultaneously.

Anna covered her face and shook her head.

"I can barely believe it myself, but it really happened. By Steam, perhaps there really are miracles in this world.

"Joyce, that seer asked me for your name, appearance, address, and birth date. He said he was going to do a star chart divination. Then he asked me if the house with a toy windmill was yours or mine. When I confirmed it was mine, he said, 'Congratulations, Miss Anna, your

fiancé has already returned and is visiting your home. What he needs now are not questions but consolation and a warm embrace.”

“Dear God...” Joyce found it unbelievable and incomprehensible. “Does he know me? Did someone send him a telegram? Could it be that he is familiar with the police in Enmat Harbor? No, that doesn’t explain it. How did he know that I came to your home? How could he possibly know that you would seek a divination? Did you make an appointment?”

“No, I made a selection at the last minute,” Anna replied, a little lost herself.

“Perhaps a good seer needs to control vast amounts of information—even if it cannot be used immediately. Perhaps there really is something incredible about divination,” Anna’s father sighed and concluded. “In over a thousand years of known history and throughout the uncertainty of the Fourth Epoch, divination has always existed and has yet to disappear. I think there must be a reason for that.”

Joyce shook his head lightly, then asked, “What’s that seer’s name?” After a moment of thought, Anna answered, “Klein Moretti.”

...

In the reception lobby of the Divination Club, Angelica had not stepped closer to them just then, as Klein had taken care to speak to Anna quietly. All she saw was Anna leaving in a daze, her face marked by shock and confusion.

Now Angelica briskly walked to the sofa where Klein sat and asked out of curiosity, “Was it a good result?”

She did not dare ask for specifics, afraid of violating the unspoken rules of fortune tellers.

“Yes.” Klein nodded and produced three copper coins from his pocket. “One-eighth of one soli is one and a half pennies, right?”

“Yes.” Angelica examined the coins and realized that one was a penny and the other two were half pennies. She quickly handed one back and said, “There’s an extra half penny.”

Klein smiled faintly and said, "Thank you for taking care of my client. She gave me a tip, so it's only right I give you one."

It's also to thank you for recommending me..., he added silently.

"All right." Angelica felt an inexplicable fear of Klein, but since his reasoning was sound, she didn't refuse the offer.

Klein returned to the meeting room, believing that more people would soon request his divinations.

However, he did not receive another customer until forty minutes past five.

It wasn't that the Divination Club's business was poor, but rather that most people who came here with a fortune teller in mind had already made their choice. *They were likely recommended by others and had long determined whose services to hire... In short, it's because I don't have enough XP yet...*

Klein laughed at himself for using game terminology.

He finished his third cup of Cibo black tea, donned his top hat, and walked leisurely out of the meeting room, holding his walking stick.

Angelica suddenly recalled Glacis's instructions and quickly moved to intercept him. "Mr. Moretti, when will you next visit the club? Mr. Glacis would like to thank you in person."

"I will come whenever I'm free. If fate permits, he will run into me for sure," Klein replied in the tone of a psychic charlatan, clearly in character.

Then he left the club before Angelica could respond and took the coach home.

When he stepped through the door, Klein found Benson reading the newspaper while Melissa was assembling bits of gears, bearings, and springs in the remaining rays of the setting sun.

"Afternoon. Did Mrs. Shaud visit?" Klein asked cheerfully.

Benson didn't put down his newspaper, merely lifting his head as he replied, "Mrs. Shaud's visit lasted a quarter of an hour. She brought some gifts and was very pleased with the biscuits and lemon cake we

prepared. She also invited us to call on her at our convenience. She is a friendly, well-mannered lady and an excellent conversationalist.”

“The only problem is that their whole family follows the Lord of Storms. They believe that girls shouldn’t go to school but should be homeschooled instead,” Melissa grumbled quietly.

Clearly, she was quite displeased.

“Don’t mind that. As long as she doesn’t interfere with us, she’s still a good neighbor,” Klein said with a smile as he comforted his sister.

The Loen Kingdom was a multi-religious country, unlike the Feysac Empire in the north, which believed only in the God of Combat, or the Feynapotter Kingdom in the south, which worshiped only the Earth Mother. Inevitably, the congregations of the three major churches—the Lord of Storms, the Evernight Goddess, and the God of Steam and Machinery—held different beliefs and customs. After a thousand years, however, they had become relatively restrained, and coexistence was possible.

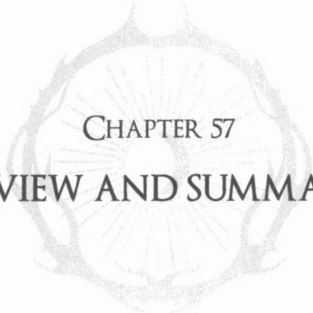
“Okay.” Melissa pursed her lips and redirected her focus to her pile of parts.

After dinner, Klein resumed reviewing historical literature. Only after Melissa and Benson had showered and returned to their rooms did he wash up, enter his bedroom, and lock his door.

He needed to organize and summarize what he had learned, as well as the problems he had encountered in recent days, to prevent himself from forgetting any critical points. Only then could he respond to subsequent developments with a clear mind.

Klein flipped open his notebook, took out his pen, and started writing in Chinese:

Why is acting the key to digesting potions?



CHAPTER 57

◆ REVIEW AND SUMMARY ◆

After pausing for a moment, Klein continued writing.

Digestion is the essence of resolving problems with potions, not merely control. This can be understood in a straightforward manner.

Merely controlling a potion is akin to using its power as an external tool, like a tamed beast. No matter how well-controlled or practiced I become, it would ultimately not be a part of me, increasing the risk of backfire. In contrast, digestion means viewing the consumed potion as part of myself—to break it down, incorporate it, absorb it, and become one with it.

I am currently certain of this point. What is more important is why “acting” helps in digestion.

According to my experience as a Seer today, I can propose two hypotheses to be verified in the future.

- 1. Roleplaying based on the potion’s name changes the state of one’s body, mind, and soul, bringing them closer to the remaining stubborn spirit of the potion’s core. This resonance allows gradual assimilation and absorption.*
- 2. The residual spirit at the core of the potion is like a computer with a complete defensive mechanism. If one wishes to invade, breach, and break it down, one must find a bug, a backdoor, or a key. The name of the potion reveals the corresponding clue. Thus, through*

acting, we can disguise our body, mind, and soul as “part of the system,” defeating its defenses and sauntering through the door. This line of thought is similar to Emperor Roselle’s description.

No matter which hypothesis is correct, one cannot ignore the state of the body, mind, and soul, for they are the only bridge between acting and the power of potions.

Klein put down his pen and reviewed the paragraph. For a moment, he was almost thankful for the exam-oriented education he received from the Foodaholic Empire. Whatever the case, whether he had chosen science or engineering for his postsecondary education, he possessed the basic skills of logic. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have been able to become a keyboard warrior, nor would he have been able to analyze his current situation.

Acting might really be effective, but we’ll have to wait and see how it turns out.

Klein made a brief conclusion for this point. After that, he wrote down his second question.

It’s a strange description. Why would a Seer, despite being more knowledgeable in the breadth and depth of mysticism, necessarily lack means when it comes to direct combat? Wouldn’t being more well-learned and professional make a Seer more powerful and more likely to find a way to defeat their enemies?

The possible reasons are as follows.

- 1. Just like in the web novels I’ve read in the past, I have transmigrated to a game world that has become reality. Thus, different “classes” must be differentiated while still maintaining balance. However, up to this point, there has been no sign of stats in this world or any mission-like developments. I’ll put this reason on hold, but it seems very unlikely.*
- 2. The fundamental law of this world is balance. The Creator designed this world with the core idea of equilibrium.*
- 3. Different Sequence potions of the same rank exist on the same energy level. These represent the most optimal states our forerunners*

discovered through exploration and evaluation. Exceeding this energy level would make it easier to lose control; falling too short would render one unable to obtain the desired extraordinary powers. Thus, when the energy level is consistent and finite, being stronger in one aspect naturally means being weaker in another.

4. *Everything in this world originated from the same source; they all evolved from the Creator. Thus, we are all fragmented parts of the Creator, and the fact that we must complement each other means that each one has inherent shortcomings.*

I am leaning toward the third and fourth reasons, but the latter stems from an unconfirmed myth and can only serve as a reference.

Thus, I shall use the third reason as a guide and try to verify it through my current studies and future discoveries.

At this point, Klein had already written two full pages. But he did not stop. Instead, he began summarizing a new idea:

From what I learned today, my luck-enhancement ritual is categorized as a classic form of ritualistic magic.

Similar kinds of ritualistic magic can be split into three parts. The first part is a sacrifice that pleases or sparks the interest of a corresponding entity. The second is an incantation that specifically describes the entity in question. The third is the practical aspect of one's request, which must be verbalized using a set format of words and representative symbols.

Using this as a benchmark to analyze the luck-enhancement ritual reveals an obvious problem: There is no third part!

It includes the sacrificial ceremony—a step involving the placement of staple foods and walking a square in a counterclockwise manner with four steps. There is also an incantation step that clearly indicates who the request is for, as in the phrase, “The Immortal Lord of Heaven and Earth for Blessings.”

But all I did after was close my eyes and wait. There was nothing that explicitly stated that turning my luck around was the goal of the ritual.

In other words, the corresponding entity has no way of knowing what the so-called luck-enhancement ritual is asking for and would have to improvise... Improvise...?

What a troll! The Quintessential Secret Divinations of the Qin and Han Dynasty is too much of a darn troll!

I must have had rocks in my head back then for even trying it...

Klein stopped writing and took two deep breaths, trying hard to calm himself down.

He exhaled sharply and continued writing.

I can consider redesigning the ritual to make it more complete. The goal of the ritual shall be to return to Earth, where my parents and friends are.

But here's the question: Was the entity truly acting on a whim, or is there a deeper meaning to it?

Furthermore, is the entity to which the incantations refer in this world the same as the one on Earth?

If so, the difference in results between the first and second rituals could be explained as the entity improvising. But my appearing above the gray fog during the second and third rituals, while consistently connecting to Justice and The Hanged Man, suggests otherwise. So why would that be?

If the fourth ritual tomorrow afternoon shows me the same results again, that would confirm that the effects are consistent. And that would mean the unknown entity has an agenda I do not yet know. In that case, adding new descriptions and requests would not yield a clear response; in fact, it might complicate the ritual and lead to adverse effects.

Could the difference between the first ritual and the subsequent ones—assuming the entity I called upon is the same—mean that the results vary depending on the world I'm in? It's as if I am using a different interface...

Then how should I design the ritual to obtain my desired outcome?

If I assume that the entities behind the first and subsequent rituals are different, that would perfectly explain some of my previous questions. However, the stability of the results in the second and third rituals suggests that the goal of the ritual was already embedded within, albeit hidden, which means I currently cannot change any aspect of the ritual.

The most important question remains: What is the identity of the entity to whom the ritual is directed? Where is He, and why doesn't He offer any hints or guidance?

Could He be deep in the world of fog?

Hmm, can I treat Him as a dormant entity—one that gives fixed responses in return for a certain stimulus but does not interfere with my actions otherwise?

If so, I could introduce different rituals as stimuli and attempt to deduce a pattern from the feedback I receive. That way, I might find the correct method of returning.

But the problem lies in the possibility that He is not dormant. In that case, any such endeavor might result in terrifying outcomes. It could be extremely dangerous.

The first attempt must be conducted with extreme caution. I must design it in such a way as to not anger the being...

What a headache. I need to learn more.

Klein sighed as he reached a conclusion. Finally, he jotted down other miscellaneous items.

There are always formless voices resonating in my ears, shouting “Hornacis” and...uh, was it saying “Frygrea” or “Feygrea”?

Hornacis is the mountain range that straddles the border between the Loen Kingdom and the Intis Republic. Its peak rises as high as six thousand meters above sea level.

According to the records in the Antigonus family’s notebook, in the Fourth Epoch there existed on that peak a Kingdom of the Night. The Kingdom of the Night... The Evernight Goddess... Is there any connection between the two? Are they allies or enemies? Did the Church of Evernight obliterate the Antigonus family because of the Kingdom of the Night?

Were the murmurings I heard coming from the notebook...from the howls of the Antigonus family over one or two thousand years?

What then does Frygrea—uh, Flegrea—mean?

Here’s an interesting thought: To be able to leave behind such a diary—to also leave behind Sealed Artifact 2-049—implies that the Antigonus family possessed rather powerful extraordinary abilities. If that is so, which Sequence did they have? Was it complete or incomplete?

My discovery of the notebook in the hands of Ryer Bieber was far too

coincidental, yet there was no sign of it being arranged. Could my fate really be tied to that notebook?

...

One after another, Klein scribbled his ideas on pieces of paper, noting all the events he had experienced since his arrival along with his theories about their meaning. He filled a total of four pages on both sides of each sheet.

Rip!

Klein suddenly tore out the four pages and read them from beginning to end, occasionally marking certain sections with his pen or adding a few extra sentences. Time flew by. The crimson moon was momentarily hidden behind dark clouds. Klein picked up his pocket watch from the table, snapped it open, and checked the time.

Then he put down the watch and retrieved a box of matches from his drawer. Lighting one, he brought it close to the four pages of notes. The orange flame quickly engulfed the edges of the paper and spread rapidly.

Klein held the burning notes on top of the wooden rubbish bin and watched as the ashes fell. He then released his grip, allowing the papers to drop. In just ten seconds, everything had disappeared—only swirling ash and the charred bottom of the bin remained.

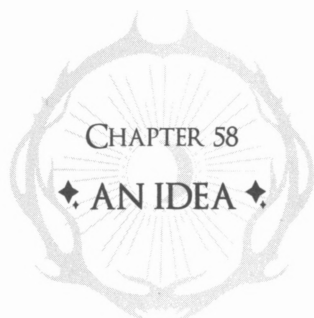
Since pages of Emperor Roselle's secret diary were still circulating in this world, Klein dared not leave behind any evidence that he could write in Chinese. If Old Neil and the others discovered the four pieces of paper he had written, he would have a hard time explaining himself.

When recording sensitive questions, Klein worried that whoever was paying attention to his dreams might see and decipher the contents, whether he wrote in Loen, Ancient Feysac, or Hermes. Therefore, he could only record his ideas and summaries in Chinese, and once he was done, burn the notes to leave no trace.

Precisely because there was no way to keep the notes, he devised a plan for himself: He would do this summary once a week to prevent himself from forgetting.

As all the ashes settled at the bottom of the bin, Klein pulled out a fresh piece of white paper and wrote at the top: *To my esteemed mentor...*

This was a letter to Senior Associate Professor Quentin Cohen. Klein wanted to ask if he had any relevant historical information about the peak of the Hornacis mountain range.



The next day was Monday morning.

Klein, who had the day off, didn't go out. Instead, he handed Melissa his letter addressed to his mentor Quentin Cohen along with more than enough money for stamps, asking her to post it at the post office near Tingen Technical School where she studied.

After breakfast, he went back to sleep to make up for the rest he'd missed from all his work. He only woke close to noon, prompted by grumblings in his stomach. He heated up some leftovers from the night before and ate them with a loaf of oat bread. Then he grabbed a newspaper and headed into the bathroom on the second floor.

These were the moments when he couldn't help but lament the lack of a cell phone.

After about seven or eight minutes, he left the toilet refreshed and reinvigorated. He washed his hands, returned to his bedroom, and locked his door. He drew the curtains closed, lit the gas lamp, and entered a trance for half an hour. After another half hour practicing his spirit vision, pendulum dowsing, and rod dowsing, he spent the next hour reviewing the mysticism knowledge he had recently acquired.

After that, he ripped up the old newspaper and crumpled the pieces into a dozen balls. He scribbled on them "Moonflower Candle," "Full Moon Elixir," and other names of materials. Then he mimicked

the prescribed steps of ritualistic magic with these props to master all the details. Until he was entirely familiar with them, he didn't intend to attempt ritualistic magic on a whim—it was both a waste of materials and a magnet for danger.

Again and again, he practiced until he picked up his silver pocket watch patterned with vine leaves and glanced at it. He realized it was quarter to three. He pondered for a few seconds before taking the scraps of old newspapers to the kitchen on the first floor to burn them. While doing so, he reset his mind and prepared for the tarot gathering.

Locking his bedroom door once again, Klein didn't wait for the clock to strike three. He planned to enter the area above the gray fog ahead of time. He wanted to seize the chance to explore the place thoroughly!

Klein stood in an empty spot in his room. As he began walking counterclockwise, he wondered if Justice and The Hanged Man were in a suitable environment yet—if they'd be undisturbed or discovered. Suddenly, his thoughts extended to another idea:

He had mentioned before that he would devise a method to allow Justice and The Hanged Man to apply for “leave” ahead of time if they needed to be absent from the gathering due to unexpected circumstances or if they truly couldn't find a way to be alone.

In the past, this would have been an almost impossible problem. There was no way he could build an entire *isekai* instant communication network by hand, right? Meanwhile, telegrams would expose his real identity.

But now, he had suddenly found inspiration from ritualistic magic.

Ritualistic magic borrows external power by seeking the help of various entities. Its incantations always make it clear at the start whom they are directed to—be it the Evernight Goddess, the Master of Crimson, or other unknown and clandestine beings.

Then does that mean I can amend the incantation and change the opening to address myself?

Address myself...

This way, even if Justice and The Hanged Man conduct the ritual in a foreign land, I would receive their messages.

Klein was thrilled as he began analyzing the feasibility of such a method.

There are two difficulties. First, I am not an incredibly strong high-rank Beyonder. Even if the address in the incantation clearly described me, it's unlikely that I would receive the "request."

Second, how can I ensure that the incantation precisely points to me and doesn't stray to some other unknown entity that happens to fit the description? That would be incredibly dangerous.

Klein paced back and forth, deep in thought over a possible workable solution. He moved in silent circles until he naturally made a connection between this conundrum and the mysterious world above the fog.

Even if I can't receive the message, that doesn't mean the gray fog can't. Its connection with the crimson stars has the ability to "drag" a person into the space directly, regardless of distance.

I could consider incorporating that into my address, using words to tie myself to the mysterious space above the fog...

Following this line of thought, even if I might not immediately receive the "request" when the other party conducts the ritual, I will still be able to see the corresponding messages whenever I enter above the gray fog.

To put it simply, it is the difference between receiving instant messages while online and checking offline messages later.

Klein became more excited as he pondered further. He felt that his idea was worth trying. "Hmm, what kind of description could be used to precisely address a message to me and to the world of fog?" he mused, ruminating over the specific details.

In fact, he had an incantation that would definitely work—the Loen transliteration of "The Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings." But that would mean ceding control over the gray fog and his rule over it, so he had to discard that option.

... The Fool from a different world?

No way.

It was quite accurate, sure, and there was almost no other existence that fit the criteria, but it would expose his biggest secret. One incantation after another crossed his mind, and he crossed each one off. After about seven or eight minutes, he finally decided on the first line of his address for the incantation:

“The Fool not of this era.”

It was obviously not specific enough, so Klein quickly added:

“Mysterious ruler above the gray fog.”

The combination of these two lines practically narrowed it down to only him. Furthermore, it established a connection between himself and the gray fog.

It's not quite complete. I can't eliminate the possibility that there are multiple spaces and rulers above the gray fog. It's possible that the description might also address the spirit plane...

Klein furrowed his brows and decided to add one more safeguard.

After a full minute of thought, he finally decided on the last part of the address:

“King of Yellow and Black, Lord of Good Luck!”

This was a vague localization of the line from his luck-enhancement ritual, “The Exalted Thearch of Heaven and Earth for Blessings.”⁹ On its own, it might end up misdirected and provoke unknown dangerous existences. But with the first two lines to narrow the search—and drawing from his experience of reaching above the fog through a similar incantation—he believed it would lock onto the intended target.

Klein wasn't sure if casting the ritualistic magic with these three descriptions would be fully effective, but he was certain that it would at least not attract the attention of some other entity, so it wouldn't endanger Justice and The Hanged Man.

Klein heaved a long sigh and recited the incantation he had devised:

“The Fool not of this era, you are the mysterious ruler above the

⁹ In Chinese, Yellow refers to Earth, and Black refers to Heaven.

gray fog. You are the King of Yellow and Black and the Lord of Good Luck..."

He nodded slightly and took out his pocket watch to check the time.

It's already 2:58 PM...

Without further preamble, Klein put away his watch and entered into a trance. Soon, he chanted the usual incantations and took four steps counterclockwise in the shape of a square.

The most ferocious noises and heart-stirring roars filled his ears once again. He felt a headache more unbearable than the pain of consuming the Seer potion. It wasn't like the sharp pain he'd felt when a bullet had torn through his head; it was a throbbing ache that made one manic and irrational, plunging the mind into chaos.

Klein controlled himself with meditation and strained to ignore the voices. Gradually, the murmurs receded like the ebbing tides. As his body lightened, his spirit followed suit, and everything seemed to drift upward.

Before his eyes, the boundless gray fog emerged. The crimson stars hung at varying distances like pairs of watchful eyes. Above the gray fog stood a palace—lofty and towering like the dwelling of a giant, as though it had existed there for millions of years.

With a stir of his will, he disappeared from where he was and reappeared at the head of the long bronze table, surrounded by twenty-two high-back chairs.

"The effect of the ritual is definitely fixed..." Klein muttered. He tapped his brow gently and allowed the fog to engulf him, even thicker than before. According to the description of The Hanged Man, if Justice had become a Spectator, it would be best to obscure his gestures and bodily movements from her as well.

Without any time for exploring, Klein extended his right hand and formed an invisible connection, reaching across to the two familiar crimson stars.

...

On the roaring blue waves of the Sonia Sea, an ancient sailboat was sailing with the wind.

Alger Wilson locked himself in the captain's cabin and commanded the phantom ship to activate the highest level of protection around the room.

He opened the pocket watch before him and laid it next to the brass sextant. The hands ticked nervously, without joy.

When the hour, minute, and second hands arrived at their correct positions, Alger Wilson saw an explosion of crimson before his eyes. It ignored the layers of protection he had placed around himself.

Ah... His sigh reverberated through the room.

...

In Empress Borough, Backlund, Audrey Hall lay against a down-feather pillow and glanced at the yellow paper in her hand. Her gemlike eyes appeared to contain two slowly spiraling souls.

Her gaze was calm and cool, as if she were waiting for a play to begin.

As the crimson red erupted, she looked down at herself with detachment as she was swallowed.

...

Above the gray fog, in the magnificent palace, beside the ancient, mottled, long bronze table, Audrey Hall's figure began to form. Klein, who had long activated his spirit vision, looked over at her. He was not surprised to see that the colors deep in her aura had merged together, becoming pure and serene—silent as a clear, reflective lake.

She really had become a Beyonder... Klein was just about to look away when he suddenly saw the chair belonging to Miss Justice change.

The bright stars on the back of the chair shifted swiftly, forming a constellation that didn't exist in reality.

But in Klein's eyes, that constellation looked exceedingly familiar—it was one of the symbols of mysticism, the symbol representing the Colossal Dragon!

Spectator... The Colossal Dragon... Klein restrained himself from shaking his head and looked over at the back of The Hanged Man's chair.

Generally speaking, it was impossible for him to see the back of the chair from his angle, but this was his home turf—everything appeared according to his will.

The constellation on the back of The Hanged Man's chair had not changed, but since Klein had grasped the basics of mysticism, he wasn't as ignorant as before. He could recognize that it was the symbol of the Storm.

Sailor... The Keeper of the Sea... Storm... That's reasonable.

The color deep in The Hanged Man's aura was much purer than before... Has he advanced? Oh yeah. What about the symbol behind my chair?

Klein suppressed his impulse to look. As before, he rapped the edge of the long table thrice and said with a smile, "Congratulations, Miss Justice, you are a Beyonder now."

He can tell straight away? Audrey was momentarily stunned, then smiled faintly. "Thank you, Mr. Fool. And thank you, Mr. Hanged Man."

"That was much faster than I thought," Alger Wilson said honestly.

Klein didn't continue the topic but tapped his brow and said with a smile, "Lady and gentleman, have either of you found more of Roselle's diary?"

CHAPTER 59

◆ ROSELLE'S ORIGINS ◆

Upon hearing The Fool's question, Audrey did not answer immediately as she had in the past. Instead, she widened her bright eyes and glanced at The Hanged Man as if scrutinizing him.

Alger subconsciously minimized his movements. After a few seconds of silence, he said, "I found two pages of Emperor Roselle's diary and have memorized their contents."

"I have one page," Audrey replied in a detached tone, her vision partially obscured by the fog.

"Not bad." Klein's voice was even, betraying neither joy nor disappointment. He felt a spark of elation at the prospect of three whole pages, yet also disappointment that there were only three. Collecting diary pages would undoubtedly be easiest at the start—when they could rely on existing connections and channels—but as time went on, gathering them would become increasingly difficult, requiring additional resources.

"Should we 'project' them now?" Audrey inquired calmly.

"Yes," Klein replied with a simple nod. He maintained his composed posture, careful not to reveal too much in front of a Spectator.

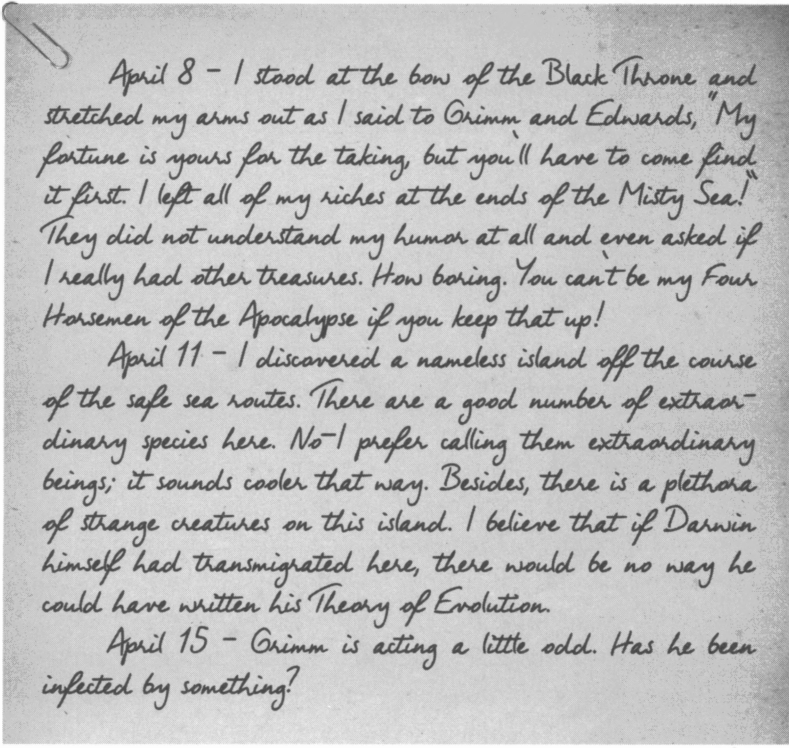
As he finished speaking, pieces of yellowish-brown goatskin parchment and dark red fountain pens materialized before Audrey and Alger. They each picked up a pen and began to recall the symbols they had memorized, channeling their desire for expression. Silently,

lines of text appeared on the parchment—some bold and proper, some delicate and elegant, and others slanted and hurried. In less than a minute, the contents that Audrey and Alger had forcibly memorized were “printed” out before them.

Klein willed the three pieces of parchment into his hands and gave them a cursory glance. He noted that some syntax was off, with missing or miswritten characters.

However, this experimentation proved that minor errors in character sequencing did not significantly hinder the overall comprehension of Chinese. Klein was also untroubled by missing words—he had long been accustomed to encountering censored asterisks in his online reading materials.

The text read:



April 8 - I stood at the bow of the Black Throne and stretched my arms out as I said to Grimm and Edwards, "My fortune is yours for the taking, but you'll have to come find it first. I left all of my riches at the ends of the Mistry Sea!" They did not understand my humor at all and even asked if I really had other treasures. How boring. You can't be my Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse if you keep that up!

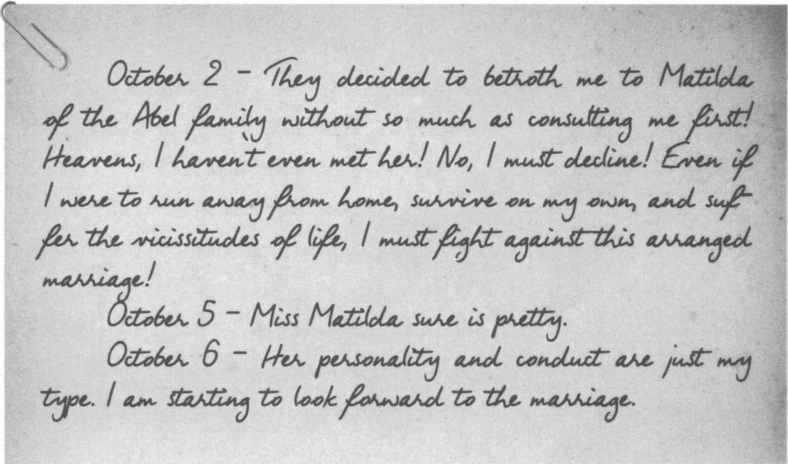
April 11 - I discovered a nameless island off the course of the safe sea routes. There are a good number of extraordinary species here. No—I prefer calling them extraordinary beings; it sounds cooler that way. Besides, there is a plethora of strange creatures on this island. I believe that if Darwin himself had transmigrated here, there would be no way he could have written his Theory of Evolution.

April 15 - Grimm is acting a little odd. Has he been infected by something?

Klein mused silently to himself, *When did Emperor Roselle, who was born in Intis, set off on his voyage? The Fog Sea should be the sea west of the Intis Republic... Hmm, I need to cross-reference this with historical records from the library...*

He quickly finished reading one page and then cast his gaze to the back of the paper.

At this point, he no longer concealed his ability to decipher Emperor Roselle's secret symbols—a talent befitting his persona as The Fool. Audrey and Alger said nothing; they waited silently, as if unsurprised by this revelation. In fact, they silently agreed that it was only natural.



October 2 - They decided to betroth me to Matilda of the Abel family without so much as consulting me first! Heavens, I haven't even met her! No, I must decline! Even if I were to run away from home, survive on my own, and suffer the vicissitudes of life, I must fight against this arranged marriage!

October 5 - Miss Matilda sure is pretty.

October 6 - Her personality and conduct are just my type. I am starting to look forward to the marriage.

Hey, Your Majesty? Where is your integrity?

That thought flitted through Klein's mind as he leaned back in his seat, striving to keep his emotions in check amid the swirling fog.

He realized that in the early years, Roselle did not write in his diary every day. Most entries were made only when significant events occurred—moments he needed to record, complain about, or simply vent his emotions over.

Klein shifted his gaze downward to the final sentence on this page:

October 9 - They actually called me the Son of the Steam. I like that very much.

A twinge of disappointment passed over him at the scant value of the first two pages, but he did not sulk. Instead, he moved the third page to the top of the stack and continued reading. This page contained content written on both sides of the paper, promising further insights into Emperor Roselle's origins.

May 21 - The Church of the God of Craftsmanship gave me two choices the beginnings of two Sequence pathways. One of them is the Savant the complete Sequence pathway they possess. The other is Insider, which they obtained from the Ascetic Order of Moss, but it lacks the higher order formulas.

May 22 - My choice was easy: Savant! The one that has a complete Sequence pathway! Although wielding more information on mysticism can be helpful in my goal of returning home, the problem is that transmigration necessarily requires help from an external entity, given that I'm not yet strong enough on my own. Since I do not know if this external entity would be benevolent or malicious, I cannot control it, which means it could be very dangerous. If that's the case, why not become more powerful myself and return by relying on my own abilities? Therefore, the completeness of the Sequence is the most important factor in my considerations!

May 23 - I have become a Savant. With the power of the potion, I actually recalled everything I have ever learned in the past, including all of physics, chemistry, and so on...

I have not only recalled them, but I now have a deeper understanding of these subjects, as well as a mastery of their possible applications and implications. Ha-ha, this is a class specially tailored for a foreign transmigrator like me; I will be able to express my advantages to the greatest extent! I have to say that if I were to return in my present state to my final year of high school, I would definitely rank first. If I could further specialize in an area, it wouldn't be too hard for me to become a scientist.

May 26 - I am enjoying my role as a Savant. Something odd is worth mentioning. When I go about my life as a Savant, doing things that are in line with this role, the murmurings that once drove me crazy have become considerably quieter. I have also been able to control my occasional temper outbursts, and I have recalled the matter of the diary. Is this what the mysterious Mr. Zaratul meant by "acting the part"? This could be the key to solving the side effects of the potions.

As Klein kept reading, he came to a profound realization of the clear differences between Emperor Roselle and himself, both in personality and in action. For example, on the matter of returning home, Klein focused more on mastering in-depth knowledge of mysticism to avoid risks and thereby accomplish his goal, while Emperor Roselle preferred to rely on empowering himself so he could overpower any danger.

I have to say, I envy people like that sometimes. Perhaps everyone

yearns for something they do not possess... Of course, I also must consider strengthening myself—both of these are important.

As these thoughts emerged in his mind, Klein sighed in quiet reflection.

Meanwhile, Emperor Roselle's comment about the diminishing side effects of the potion bolstered Klein's confidence that his conclusion about "acting the part" was more or less correct. He set the three diary pages aside, looked up at Justice and The Hanged Man, and smiled. "My apologies. I was too absorbed in reading."

Audrey suppressed a hint of envy and smiled faintly. "I can understand. I hope to one day be able to exchange for information contained in the diary."

"That will come at a price," Klein replied, glancing briefly at Justice before sweeping his gaze toward the silent Hanged Man.

Audrey pressed her palms together in front of her. "Mr. Fool, Mr. Hanged Man, I have three questions to ask. If you deem the answers highly valuable, you can tell me what you want, and I will do my best to obtain it."

"No problem," Alger answered succinctly.

Klein nodded and leaned back, making himself comfortable. After a few seconds of thought, Audrey began, "The first question is, what exactly does 'acting' mean? I realize that the lingering spirit of the potion exerts minute effects on me, so is that because I've been acting as a Spectator all along?"

Alger said nothing, instead looking toward The Fool as if waiting for an explanation.

Klein rubbed his finger on the edge of the table and replied in a relaxed tone, "Let me explain this with an analogy. Imagine the core powers of your potion as a heavily guarded castle. The remnants of the potion's spirit—the potential for backfire—reside within that castle. Our goal is to eliminate that remnant and become the true master of the castle.

"There are two ways to achieve this. The first is to storm the castle

by force. There is no guarantee of success, and you will most likely injure yourself in the process unless you can suppress the force with absolute power. Clearly, we are not equipped for that.

"The second way is to receive an invitation from the master of the castle. Such an invitation allows you to bypass the guards and infiltrate the castle successfully, letting you finish off your opponent with ease. The catch is that the invitation contains a description of the guest's facial features and corresponding characteristics. In other words, we must disguise ourselves and *act* as the invited guest. Do you understand?"

Alger immediately asked, as though he had anticipated this explanation, "So the aforementioned invitation is the name of the Sequence potion?"

"That's correct," Klein confirmed.

For a moment, Audrey froze, suddenly enlightened. She now fully understood the meaning of "acting." Thrilled, she promptly exited her Spectator state and exclaimed in joy, "What an ingenious method. I think it perfectly fits your title. Its style is very compatible with The Fool... I never would have believed that acting could have such an effect. Luckily, I have been instinctively acting as a Spectator these past few days."

She paused before continuing, "I consider this answer extremely valuable. I am not comfortable accepting it without giving anything in return. Mr. Fool, what will you have me do in exchange? Of course, I still remember that I owe you a page from Emperor Roselle's diary."

"More pages of Roselle's diary, or..." Klein paused briefly. He had desired any information he could obtain about the rest of the Seer's Sequence but felt that such a low-level request might tarnish the mysterious image of The Fool. Thus, he chose to postpone that request and instead ask discreetly on another day. *I've only advanced recently, and I have yet to completely digest the Seer potion...*

He thus consoled himself before speaking again in an even tone,

“Anything regarding the Antigonus family—even if I am already aware of some of it.”

Alger remained silent for a few seconds before cautiously glancing toward the head of the table. After a moment of deliberation, he said, “Mr. Fool... I believe I can pay you back immediately with the information you’ve just requested.”

CHAPTER 60

◆ THE SECOND SLATE ◆

“No problem.” Klein maintained an even tone. He rested his left elbow on the armrest of his chair and lightly supported his forehead with his fingers, feigning calm attention.

After a moment of deliberation, Alger spoke, “The Antigonus family is an ancient clan. Their history can be traced back to before the Third Epoch, in the Age of Cataclysm. They’re also related to the second Blasphemy Slate.”

The second Blasphemy Slate? There’s a second Blasphemy Slate?! How many in total are there?

Klein’s pupils constricted, and he nearly changed his posture.

According to what The Hanged Man and Justice had said previously, the Blasphemy Slate contained the profound mysteries of the twenty-two paths of the divine!

Now he’s saying there are two of such important items or even more?

Twenty-two paths of the divine... Paths of the Sequences... Could these two mean the same thing? Could it be that every complete Sequence is a path that leads to a divine throne?

At that instant, a flurry of thoughts flashed through Klein’s mind at the mention of the second Blasphemy Slate. He believed that if not for the thick gray fog concealing him, his emotional reaction might have been obvious to Miss Spectator.

As an expert in his field, Klein was no stranger to the Age of Cataclysm. It was the name of the Third Epoch. His recent reviews of historical materials had even revealed that the Third Epoch was divided into two eras: the Glorious Era and the Cataclysmic Era.

“A second Blasphemy Slate?” Audrey, not bothering to mask her ignorance, inquired. She hadn’t yet returned to her full Spectator state, her emotions still raw.

Great question! Klein silently cheered her on.

It was a question he couldn’t ask as The Fool.

Alger stole a glance at The Fool and noticed that his posture remained unchanged, his silence unwavering. After a brief moment, Alger continued, “The first Blasphemy Slate appeared in the Age of Darkness—the Second Epoch—when we humans struggled to survive under the protection of gods. The second Blasphemy Slate emerged at the tail end of the Third Epoch. Its appearance might even be said to have marked the end of the Age of Cataclysm.

“The contents of both Slates are kept secret by the seven major churches. I only know bits and pieces—that they both relate to the paths of the divine. However, I’m not aware of any differences between them.”

“Was the Blasphemy Slate that Emperor Roselle saw the first or the second?” Audrey asked, her tone laced with curiosity.

At that moment, Klein recalled what Alger had mentioned about the potion names during their first gathering: The names of the Sequence potions were derived from the Blasphemy Slate!

Similarly, the captain also mentioned that the formation and completion of the potion system was thanks to the appearance of the Blasphemy Slate!... That indirectly confirms that the paths of the divine are the Sequence pathways!

Klein silently answered his earlier question.

Alger simply replied, “The second one.”

The glint in Audrey’s eyes quieted as she returned to her Spectator state. She asked no further questions, instead focusing her gaze on The Hanged Man. Her scrutiny seemed to make Alger

uncomfortable, yet he suppressed his agitation and continued slowly, "In the Solomon Empire of the Fourth Epoch, the Antigonus family was considered a prominent part of the aristocracy. However, they left no memorable achievements until they supported the establishment of the Tudor Empire. Only then did they secure a place at center stage on the Northern Continent.

"In that period, illustrious names such as Antigonus, Amon, Abraham, and Jacob reigned in the human kingdoms. Yet after the Blood Emperor of the Tudor Empire perished in the War of the Four Emperors, they all fell from grace and were hunted down by the seven deities we now know.

"I'm not entirely sure what transpired, but I do know that the Antigonus family was destroyed by the Church of Evernight. Mr. Fool, if you want more details, I'm afraid your only options are to obtain information from the Church of Evernight or from one of those ancient secret organizations. You know the ones I am referring to."

I don't...

Klein nodded, secretly frustrated. "Mm-hmm."

The Secret Order is one. The Ascetic Order of Moss that Captain and Old Neil mentioned is another. I wonder if the Psychology Alchemists counts...

As he mentally ticked off the candidates, Alger provided the final pieces of information, "I similarly have no idea which Sequence pathway the Antigonus family held. There are only two adjectives that repeatedly appear in the descriptions—strange and terrifying."

Strange and terrifying... Thinking back to the notebook and what happened to the original Klein and his classmates, as well as to what happened to Ryer Bieber's mother, Klein thought the description couldn't be more apt. He continuously rapped the edge of the long table with the tip of his finger as he pondered.

Then he slowly began to speak.

"Very well. I am satisfied with this payment."

He lightly rapped the table with his fingers to emphasize the action—to instill in Justice and The Hanged Man that he had a habit

of tapping on something. This gesture also served to conceal the fact that the same motion was used to activate and deactivate his spirit vision.

"It's my pleasure," Alger replied without further comment.

Audrey glanced at The Hanged Man and then at The Fool. With a small smile, she said, "Then I shall ask my second question. What is the name of the potion in the Sequence after Spectator? Where can I find the clues?"

I'd also like to ask so directly, but different choices lead to different difficulties...

Klein said nothing and instead cast his gaze toward The Hanged Man.

After a few seconds of silence, Alger answered, "I'll answer the question for free since I'm the one who led you onto this path. The next rank in the Sequence after Spectator is rank eight, Telepathist. The archaic name of rank seven is Psyche Analyst, but it is now called Psychiatrist. That is what I learned from a member of the Psychology Alchemists. I think they should have quite a number of potion formulas for this Sequence."

The Psychology Alchemists... Spirit Medium Daly was rather approving of their ideas, though Captain thought of them as evil and crazy...

Klein listened, deep in thought.

"Do you know the whereabouts of that particular Psychology Alchemists member?" Audrey asked, her eyes sparkling. Whether Telepathist or Psychiatrist, both names clearly appealed to her.

Alger gave a rare laugh. "I do. He's drowned in the sea near Sonia Island—I put him in there with my own hands. If you would like to look for the Psychology Alchemists, I must apologize. The trail is cold."

He wasn't worried that Justice would deduce his identity from his description because he had been alone throughout that entire process; nobody saw him.

"Drowned..." Audrey was momentarily at a loss for words. She drew a deep breath and, suddenly failing to maintain her Spectator

state, asked bashfully, “My third question. If—and I’m saying if—an ordinary animal were to drink a Sequence Nine potion, what would happen?”

What kind of a question is that? Klein tapped his brow discreetly with the finger supporting his forehead.

Very quickly, he noted changes in color and saw that Audrey’s emotions were a mix of panic, nervousness, and embarrassment.

Could she really have done something so reckless? Klein was astounded, though he wasn’t entirely surprised. After the past two gatherings, he was certain Miss Justice was capable of such a thing.

Alger, clearly dumbfounded as well, took a moment to reply.

“Ordinary animals do not possess human-level intellect. They wouldn’t be able to learn meditation immediately. Therefore, the potion would most likely cause their death on the spot or reduce them to a monstrous state. However, if they survived the initial ingestion, they might become an extraordinary creature. If the potion enhances their intelligence, they could even become smarter.”

“I see,” Audrey breathed out a silent sigh and nodded in mild relief. “I have no further questions.”

Alger considered for a moment and said nothing regarding the Aurora Order or the Listener. He shook his head and added, “Nor do I.”

“I have something.” Klein didn’t change his posture but said with a smile, “It will require your cooperation.”

He had yet to turn off his spirit vision, and he immediately noticed that The Hanged Man was showing signs of nervousness, and the usually dauntless Miss Justice also appeared a little cautious and apprehensive.

Before they could reply, Klein consoled them, saying, “Don’t worry. It’s a trivial matter. If it’s successful, it will be very beneficial to you, so I won’t ask for any extra remuneration.”

“Please go ahead,” Audrey said, instinctively entering the Spectator state, though she couldn’t see through the thick gray fog surrounding The Fool, no matter how hard she tried.

“As you wish,” Alger replied, composing himself.

Klein moved his fingers and smiled. “Previously, I mentioned that I would try something to enable you to request leaves of absence. That way, you won’t have to worry if you need to be somewhere unsuitable on a Monday afternoon.”

“That is indeed our wish,” Audrey replied, loosening her tightly knit eyebrows.

Alger considered for a moment before asking, “What do you need us to do?”

“You could try a magical ritual at your convenience. It need not be too formal, as long as you’re in an environment free from disturbances. Place four brand-new candles on the altar—one in each corner of a square. It’s best if they are sandalwood-scented. Then position a loaf of white bread near the candle in the top left corner, a bowl of Feynapotter noodles by the candle in the top right, paella by the candle in the bottom left, and a Desi meat pie by the candle in the bottom right. Finally, use a silver knife to create a sealed spiritual environment.”

Klein proceeded to describe his modified version of the luck-turning ritual, teaching Miss Justice how to create a spiritual environment for free.

To be frank, since the ritual was targeted at himself, Klein believed that the sacrificial part—intended to attract and please an external entity—could be omitted entirely. However, he still made every effort to ensure the process appeared legitimate. Of course, it wasn’t entirely in line with what Old Neil had taught about gods occupying two spots and adding the “self” as a third.

“...Distill a mixture of moonflowers, gold mint, slumber flowers, bergamot, and cistus, and then extract its essential oil. Instill one drop onto each candle...”

Audrey listened with keen interest as she diligently noted everything he said. When he was finished, she asked, “What about the incantation? Mr. Fool, what is the corresponding incantation?”

At that moment, Alger ceased writing with his fountain pen and turned his head to look at The Fool.

Behind the gray fog, Klein lightly tapped the edge of the long table with his finger and answered steadily in Hermes, "The Fool not of this era, you are the mysterious ruler above the gray fog. You are the King of Yellow and Black and the Lord of Good Luck..."

CHAPTER 61

◆ STRANGE SYMBOLS ◆

“The Fool not of this era... Mysterious ruler above the gray fog... The King of Yellow and Black and the Lord of Good Luck...”

Audrey Hall repeated the three lines to herself in silence. Suddenly, a tumultuous wave of emotion overwhelmed her, making it impossible to maintain her Spectator state.

As an enthusiast of mysticism, she would exchange any information she obtained—regardless of its truth—in private gatherings with like-minded peers. She had studied the Hermes used in rituals and often attempted the incantations others mentioned long before she was pulled into the gray fog or made any real contact with extraordinary powers.

None of those rituals had produced any tangible effects, but they had given Audrey a basic understanding of incantations and their usual templates.

Thus, she recognized the significance of these three lines and how they related to other rituals.

Typically, such words described and pointed to one of the seven gods who watched over this world. Therefore, The Fool’s address was claiming a status equal to that of the Master of Crimson, the Mother of Secrets, and the Queen of Calamity and Fear!

Is Mr. Fool the unknown, mysterious, powerful, godlike entity that

Glaint had spoken of? Could he be the source of danger we must carefully avoid in rituals?

Audrey quickly recalled the laments of her friends—those who had yearned to try the strange rituals they'd found but were too afraid to act. For a moment, she was at a loss for words.

Alger Wilson, who understood far more than Audrey, shivered from deep within.

If the ritualistic magic Mr. Fool designed can truly reach him and allow him to receive our requests, then we...would have to address him as Him. We would have to use the pronouns reserved for gods and other beings of equal power.

How fortunate and how wise I was to have always acted in concert with him and never done anything foolish. Even when I was testing him, it remained within the normally accepted boundaries...

Could he perhaps be an ancient, mysterious, horrifying entity that has never revealed his true form or name to the world? Could he be the Primordial Demoness, the Hidden Sage, or the True Creator that several secret cults revere?

Alger understood that although he was looking at The Fool, the figure before him might not be his true form. This entity might not even possess a gender—or resemble a humanoid at all.

Klein propped his forehead up with one hand and tapped on the table with the other, acutely sensing the changes in The Hanged Man and Justice. Yet he acted as though everything was exactly as expected. Disregarding their reactions, he continued the incantation:

"I pray for your help.

"I pray for your favor.

"I pray for you to give me a good dream.

"Oh, slumber flower, herb of the crimson moon, please bestow your powers to my incantation.

Oh, bergamot, herb of the sun, please bestow your powers to my incantation."

...

He finished describing the incantations taken from another ritual template. When he was done, he smiled.

"Lady and gentleman, have you memorized it?"

"Ah," Audrey quietly gasped, quickly covering her mouth before earnestly trying to recall the words. With her enhanced memory as a Spectator, she rapidly processed the information and repeated the incantation aloud to confirm it was correct.

Alger acted as if nothing unusual had occurred. Regardless of his inner thoughts, his pen never ceased its steady movement across the page.

After Klein confirmed that Audrey had recited the incantation correctly, he smiled and said, "If this trial is successful, then next time we shall lightly modify the ritual for our own benefit. I hope you will have time to complete the ritual before Wednesday, at the latest."

He intended to return on Thursday night to determine whether the ritual had worked.

Klein deliberately did not ask The Hanged Man and Justice to directly request a leave of absence as part of the test; he worried he wouldn't be able to discern whether they were genuinely asking for leave or if it was merely an incidental result of the ritualistic magic. If that happened, should he pull them into the gathering or not?

"At your pleasure," Audrey and Alger replied respectfully, collecting themselves.

"Following The Hanged Man's suggestion last week, we shall have time for casual conversation after we discuss serious matters. Who would like to begin?" Klein asked, making an inviting gesture with his hand.

Audrey thought for a moment, then said, "Mr. Fool, the suggestion you made regarding the exam selection and the separation between civil and political affairs has gained the approval of many members of parliament. Perhaps...it could really become a reality. Of course, given the speed at which our kingdom's government operates, the bill might not appear for at least another half year."

She was not worried that The Hanged Man would track her down using this piece of information. She had dropped subtle hints, casually and seemingly by chance, to guide those proud wives into believing that their own brilliant minds had conceived the idea. These ladies had rushed to show off to their husbands, their fathers, and their brothers. At that moment, Audrey felt as though she were watching a flock of golden peacocks displaying their tail feathers.

She believed that, through self-reinforcement, these women would soon become convinced that the glory belonged solely to themselves, eventually forgetting Audrey's role and even fighting among themselves over who had conceived the idea first.

Using this ingenious method to change the political winds of a kingdom gave Audrey a peculiar sense of gratification, as if she had found a way for a Spectator to influence the plot of a play.

"Let's hope so," Alger replied sarcastically.

After a pause, he glanced at The Fool and said, "In recent decades, the activities of various secret organizations have trended upward. In fact, new secret organizations have even emerged, some of them now having reached a significant scale with many Beyonders involved."

Are you trying to find out the reason from me? I haven't even gained access to information about these illegal organizations...

Klein merely smiled without commenting on The Hanged Man's news. Changing the subject, he said vaguely, "Some ancient powers are awakening from their slumbers."

For example, the power represented by the Antigonus family's notebook...

"Is that so...?" Alger muttered softly, as though recalling something.

Klein swept his gaze toward The Hanged Man, then to Justice, and said with a smile, "If there is nothing further to share, then let's end today's gathering here."

"As you wish." Audrey and Alger stood up together.

Klein moved his finger and severed his connection with the

crimson stars. He watched as the two figures disappeared from the magnificent palace.

Standing up, he walked around to the back of his own chair at the head of the table. There, he looked at the constellation symbol inscribed on its back.

Radiant stars were connected in the shape of a strange symbol—one that did not match anything in Klein's current understanding of mysticism.

He observed it closely before identifying the "Pupilless Eye," a symbol representing concealment. He also saw the "Contorted Lines," which represented change. A portion was missing from each symbol where they overlapped to form a new one.

An incomplete concealment and an incomplete change... What does it mean when they're put together?

Klein furrowed his brows as he muttered to himself, unable to come up with an answer at the moment. He retracted his gaze and walked all around the ancient, magnificent palace, scanning every corner with his eyes.

Back when I conjured this place up on a whim, I merely thought of a rough concept. I never described the shape of the hall, the table, or the chairs in detail... Where did this design come from? Was it the optimal choice? The first prototype? Or is it a reflection of reality?

As he looked, Klein suddenly remembered a question he had previously neglected.

Sigh. I have to say that, as a keyboard warrior, I really lack experience in many areas. I am also not astute enough—so much so that I only realize this question now...

With that self-reflection, Klein made a serious effort to examine every corner of the palace and the gray fog around it, but he did not find any other living things, nor did he notice anything else strange.

For now, Klein did not dare to venture deeper into what seemed to be an illusory land without boundaries. He was afraid he would end up completely lost there.

Letting out a deep breath, he marveled at the mystery contained in this place.

I wonder if there will be any changes here when I become more powerful...

Klein sighed as he unleashed his spirituality and enveloped himself with it, then invoked the sensation of a quick drop.

Everything flew past quickly—a myriad of illusions shattered around him. He passed through the grayish-white fog and saw reality again. He saw the table, curtains, and clothing rack in his bedroom.

...

In Empress Borough, Backlund, Audrey opened her eyes and saw the oil painting hanging on the wall. She felt the softness of the down pillow under her head. She did not stand up immediately; instead, she gave herself a moment to remain in her thoughts, recalling what had happened during today's gathering as if watching a play she had already seen.

"When Mr. Fool told us to try the ritual and gave us the address of the mysterious ruler—the King of Yellow and Black—he spoke with a certain confidence... Confidence..." Audrey analyzed these words in silence, then suddenly drew a sharp breath, feeling a slight tremble in her body.

Forget it. Since I cannot fight it, there's no need to dwell on it... Mr. Fool has always been amiable. He must be a law-abiding entity...

Audrey's mood rapidly improved. Her thoughts shifted to her acting and the weak side effects of her potion.

Humming a merry tune, she got out of bed and walked toward the door, adjusting her mindset to embrace her role as a Spectator.

As she opened the door, she noticed a maid walking past. Observing the old calluses on the maid's hands, the marks on her face, and other subtle details, Audrey deduced many things from these observations.

At that moment, she experienced a strange feeling and quickly turned to look at a shaded corner away from the balcony. There, Susie, her large golden retriever, sat silently, watching her much like how she observed the maid.

My Goddess A twitch at the corner of her lips betrayed an urge to cover her face as she let out a long sigh.

...

On the Sonia Sea, in the heavily protected captain's quarters, Alger awoke and noticed that nothing had changed around him—as if nothing had happened at all. He sighed and thought to himself.

An ancient existence?

...

Klein, having exited the ritual, pulled open the curtains. He then took out his notebook and began writing again, recalling the contents of Emperor Roselle's diary pages in an effort to reinforce his memory so as not to forget. When he was done, he reread his notes repeatedly. Finally, he tore the pages up and incinerated them.

If I do this once a week, I won't forget the most salient points. But over time, this will become an increasingly arduous task... How unfortunate that I don't have any better ideas. I don't know any cryptography either...

Klein collected himself and stretched his neck. He planned on heading over to the Divination Club.

A Seer was defined differently by different people. No one could say that another person's impression was wrong. So Klein, unsure which type of Seer best fit the requirements of the potion, could only self-correct through practical applications until he ascertained which method was optimal!

CHAPTER 62

◆ THE SEER'S SUGGESTION ◆

Before Klein went out, he meticulously cleaned his suit and top hat with a small brush and handkerchief. Then he washed his white shirt and changed into a similar linen shirt along with the only decent, cheap coat he had. Briskly, he walked out onto the street.

First, Melissa's dress. Second, Benson's suit. Only then can I consider another suit for myself. Money is never enough... Besides, we need to save money to buy porcelain tableware to receive our guests... And I also have to save money to buy a variety of materials related to mysticism...

Klein mentally calculated the family's financial situation as he sat on the coach. The more he thought about it, the more he shook his head.

He reckoned he needed at least a year before the three of them could live as a middle-class family.

Of course, that was without taking promotions and pay raises into consideration.

The coach drove past one street after another before stopping on Howes Street, across from the Divination Club.

Klein adjusted his black, non-silk, short hat and hopped off the carriage. Walking along the familiar street, he entered the club on

the second floor, where he saw the beautiful receptionist, Angelica. There was a hint of swollen redness around her eyes, but she looked extremely relaxed.

Klein raised his hand to tap his brow lightly and carefully examined her. He noted that the gray hue deep in Angelica's emotional colors had greatly dispersed, replaced with a bright, sunlit white. After taking it in, Klein walked over, removed his hat, and smiled. "Ms. Angelica, it's a lovely day today, isn't it?"

Angelica lifted her head and gasped, briefly startled. Then she beamed and said, "You are just like Mr. Vincent's cat. You don't make any sound while you walk, do you? But, hmm, you're able to tell? Ha-ha, I almost forgot that you are a fortune teller skilled in reading faces..."

She paused, then gently bit her lip before giving him a bow. "Thank you. Thank you for your suggestion yesterday. I haven't felt this relaxed, happy, and content in a year."

Hearing her sincere gratitude, Klein felt his own joy swell. The corners of his lips lifted as he replied, "It's my pleasure to have been of assistance."

As he spoke, he felt his spirituality relax but also become livelier.

Is this what the Seer wants? A Seer who can truly help the inquirer? Klein pinched his brow thoughtfully before secretly tapping it twice.

In practice, he found that the motion of activating and deactivating his spirit vision was not inconspicuous enough. He hadn't yet devised a better method to replace it. Since he had only recently become a Seer, his spirituality had not reached its limit, and neither had his mastery. Therefore, only spots that could effectively trigger his spirituality could serve as an activation switch—and there were not many such spots. The brow was by far the best option.

When I become a true Seer after fully digesting the potion, I should be able to design a more inconspicuous activation motion...

Klein nodded to himself and walked toward the half-open meeting room.

"Coffee or tea?" Angelica asked hurriedly.

"Desi coffee," Klein answered, planning to sample all the drinks the Divination Club had to offer.

He noticed that six or seven members were present in the meeting room—but not Hines Vincent, who was almost always there.

"Mr. Vincent isn't here today?" Klein paused and asked in passing.

Angelica blinked for a moment, then said, "Mr. Vincent doesn't come here every day. He accepted an invitation to give a lecture for a divination organization at Enmat Harbor. Are you looking for him?"

"Not at all. I was just curious. It's just that I've seen him every time I've come here." Klein shook his head with a smile. Meanwhile, he realized that among the seven members present there was a familiar face—Glacis, who had divined for him before.

Wearing his monocle, Glacis was sitting at a table, absorbed in reading when he suddenly sensed someone watching him. He lifted his head, and a look of obvious joy spread across his face as he pushed his hands on the table and stood up. He dashed toward Klein and stopped before him.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Moretti. I was wondering if you would come today. I heard from Angelica that you are not a doctor but a fortune teller who is good at face-reading."

Klein smiled. "That's not my only field of expertise. Mr. Glacis, you no longer seem plagued by your ailment?"

Klein pinched his forehead and tapped twice on his brow. He noticed that the unhealthy hues in Glacis's complexion had returned to normal.

"Yes, I deeply regret not taking your suggestion back then. Luckily, there is an amazing apothecary near my home. He gave my wife a magical decoction that pulled me back from the brink of death," Glacis exclaimed with emotion.

As a quasi-member of the Nighthawks, Klein asked with occupational sensitivity, "An amazing apothecary? A magical decoction?" *Magical? How magical? Is it within the range of extraordinary?*

"He said it was a kind of folk remedy from Lenburg. In short, it

helped tremendously with my illness,” Glacis answered, seemingly unaware that his description struck Klein as somewhat mundane.

A folk remedy apothecary? Klein tapped his brow thoughtfully. “What’s his name? Where is his shop? As you know, even a fortune teller can’t guarantee constant good health. Perhaps I will need some remedy for myself in the future.”

Klein recalled from his teachers and classmates that the current health system in this world was still in its nascent stages. With hardly any cure for many diseases, magical decoctions and remarkable apothecaries still ruled the market. There was no harm in knowing more—knowledge that might one day prove useful.

Glacis answered honestly, “His name is Lawson Darkwade. He has a shop at 18 Vlad Street in Eastside—named Lawson’s Folk Apothecary.”

“Thank you,” Klein said sincerely, committing the information to memory.

Glacis then turned and invited him to sit beside him. At that moment, Angelica entered carrying the coffee she had prepared. Compared to Southweir coffee, Desi coffee was more fragrant, though it didn’t taste quite as good... Klein took a sip and savored it for a moment.

Noticing that Klein had set his white porcelain cup down, Glacis hurriedly asked, “Mr. Moretti, may I request a divination from you? I will pay according to the price you set.”

“Eight pence is sufficient. I won’t raise the price unexpectedly.” Klein hoped that someone would request his divination services. “Would you like to go to a divination room?”

“Yes. Topaz, please,” Glacis replied, leading the way with evident familiarity.

After entering the divination room and locking the door, Klein sat behind the long table. In a serious tone, he asked, “Mr. Glacis, what would you like to divine?”

“I have an investment opportunity that involves a vast sum of money. If it fails, my family and I will suffer a heavy loss. I wish to

know whether it will be a successful investment.” Glacis volunteered further, “I have divined using tarot cards previously. Hmm, a divination after purifying my soul. The result was pretty good. Yes, I did the interpretation myself, but I did not defy the principles of the symbols.”

Klein considered this for a moment and then asked curiously, “It would be helpful if you could describe the entire situation in detail, including your information. It’d be even better if you had details about the other party as well. We can perform a star chart divination.”

“All right,” Glacis said, organizing his thoughts. “When Mister Lanevus was surveying the Hornacis mountain range, he discovered a mine rich in high-quality iron ore. He emptied all his savings to purchase that land and hired a professional company to inspect it. The result was very encouraging. However, he lacks the funds needed for further development, so he formed a steelworks company and plans to apply for a bank loan using the project. At the same time, he intends to issue a corresponding number of shares to raise the initial capital. The plan is still in its infancy, but it promises handsome returns.”

Klein, who had been reading the newspaper recently and considered himself somewhat of a history expert, knew that stock equities existed in this world. He also recalled that the concept of shares originated with Emperor Roselle.

Him again... During the colonization of the Southern Continent, Emperor Roselle set up the West Balam Company and successfully solved the nation’s financial problems by raising funds from the public through the issue of shares. In doing so, he was the first to benefit from the profits of colonization.

Because the returns were great, similar ventures followed one after another. There were railway shares, mining shares, steam development shares, and so forth. Some succeeded, and some failed, which propelled the formation of organizations like the Backlund Stock Exchange.

Aside from that, Emperor Roselle had also created national bonds,

unit trusts, and other financial instruments. The former went on to become the most stable form of investment today, yielding an annual return of 4–6%.

Klein recalled that Benson had once said that if he could inherit three thousand pounds, he would no longer need to work so hard anymore. With a stable annual interest of about 5%, that would yield a fixed return of 150 pounds per year—roughly equivalent to Klein's current annual income.

So that's the so-called rentier class...

Klein sighed and asked carefully, "Are you sure there are no problems with this? Is Lanevus trustworthy?"

Glacis nodded. "I've seen his property papers and the inspection report. There's a stamp from the county government of Sivellaushire and an endorsement from a professional company. Besides, there's a photo of him with Sir Dwyer and Mr. Mayor inside his office."

A photo? That doesn't mean anything...

Klein had grown up in an era of information explosion and had seen too many things to be swayed by mere photographs. That alone wasn't enough to make him buy the story.

However, it didn't matter whether he believed it or not. All he could do was pick up a pen and draw a corresponding star chart based on the crucial time and information that Glacis had provided him.

After a long while, Klein pointed to the star chart and said, "You should be able to tell for yourself. This will be a very unsuccessful endeavor. Beneath the flourishing surface lies a steep precipice—an abyss. Based on this divination, my suggestion is to avoid it altogether."

"..." Glacis fell silent; his mouth opened and closed several times before, a few minutes later, he managed a rueful smile. "I will carefully consider this matter after I get home."

Hearing this answer, Klein could only shake his head with a silent sigh, feeling the helplessness of a Seer. A Seer can only offer suggestions; he could not make decisions for others.

Just as the two walked out of the Topaz Room, Angelica approached and said, "Mr. Moretti, someone is requesting your divination services." Then she added in a whisper, "He did not ask for my recommendations, nor did he view the album."

Has my reputation spread?

Curious, Klein turned and headed for the foyer.

CHAPTER 63

◆ DREAM ANALYSIS ◆

Klein took a few steps forward and saw the client. He was dressed in a black suit and held a gold-inlaid wooden cane in his hand. His short blond hair flared out stubbornly from beneath his short top hat. His nose was aquiline like a hawk's beak.

Anna's fiancé... Joyce Meyer, the one who survived that terrifying ordeal...

Klein, recognizing him from his dream divination, immediately greeted him with a smile. "Good afternoon, Mr. Meyer."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Moretti." Joyce removed his hat and bowed in greeting. "Thank you for the advice you gave Anna. She cannot stop praising how incredible you are."

Klein chuckled. "I changed nothing at all. You should be thanking yourself. Without your strength of will and your aspiration for goodness, you wouldn't have overcome such calamity."

After the exchange of pleasantries, Klein inwardly grouched.

Does this count as mutual professional bootlicking?

"In all honesty, I still find my coming back alive to be a dream. I cannot believe I managed to get through wave after wave of horror," Joyce said wistfully, shaking his head.

Without waiting for Klein's reply, he continued, "You knew who I

was the moment you saw me. Was that because my nose stands out too much, or because you divined that I would visit you?"

"I had your detailed information. That is enough for a seer," Klein replied vaguely, acting like a seasoned charlatan.

Joyce was visibly stunned. After a pause of more than ten seconds, he squeezed out a smile. "Mr. Moretti, I'd like you to divine for me."

At that moment, Joyce realized something.

Mr. Klein Moretti had introduced himself as a seer, not merely a fortune teller. A seer!

"All right, let us head to the Topaz Room," Klein gestured.

In that instant, he silently chastised himself for not wearing a long black robe or speaking sparingly to maintain the mystique of a seer.

After entering the room, Joyce Meyer locked the door of his own volition. As he surveyed his surroundings, Klein seized the opportunity to tap twice on his brow to activate his spirit vision.

Joyce settled into a chair and leaned his cane beside him. Tugging at his bow tie, he said hoarsely, "Mr. Moretti, I wish for you to interpret my dream."

"Dream analysis?" Klein asked, as if confirmation was all he needed.

Klein's spirit vision revealed the various hues representing Joyce's health—none so alarming as to suggest serious illness. The colors symbolizing his emotions were predominantly blue, for pensiveness, and their darkness suggested tightly wound nerves.

Joyce nodded solemnly. "I have had the same dream every night since arriving at Enmat Harbor—a dream filled with terror. I know it could be trauma from my horrific experience and that I should see a psychiatrist, but I suspect this is no ordinary dream. A normal dream would have some variation in details even if it recurred nightly, but this dream remains exactly the same, at least in all the parts I can recall."

"To a seer, such dreams are seen as revelations from the divine," Klein explained, half-consoling, half-explaining. "Can you describe the dream to me in detail?"

Joyce clenched his fists, holding them against his lips. After a

moment of contemplation, he began, "I dreamed that I was falling from the *Alfalfa* into the ocean. The ocean was dark red—as if it were filled with putrid blood.

"As I fell, someone on the boat grabbed me. I couldn't see exactly what he looked like. I only know that he was very strong. At the same time, I was also holding onto someone, trying to save him from falling into the sea. I know this person. He was a passenger of the *Alfalfa*, Younas Kim.

"Because of his weight and his struggling, I could not bear it any longer and had to release my grip. I watched him scream as he sank into the sea of blood.

"At that moment, the person above me also released his hand. I flailed my arms, hoping to grab onto something, but there was nothing to hold on to. I plummeted rapidly, and then I woke up in horror, with sweat covering my back and forehead."

Klein held his forehead and gently tapped it, as though deep in thought. He then organized his words and said, "Mr. Meyer, nightmares, recurring nightmares, and even similar dreams are all psychological phenomena with corresponding sources. When the same nightmare repeats night after night, it is a signal from your inner spirituality—a revelation from the gods."

Seeing Joyce's confused expression, he elaborated, "Believe me, even an ordinary person's inner spirituality is capable of sending signals. I do not know exactly what happened on the *Alfalfa*, but I can tell you it was a tragedy of blood and steel that has left a profoundly traumatic impression on you."

Seeing Joyce nod slightly, Klein continued, "You must have been utterly horrified and fearful on the ship. When overwhelmed by extreme emotions, it is easy to lose your perception and overlook crucial details. This doesn't mean you didn't see those details—you simply disregarded them. Do you understand? Disregarded.

"In your subconscious, in your spirituality, those overlooked details still remain. If they are important enough, your inner self will remind you of them through your dreams."

Previously, when I felt I had overlooked something, I later realized that the diary was with Ryer Bieber... I, however, was more sensitive, with stronger spirituality and a deeper knowledge of mysticism, which allowed me to deduce things more quickly.

Klein looked into Joyce Meyer's eyes and asked, "Did Mr. Younas Kim—the one you let fall into the sea of blood—plead with you on the ship, only to be unable to escape his fate?"

Joyce fidgeted unnaturally, opening and closing his mouth several times before answering, "Yes, but I do not pity him. Perhaps in a few days or a week, you will read in the newspapers what a cruel and despicable bastard he was. He raped and murdered at least three ladies and even threw a baby into the Berserk Sea. He led a band of savages who lost their minds and brutally massacred the passengers and crew.

"He was scheming, strong, and evil. I dared not—and could not—stop him because doing so would have cost me my life."

"I am not doubting what you did," Klein said, making his stance clear. Then he explained, "But your dream is telling me that you are feeling regret and remorse. You believe that you should not have released your hand. If you truly felt that killing him was an act of justice, then why do you feel remorse to the point that it haunts you in your dreams?"

"I don't know, either..." Joyce shook his head, confused.

Klein crossed his fingers and rested them under his chin as he attempted to analyze the situation. "In light of what I've just described, are you overlooking certain details? For instance, consider what Younas Kim said—what were the exact contents of his plea, the way he presented himself, and so on. I cannot recall the incident for you, so please think about it carefully."

"There's nothing... All he managed to say back then was, 'Spare me. I surrender...'" Joyce muttered.

Not knowing the full details himself, Klein could only guide him based on his understanding of the dream. "Perhaps you felt that Younas Kim was more useful alive—that he could prove something or explain something?"

Joyce knitted his brows. After a moment, he said, "Perhaps...I still find that the conflict on the *Alfalfa* erupted too abruptly and escalated too viciously. It was as if the passive evil in everyone's heart burst out of control... It was far too unusual ... Perhaps...perhaps I wished to interrogate Younas Kim and ask him what happened—what made him act as if possessed by the devil."

Klein's eyes lit up with a sudden inspiration after hearing Joyce's hazy description. Speaking in a tone steeped in mystery, the way a seasoned charlatan might, he said, "No, that's not the only reason."

"What?" Joyce appeared startled.

Klein crossed his fingers and rested his chin on them. He fixed his gaze on Joyce and spoke slowly but forcefully, "Not only did you find the incident unusual, but you also noticed details that you disregarded. When you string together those overlooked details, they lead to a terrifying conclusion.

"Your inner spirituality is warning you that there is someone who should be regarded with the highest suspicion. That person is the one who grabbed you in your dream and then released his hand. You subconsciously refuse to suspect him, and therefore, you cannot see his face. He was your companion. He once controlled your fate or perhaps even saved you!"

Joyce suddenly leaned back, slamming into the back of his chair with a dull thud. His forehead slowly broke into a sheen of sweat, and confusion filled his eyes. "I...I see it..."

Without warning, Joyce sprang to his feet, his chair wobbling with a clanging sound, nearly toppling over. "Mr. Tris..." he managed, as if expending all his energy to utter the name.

He was that friendly, bashful boy with the round face—the hero who had saved the survivors.

Klein did not interrupt. He simply leaned back and waited in silence. Joyce's expression changed several times before finally settling into a pale, normal look. He then offered a rueful smile. "I understand now. Thank you for interpreting my dream. Perhaps it's time for me to visit the police station."

Reaching into his leather wallet, Joyce fished out a one-soli note. "I don't think money can fully represent your worth, but I can only pay according to the price you set." He pushed the note toward Klein.

I wouldn't have minded if you gave me ten pounds... One soli... You sure are like your fiancée...

Klein maintained his mysterious facade, saying nothing as he smiled and placed his hand on the note.

Joyce took a deep breath, donned his hat, and turned toward the door. As he locked it behind him, he looked back earnestly, "Thank you, Master Moretti."

Master? Klein thought with a quiet chuckle as he watched Joyce leave the divination room and wondered silently to himself.

Something unbelievable seems to have happened on the Alfalfa... If only Captain Dunn were here. He could peer into Joyce Meyer's dreams and uncover everything...

...

It was a Tuesday morning in Empress Borough, Backlund, when Audrey, having woken earlier than usual, beckoned her golden retriever Susie over.

"Susie, you are also a Beyonder now," she said seriously. "We are the same kind—wait, no, what I mean is that we have to help each other. Later, you need to guard the door and not let anyone disturb me. I have to conduct a ritual."

Susie merely looked at her mistress and shook her tail in gentle exasperation.



CHAPTER 64

♦ INSTIGATOR ♦

After giving Susie her orders, Audrey paced around her room, still a little worried. She, too, was uncertain whether the ritualistic magic she was attempting today would yield any odd results.

“How about this...?” Her eyes grew calm as she reviewed the imagined process from the vantage of a bystander. Soon, she devised a new arrangement.

Audrey unlocked the door to her bedroom and said to Susie, “Susie, stand guard here. If Annie and the rest try to barge in, immediately go to the bathroom and inform me.” To prevent any accidents, her lady’s maid kept the key to unlock the door.

Susie gave her a knowing look and wagged her tail three times.

“Very good. I’ll let you choose anything you want for lunch today!” Audrey pumped her fist gently.

After exhorting Susie, she went into the bathroom. The square bathtub measured three to four meters on each side. Clear water rippled gently within it, with white steam rising to create a hazy scene.

Audrey removed the many bottles and jars from a large rectangular table, then returned to her room to carry in the candles, sacrificial items, and a long white chemise. Once everything was in place, she closed the bathroom door.

She heaved a sigh of relief and picked up a translucent, light-blue vial about the size of her palm, which sat beside the four candles.

The cylindrical bottle shimmered dreamily in the light; it contained the ceremonial oils she had distilled yesterday. As an enthusiast of mysticism, she had no shortage of research on such items—she had made many different extracts, flower essences, solid perfumes, essential oils, and incense herself. Thus, she quickly completed the initial preparations according to The Fool's instructions.

"Moonflowers, gold mint, slumber flowers, bergamot, and cistus... What a peculiar concoction..." Audrey mumbled quietly. "Oh, one must cleanse one's body and calm the mind before engaging in ritualistic magic. This is a form of reverence to the divine—uh, to the target."

After reviewing the entire process in her mind, she placed the ceremonial elixir beside the bathtub, then reached out and began removing the clothes she'd been wearing. Silk garments fell into the laundry basket one after another. Audrey coiled her hair into a bun and tested the water's temperature with her hand. Then she carefully stepped into the bathtub, allowing her body to slowly sink into the water's warm embrace.

"Phew..." She exhaled comfortably, feeling the warmth spread over her. She felt unusually relaxed.

I don't even want to move a single finger... Audrey forcibly summoned her energy as she picked up the translucent, light-blue bottle and dripped a few drops into the water.

A waft of fragrance filled the room, breaking the silence with a refreshing scent. Audrey breathed in deeply several times and nodded in satisfaction.

"Not bad. It's very pleasant.

"How relaxing. How comfortable..."

"I don't want to move at all. All I wish is to lie here quietly..."

"Quietly, quietly... Qui...etly..."

After losing her sense of time, Audrey suddenly heard barking.

She opened her eyes in shock, looking left and right in a daze.

She had no idea when Susie had opened the door and entered. The golden retriever was squatting outside the bathtub, watching her in exasperation.

As Audrey rubbed the corners of her eyes, she realized that the water had cooled considerably.

“Did...did I fall asleep?” she blurted.

Susie regarded her silently, neither barking nor wagging her tail.

“Ha-ha, the effect of that ceremonial elixir is truly remarkable. Mm-hmm, really remarkable!” Audrey chuckled dryly in a cheerful tone as she explained

She stood up, retrieved a towel, and, while wrapping and drying her body, said to the golden retriever beside her, “Susie, continue keeping watch. Do not let Annie and the rest come in!”

Only when the golden retriever left did she stick out her tongue guiltily, toss her towel aside, and pull on a clean white chemise.

After closing the bathroom door, Audrey recalled the ritual she had memorized.

She picked up the four candles and placed them on the four corners of the table.

A loaf of white bread at the top left corner and a bowl of Feynapotter noodles at the top right corner. Smells great, though it's a little cold now... No! This isn't the time to think about that! Paella at the bottom left and a Desi pie at the bottom right...

Audrey carefully set up the altar according to The Fool's descriptions, shaking her head twice during the process. After finishing the preparations, she lit the candles one by one, then picked up a silver knife and stabbed it into a pile of coarse salt. She recited the sacred incantation in Hermes before withdrawing the knife and placing it into a cup filled with clear water.

She then focused her mind, retrieved the silver “sacred blade,” and meditated on the image of her spirituality spreading out and emanating from the tip of the blade.

Invisible energy poured forth as Audrey held the knife and circled the altar once. She felt as though a spiritual wall had been

fully erected around her, keeping all uncleanness and distractions outside.

Maintaining her Spectator state, she did not allow her excitement or joy to interfere with the ritual. She set the silver knife aside and picked up the crystalline vial of light blue liquid, applying one drop to each candle.

Szzzzt!

A faint fragrance emanated as Audrey's body, mind, and soul reached a state of tranquility. She drew a quiet breath, lowered her head in reverence, and began chanting the incantation in Hermes:

"The Fool not of this era,

"You are the mysterious ruler above the gray fog,

"You are the King of Yellow and Black and the Lord of Good Luck,

"I pray for your help.

"I pray for your favor.

"I pray for you to give me a good dream.

"Oh, slumber flower, herb of the crimson moon, please bestow your powers to my incantation.

"Oh, bergamot, herb of the sun, please bestow your powers to my incantation."

...

After chanting, just as she planned to meditate on the contents of her plea, she felt a stir within the spiritual wall. A dark red star began swirling on the back of her hand. Her heart skipped a beat, and she hurriedly closed her eyes, steadying her emotions as she sincerely shaped her plea in her mind. When she opened her eyes again, Audrey surveyed her surroundings but found nothing out of the ordinary.

"Is that all?" she murmured to herself, lightly knitting her eyebrows.

...

The King of Yellow and Black and the Lord of Good Luck... The Fool not of this era...

In the captain's quarters on the *Blue Avenger*, Alger Wilson—dressed in his Church of Storms robe—silently recited the three lines of address

he had heard that afternoon. He appeared to be searching for clues as to who the entity might be.

He shook his head and stood up, a little agitated, but ultimately did nothing. Alger was not at ease about the *Blue Avenger*—the ancient relic from the Tudor Dynasty. Although he had already seized control of the ship, he had a feeling it still held many secrets, much like the Blood Emperor had. Therefore, he had used the ship's protective ability to test The Fool's powers, yet he wouldn't attempt any unknown ritualistic magic on board.

After mulling it over for a few minutes, Alger went out onto the deck and said to the handful of crew members, "We will be reaching the Rorsted Archipelago soon. We will anchor there for a day."

The crew immediately responded in unison, "Thank you, My Lord!"

Because the ghost ship required so few sailors, the crew never had to worry about supplies; they enjoyed fresh food and clean water daily. However, the ceaseless days at sea and the nearly unchanging vistas exhausted them both physically and mentally. It felt as though they were always repressing something, holding back until they eventually lost control.

The Rorsted Archipelago was a famous colony on the Sonia Sea. Its commercial sector was booming, encompassing all kinds of trades.

"I can't wait!" a crewman exclaimed, thrusting his hips and letting out a knowing laugh that all the men seemed to understand.

...

On the coach heading toward Jutland Street, Klein was reading the newspapers leisurely when he suddenly blinked, as if he'd heard an ethereal voice calling to him from afar. Shapeless murmurs resounded in his mind, making his forehead throb uncontrollably. The indecipherable voices vanished as quickly as they had come—in just ten seconds, they were gone. Klein pinched his forehead, resisting the throbbing pain deep in his brain.

Is this the murmur of unknown entities that Old Neil mentioned? A result of enhanced spiritual perception? Thoughts flashed through

Klein's mind as he suddenly saw four black dots subtly rise on the back of his right hand. They appeared inconspicuous—as if they were natural moles. Yet these four black dots, a residue of the luck-enhancement ritual, quickly sank back into his skin, fading until they vanished.

Klein looked at his hand in surprise. He now had another theory about what had just happened.

Is Justice or The Hanged Man attempting the ritualistic magic I gave them?

Did my idea work?

Can just reciting those three lines truly pierce the mysterious space above the gray fog and point precisely to me?

But I'm far from powerful enough. I can't hear the contents of their prayers... I wonder if the message is being "stored" above the gray fog...

Hmm, I should go in tonight to confirm.

Klein felt both apprehensive and excited. He quickly raised his newspaper to hide his expression before anyone could see the change on his face.

Soon, he arrived at Jutland Street and entered Blackthorn Security Company. Before he could greet Rosanne, Klein saw Captain Dunn Smith walk out through the partition. He held a piece of paper with a portrait on it.

"Here, you can take a look at this internal arrest warrant, too. An unusually cruel and ruthless Beyonder has entered Tingen." Hatless and dressed in his black trench coat, Dunn swept his gaze over and handed the paper to Klein as he passed by.

When Klein glanced at it, the first thing that caught his eye was a portrait sketch. Its subject was a boy with a round, amiable face that had a tiny hint of bashfulness, and he looked no older than nineteen.

"This is Tris, suspected to be a Beyonder. The preliminary estimate is that he's a Sequence Eight Instigator, but we are not eliminating the possibility that the Theosophy Order is behind it. He caused the bloodbath on the *Alfalpa*... According to witness testimony, he came

to Tingen after leaving Enmat Harbor. His current whereabouts are unknown..."

Tris... The Alfalfa... So the culprit was a Beyonder?

Klein suddenly recalled yesterday's dream analysis and what Joyce Meyer had told him. He immediately said, "Captain, I know one of the people involved. He might be an important witness."

"I know—Joyce Meyer. I was asked to assist the Machinery Hive-mind unit last night and saw you in Joyce's dream. I also confirmed, from many details, that Tris singlehandedly orchestrated the tragedy on the *Alfalfa*." Captain Dunn Smith chuckled, his gray eyes calm and untroubled.

Ugh, Captain... Thankfully yesterday was my day off, so he didn't catch me acting as Seer during working hours...

Klein groused internally, the horror of almost being caught slacking by his direct superior still fresh in his mind.

Instead, he asked, "Which Sequence is Instigator? And what kind of organization is the Theosophy Order?"

Was instigating people to kill each other a method Tris used to eliminate the side effects of the potion, or was it a prerequisite for advancement through the Sequence?

Dunn paused for a few seconds before replying, "Actually, it's about time you learned the relevant information regarding Beyonders and hidden cults. Don't listen to Old Neil and bury your head in historical literature all the time."

Captain, weren't you the one who recruited me to be your "history expert"? Klein thought, but he didn't dare point it out. Instead, he nodded earnestly. "All right."

CHAPTER 65

◆ ABOUT BEYONDERS ◆

With paperwork bearing Dunn's signature in hand, Klein went underground to the armory. "Dunn is right. It's time you learned about the different Beyonders and the various secret organizations." Dressed in his traditional black robe, Old Neil wasn't at all surprised when he saw the signed slip; instead, he sincerely agreed with the captain. He added with a grin, "After all, you will be heading to the black market with me tomorrow evening."

"Tomorrow evening?" Klein asked, unable to conceal his pleasant surprise.

Old Neil nodded with a hint of lament, "I'm a person who can't sleep with an unpaid debt. I always wish to settle them as soon as I can."

You didn't act like this before... You left it to the last moment before using ritualistic magic to solve the problem... It seems I'm not the only one suffering from procrastination... Wait, do you really need to say that when you're just afraid to spend the money meant to repay a debt?

But Klein didn't expose Old Neil. Instead, he had a request for him. "Mr. Neil, I'll trouble you to retrieve the corresponding information from inside Chanis Gate."

The archive primarily housed archaeological and historical documents, along with some basic information on Beyonders and secret

organizations. Old Neil slowly sipped his hand-ground coffee and smacked his lips. Only then did he leave the armory with the signed and stamped paperwork, leaving Klein to keep watch on his behalf.

After more than ten minutes, Old Neil returned with a huge stack of documents. "You can only read these here. They are not to be taken out," he warned as he placed the stack on the table.

"All right," Klein said firmly. He reached out and quickly flipped through the pages, skimming over the detailed records. *As expected of the Nighthawks' internal documents—produced by a church with over four thousand years of history or more*, Klein thought with a sigh.

The documents contained not only introductions to various secret organizations but also lists of many Sequence pathways. Some pathways were complete, some merely included the Sequence's potion names, while others only described the abilities of certain ranks within a Sequence. Then there were those that were entirely blank.

Suppressing his excitement, Klein began searching for the Sequence pathway that began with the Seer. Ruffling through the pages, he soon recognized a familiar term. Then his delighted expression froze. There were no corresponding potion names for either Sequence Seven or Sequence Eight!

Thankfully, the documents did contain the abilities of these two ranks. Klein silently exhaled as he calmed his mind and began reading the descriptions aloud:

"Sequence Eight, potion name unknown. The corresponding Beyond is skilled in strategic combat and is very crafty."

Skilled in strategic combat? That's the next level up from Seer? Why does it sound not quite right...? It's not like I'm a ranger class or anything... Or am I going to have to become a melee mage? And what does "crafty" mean? Does it imply that my enhanced intelligence makes me good at fooling the enemy?

Klein was stunned. He even suspected that the Nighthawks' information might be wrong. There were some example cases appended at the end, but despite reading them repeatedly, he couldn't find a reasonable explanation.

He shifted his gaze to the description of Sequence Seven.

“Potion name unknown. The corresponding Beyonder has mastered many enchantments that can be quickly cast by combining one’s own techniques with supernatural powers.”

Now that’s more like it! That’s exactly what a Seer’s level-up should sound like! Klein heaved a sigh of relief.

After reading the example case of Sequence Seven, he ran his eyes over the summary of the Sequence pathway:

“This Sequence was first formed in the Solomon Empire’s Zaratul family. The clan was not completely exterminated during the conflicts of the Fourth Epoch. The family name is occasionally heard in the history of the Fifth Epoch... It is suspected to be connected to the ancient organization, the Secret Order.”

Zaratul? Upon reading that name, Klein’s eyes narrowed. He had just seen it in Emperor Roselle’s diary pages yesterday! Roselle’s tip about acting had come from a mysterious figure known as Zaratul!

Is this mysterious Zaratul the reason Emperor Roselle regretted not choosing Seer back then? It indirectly influenced me, so I became a Seer—bringing “acting” right back into a Seer’s embrace... It’s starting to feel a little like destiny.

Klein knitted his brows, sensing something *different*. There didn’t seem to be anything wrong with this chain of logic. However, in the domain of mysticism, such feelings of destiny were often linked to deeper problems and usually a portent of something significant.

And when combined with the absurdness of transmigration itself... There seem to be more mysteries than ever... Not to mention, this guy I’ve possessed tried to commit suicide precisely due to the Secret Order’s lost notebook...

Klein mulled over his thoughts at length, coming up with many hypotheses, but he lacked enough evidence to prove any of them.

Phew... After repeatedly reading this information, he finally suppressed his speculative ideas and began reading the other records.

He first found the Sequence containing the Sailor potion and discovered that it was indeed under the Lord of Storms.

For this old adversary they'd known for at least two or even three thousand years, the Nighthawks' internal records were incredibly detailed.

"Sequence Eight Folk of Rage. Ancient name—Storm Guardians. The corresponding Beyonders can release strikes that far exceed normal thresholds when enraged. Both their strength and speed are greatly enhanced... To face them is akin to facing a violent storm...

"Sequence Seven Seafarer. Ancient name—Storm Preacher. The corresponding Beyonders is also a scholar of astronomy and geography. They possess an intuitive grasp of magnetic fields, ocean currents, wind direction, and cloud formations... A ship with a Seafarer will never get lost at sea... They are the more prestigious apostles of the sea. While on the ocean, they receive enhancements in every aspect...

"They are friends of the water. They can move freely beneath the surface for more than half an hour... To a certain extent, they're able to cast a number of water-related spells. Some of these arise from their own mastery, and some are bestowals from the Lord of Storms, for example..."

A Sequence Seven Seafarer sure is very powerful... Klein nodded to himself in deep thought.

He suspected that The Hanged Man was either a Storm Guardian or a Seafarer. Given that he had recently advanced in his Sequence, it was more likely that he was the latter. This also suggested that The Hanged Man was either a member of the Mandated Punishers or a pirate secretly working for the Church of Storms.

Impressive. Impressive...

Klein flipped back a few pages and found the advancement details for Spectator. He discovered that the description was identical to what The Hanged Man had stated.

Sequence Nine Spectator was akin to a Seer. They lacked the means to confront their enemies directly, so they relied on the information obtained by observing a target to capture that person's true thoughts and then subtly influenced and guided the situation toward their preferred outcome.

Sequence Eight Telepathist was merely an improvement on every aspect of Spectator. Their observations delved deeper, extending beyond superficial details into one's aura, ether body, and other mystical domains. The combination of these skills allowed a Telepathist to capture a person's thoughts as though reading their mind. It was nearly impossible to keep a secret in their presence.

Sequence Seven Psychiatrist, also known as Psyche Analyst, built further on the foundation of Sequence Eight. With these enhancements, a Psychiatrist could directly influence a target's mind. For instance, they might help someone recover from mania or, conversely, induce manic episodes and cause a person to lose their grip on reality.

"A Beyonder who can't be easily discovered..." Klein concluded after reading the description.

Once he finished reviewing the information on the members of the tarot gathering, he flipped to the section about the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery, since Emperor Roselle had chosen their Savant Sequence.

"Sequence Nine Savant. The corresponding Beyonder believes that knowledge is power. They possess a basic understanding of mysticism yet are far more knowledgeable about technical things, such as regal water, nitroglycerin, and the intricacies of bolts and gears. They seem to know everything."

No wonder Emperor Roselle claimed that this potion suited him perfectly—it allowed him to capitalize on his advantages. Enlightened by this, Klein shifted his eyes downward. After several examples, he finally reached the description for Sequence Eight:

"Archaeologist. They possess extensive knowledge of history and outdoor survival, as well as forbidden lore concerning ruins. Their physical strength and innate abilities empower them in their pursuits..."

"Sequence Seven Appraiser. They can intuitively discern the potential and pitfalls of most extraordinary items, enabling them to harness such objects while minimizing risk..."

Due to insufficient security clearance, Klein could only access

Sequence pathways up to Sequence Seven. This limitation left him somewhat frustrated. He only wished that Backlund would promptly send over Sealed Artifact 2-049 so he could verify whether Ryer Bieber was indeed a descendant of the Antigonus family.

That way, he'd have a chance to become a formal member and obtain a higher clearance.

Collecting himself, Klein carefully read the material from cover to cover. He knew that the potions in the Sequence following the Corpse Collector were Gravedigger and Spirit Medium. He also noted that there was no information about Sequence Eight of the Mystery Pryer Sequence. Not only was there no potion name, but the description itself had been left blank. However, Sequence Seven of that Sequence did have a name: Warlock!

Sounds impressive... Klein slowly flipped the page and came upon the Apprentice and Marauder Sequences—records that Emperor Roselle had once regretted. Their documentation only extended to Sequence Eight.

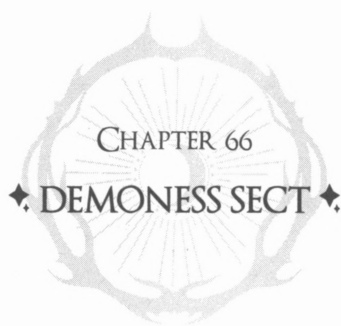
“Sequence Nine Apprentice. Their abilities are rather odd. We know only that this is the origin of the mage Sequence. They are rarely trapped or stopped since they always seem to have a means to escape and overcome obstacles...”

“Sequence Eight Trickmaster. They wield all kinds of strange but relatively weak spells...”

“Sequence Nine Marauder. It is difficult to distinguish these Beyonders from ordinary robbers or thieves. Perhaps their methods are more impressive, but their goal of amassing riches is driven not by enjoyment or survival but by an almost fated calling...”

“Sequence Eight Swindler. We have discovered traces of Beyonders in cases of fraud. They derive pleasure from swindling...”

Deriving pleasure from swindling... Is this an instinctive, organic form of acting? If I had the choice, I might have selected Apprentice... Klein mused silently. Then he discovered the corresponding Sequence potion of Tris—the culprit behind the *Alfalfa* tragedy: Instigator.



“Sequence Eight Instigator. They are adept at triggering the evil desires deep in people’s hearts. They excel at inciting strife and escalating conflicts, leading to tragedies drenched in blood...”

Klein frowned at the sparse description. From its wording, it seemed the Nighthawks did not fully grasp the capabilities of this potion—yet it matched the characteristics of the *Alfalfa* tragedy.

Klein cast his gaze upward and read the Sequence Nine entry for the Instigator Sequence.

“Sequence Nine Assassin. Can briefly transform their bodies to become light as a feather. They possess vision as sharp as an eagle’s, as well as night vision. Every Assassin is adept at hiding in the shadows. They move with exceptional dexterity and can condense all their power into a single devastating blow...”

After reading the description, Klein was left deeply confused.

Assassin... The next order up from Assassin is Instigator?

This advancement was as odd as a Seer advancing to a class that specializes in strategic combat. Some Sequence pathways progressed in a very orderly fashion, which seemed entirely normal—such as the Spectator pathway. Yet others appeared to defy intuition and logic.

Perhaps I simply haven’t discovered some of the hidden connections yet... For instance, both Assassins and Instigators have the potential to

bring ruin upon others... But I still can't figure out the advancement of a Seer! Could it be similar to old man Gandalf's lineage? After adding some supplementary magic, do all the other attribute points all get piled onto strength and techniques?

Klein shook his head as he struggled internally. He flipped to the section on the Theosophy Order, the secret organization connected to the Instigators.

"Theosophy Order. A secret organization that emerged in the Fifth Epoch—the early period of the current epoch. They believe that the mind is the fundamental essence of a person, while the physical flesh is merely a cage that restrains the mind. In their view, human evil stems from the influence of the body. To gain knowledge, one must harness spirituality, gradually liberating the mind from its physical constraints. Through numerous trials of the astral body, a person is eventually released from the material world, returning to their purest, truest self, and thus attaining eternal redemption.

"Consequently, many extremist members of the Theosophy Order make it their goal to destroy the bodies of others—a path that has led to many bloody massacres. It is evident that they possess two Sequence pathways. The first includes the Apprentice and Trickmaster potions commonly seen among their members. The second Sequence, which comprises Assassin and Instigator, appears only rarely. There is currently no evidence that the Theosophy Order possesses potions in Sequence Seven or higher.

"It is unknown how the Theosophy Order was established. Their origins can only be inferred from the two Sequence pathways. Firstly, the potion names 'Apprentice' and 'Trickmaster' readily evoke the Abraham family of the Tudor Dynasty in the Fourth Epoch. The Tamara family, closely tied to the Abraham family through long-term intermarriage, cannot be discounted either. Secondly, both Assassin and Instigator point unmistakably to the Demoness Sect."

The Abraham, Tamara, Antigonus, and Zaratul families; the Solomon Empire's Black Emperor; the Tudor Dynasty's Blood Emperor; the Trunsoest Empire; and the Jacob and Amon families that The Hanged

Man had mentioned—all these names were shrouded in the secrets of the Fourth Epoch. And perhaps there were many hidden truths, too.

Klein was astounded by what he read. He felt a deep appreciation for the shroud of mystery surrounding the history of the Fourth Epoch. The mere outlines he could glimpse through the fog left him shuddering involuntarily. It was as though he could envision a thriving era of extraordinary power, an epoch where blood tangled with the bizarre, and horror bloomed in symphony with the perverse.

Klein drew in a silent breath and flipped through the book again but did not discover any corresponding descriptions of the Demoness Sect.

He looked up and saw Old Neil fiddling with some filter paper for his hand-ground coffee. He asked sincerely, “Mr. Neil, what organization is the Demoness Sect? I can’t find any introduction about them in the documents.”

Old Neil was in no hurry to respond. After he finished wrestling with his coffee, he chuckled and said, “Your security clearance isn’t high enough. Even with Dunn’s permission, you wouldn’t be able to access that information. In fact, much of it is only available in the Holy Cathedral—not stored behind Tingen’s Chanis Gate. Perhaps one day, when you become a captain of the Nighthawks, you’ll be sent to the Holy Cathedral for training, and only then will you have access.” He continued, “I don’t know very much about the Demoness Sect, either. All I know is that they worship the Primordial Demoness. They believe that this secret entity is the true inheritor of the Creator—that she was born out of Chaos, the Original One birthed from the Creator’s body, and, ultimately, the Final One who will end everything.

“Their Sequence pathways are connected to this belief. To obtain the favor of the Primordial Demoness and to approach this secret entity, the upper echelons of the sect are all female. That’s why they’re called the Demoness Sect. Anything further is beyond the knowledge of someone at my level. I’ve heard that the demonesses make it their mission to spread catastrophes.”

Spread catastrophes...? This does match the hidden commonality of Assassin and Instigator... But this Mr. Tris's future seems bleak. The subsequent potions in the Sequence will probably be more suited for women...

Klein nodded slightly and resumed reading.

Once he had gone through all the materials, he realized there were more secret organizations than he had imagined. On reflection, that was only natural—this was a world with thousands of years of history, and there was once an era when extraordinary powers were extremely active.

According to the documents, Klein sorted the secret organizations into three categories based on their eras.

First were the ancient organizations born in the Fourth Epoch, including but not limited to the Ascetic Order of Moss, the Secret Order, the Blood Sanctify Sect, which worshipped the devil, and the Demoness Sect, which the text only referenced once.

The second was the secret organizations born early in the Fifth Epoch, the present epoch. For instance, the Theosophy Order, the death-worshipping Numinous Episcopate, the Life School, which focused on a master-apprentice lineage, and the Rose School, known among Beyonders for its bloody sacrifices.

The third category was new organizations that had only reared their heads in the recent century or two. They included the Aurora Order, the Order of the Red-Blooded Cross, the Element Dawn, and the Psychology Alchemists, which Klein had long heard about.

There were also other smaller organizations that didn't play major roles.

"Benson and Melissa can't have imagined how dangerous this world is... It's not only limited to wars..." Klein shook his head with a wry smile. He stacked the classified documents neatly before pushing them to Old Neil.

Inside, Klein added silently, *Hopefully, my little Tarot Club never gets on this list...*

Old Neil, oblivious to the fact that a leader of a secret organization

was sitting right across from him, smiled amiably as he took the documents back behind Chanis Gate.

Klein sat there and wondered if he should divine the location of Instigator Tris. But he abandoned the thought after no more than twenty seconds. After all, he only had a vague idea of Tris's appearance and wasn't even sure if the name was genuine. If he could pinpoint his location with such scant information, he wouldn't be a Seer—he'd be a prophet!

By the time Old Neil returned, Klein had reined in his thoughts and continued studying mysticism, eager to learn even more "templates" of ritualistic magic. He spent the entire day studying and practicing. Although he did not participate in the joint operation to capture Instigator Tris, he did hear that the delivery of Sealed Artifact 2-049 from Backlund had been delayed due to an extenuating circumstance; the actual arrival time was still pending.

Having earned nearly two soli from yesterday's divination, Klein spent ten pence to buy a two-liter keg of Enmat Beer for Benson on the way home, as well as some freshly baked lemon cakes for Melissa.

"Klein, I know you care for us deeply, but there's really no need for this. You don't have to keep spending money on such things," Benson remarked after seeing the tiny keg of beer.

Melissa stood beside him, bobbing her head in silent agreement.

This is probably where our purchasing habits differ...

Klein sighed in amusement. "Benson, Melissa, don't worry. This was bought with my additional subsidy. I earn an extra two to four soli every week."

It's not like I can tell you that I get some money on the side from providing divinations for people..., he added inwardly.

"...This job of yours is much better than I imagined," Benson commented, a bit taken aback.

That's right. I can even learn divination on the job..., Klein mused silently before turning toward the kitchen.

With the combined efforts of the trio of siblings, a sumptuous dinner was soon laid out on the table.

After eating to their hearts' content, Klein, Benson, and Melissa sat slumped in the parlor. It took them quite a while before they finally rose to clean up, chat idly, and study.

When Benson and Melissa go to sleep, I'll venture above the gray fog to see the effects of the ritual..., Klein thought as he reviewed his history textbooks and shot a glance at his siblings.

...

At the bottom of Ironcross Street, Westside of Tingen, a three-storied apartment building lay immersed in darkness. There were no street-lamps or any additional light.

Suddenly, a figure leaped from a window on the third floor. He fluttered gently to the ground like a feather, without causing a stir, and landed. Then, with a twist of his body, he vanished—blending into the shadows until only a faint outline remained.

He traveled quickly, arriving at the dock where he approached a deserted corner piled with goods. Carefully surveying the surroundings and circling the area twice, he finally left the darkness and stepped into the corner. There, his round, friendly face was revealed. He was Instigator Tris—the very man who had single-handedly caused the atrocity on the *Alfalfa*.

“How does it feel?” a mysterious figure wearing a black hooded robe emerged from the shadows. The voice was distinctly feminine.

Tris revealed a genial, satisfied smile. “Feels great. That scene was exactly what I’d dreamed and yearned for. I believe I have appropriately completed the mission and properly prepared for advancement.”

The dark-robed woman nodded imperceptibly and said, “Very well. According to our promise, I will give you the Sequence Seven formula and the three main ingredients. You will have to gather the rest yourself.”

“No problem,” Tris answered as if expecting this.

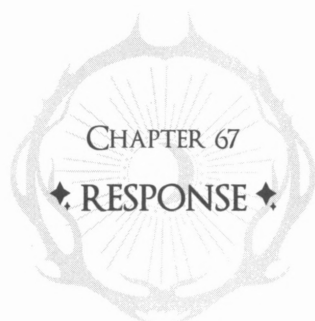
The mysterious woman reached out and handed him a book-like object. Its ancient, mottled bronze exterior was bound by a strange star-shaped lock. Tris knew that in this “book” lay the formula and ingredients, and he couldn’t hide the excitement swelling in his

heart. Struggling to compose himself, he looked curiously at the potion's name inscribed on the bronze cover.

"Witch!" Tris exclaimed aloud. He couldn't believe that the ancient Hermes word was written on it.

Witch? I'm about to advance and become a Witch? This must be a joke!

The mysterious woman covered her mouth and giggled quietly. After a pause, she answered, "Weren't you always curious? Curious as to why the higher ranks are all female? Well, here's the answer."



The crimson moon high in the sky hung silently in the darkness. It illuminated Tingen, the city of universities, as the night gradually fell silent.

Klein stood in front of his desk and looked through his bay windows at the empty Daffodil Street. In the distance, he heard the sound of carriages quickly galloping in the distance, their sound muted by the night.

He picked up his vine-leaf-patterned silver pocket watch and snapped it open. After a glance at the time, he drew the curtains, letting the yellowish glow of the gas lamp reflect into the bedroom.

Klein then turned around at a pace neither fast nor slow, locked his room, and switched off the gas valve. The room was instantly plunged into darkness. Only a sliver of red moonlight, peeking through the gap in the curtains, provided a faint color to the space, providing an atmosphere of darkness that inspired many folktales.

Klein retrieved the silver knife he had acquired from the Night-hawks. He envisioned a spherical light in his mind and entered a half-trance state. Focusing his mind as he had practiced before, he allowed his spirituality to spill out from the tip of his blade, merging with his surroundings to seal off the room. He did this to prevent any unusual stirrings that might wake Benson and Melissa.

After setting the knife aside, Klein walked four steps in a counter-clockwise direction, each step accompanied by a line of the incantation from Earth.

The unchanging roars and murmurs inundated him. With the same mania and mental pain that had plagued him before, he did his best to control himself during this grueling, dangerous stage of the process.

The expanse of gray fog stretched endlessly. Crimson stars hovered at varying distances, and the towering palace stood erect like a fallen giant. Everything before him was exactly as it had been—unchanged. The silence and antiquity accumulated over thousands of years permeated the space.

“No, there is a change!” Klein muttered to himself as his gaze locked onto a crimson star near him.

That was the star symbolizing Justice!

The crimson cloud around the star began to pulse. Though it wasn’t aggressive, it was persistent.

Klein carefully spread out his spirituality and reached toward the cloud. The moment he made contact, he felt a hum in his head. A blurry, distorted scene appeared before his eyes, and he heard an illusory, overlapping chorus of prayers:

“The Fool not of this era,

“You are the mysterious ruler above the gray fog,

“You are the King of Yellow and Black and the Lord of Good Luck,

“I pray for your help.

“I pray for your favor.

“I pray for you to give me a good dream.”

...

“I pray for you to give me a good dream.”

...

“I pray for you to give me a good dream.”

...

The female voice echoed endlessly, overlapping with itself. Irritation and chaos overwhelmed Klein’s mind as if he were listening to

someone upstairs pounding on furniture, thumping the floor, and fighting when he had only just fallen asleep.

Suppressing his emotional response, he used meditation to calm his impulses. Then he carefully discerned the blurry scene before him.

It was a girl dressed in a white robe, her beautiful golden hair framing her face as she stood before four flickering flames. With her head bowed, she chanted incessantly. From the distorted image, Klein could barely recognize her as Miss Justice! At that moment, he confirmed that the ritual incantation he had devised could indeed point precisely toward the gray fog—toward him!

A satisfying sense of achievement filled him. His effort at discovery, at making something from nothing, had proved effective.

I won't praise myself for being awesome..., he thought, though his mood was buoyed enough that even the incessant, pleading voice echoing in his ears like a buzzing fly was now tolerable.

As a thought stirred in his mind, Klein decided to transmit his mental response to the crimson star through the intricate connections here.

"I'm aware."

...

Through layers of thick gray fog before him, a distorted and blurry figure stood in the deepest depths. In the spot where its eyes should have been, crimson swirled as the figure's voice resounded over and over in that vast, empty world.

"I'm aware."

"I'm aware."

"I'm aware."

...

Audrey Hall jolted awake, sitting up with her blanket wrapped tightly around her. Her mind was wholly occupied by the vivid scene from her dream. She knew very well that she had dreamed of The Fool—the mysterious being that dwelled above the fog.

"Is this a response to prayer this morning?" Audrey murmured as she quickly slipped into her Spectator state, calming herself and

analyzing the experience. Although she couldn't fathom why The Fool hadn't responded on the spot and only did so at night, she was still stunned beyond belief that the ritualistic magic had worked—that those few lines of incantation had indeed taken effect. In the past, she had prayed to the Evernight Goddess and received no response at all!

Even if Mr. Fool is not a god, he probably isn't far from being one... Audrey slowly inhaled and then exhaled. Realizing that he was a powerful existence beyond her means of resistance, she promptly set aside her worries and began planning her next steps.

"First, I must completely digest the Spectator potion... My acting has been pretty good so far.

"Second, I should seek out the Psychology Alchemists.

"Third, perhaps I can obtain the Telepathist potion formula from Mr. Fool or at least some clues about the Psychology Alchemists.

"However, every godlike existence has a complete Sequence pathway that belongs solely to them. They might not know the formulas of other pathways... An organization like the Psychology Alchemists might be too new to have attracted Mr. Fool's attention..."

...

With the connection severed, Klein sat at the head of the long bronze table in a rather good mood.

He was completely enveloped in gray fog. Leaning back, he held his hand in a loose fist against his lips as he recalled and analyzed what had just happened. The world of the gray fog was utterly silent at that moment, with him as the only living entity—an absolute stillness that felt almost eternal.

It seems I can only transmit information here and am unable to wield its powers fully... One of my earlier ideas about manipulation won't work after all.

Klein silently prodded his lips as he reached his conclusion. He had originally hoped that if the incantation and ritual proved effective, he could bind his body to the world of gray fog in the same manner—thereby leveraging its mysterious power. Then he could pray

to himself and, through such a loophole, bypass the inherent limitations and dangers, making full use of the gray fog's might.

For example, he could first conduct a ritual and pray to "himself" for the bestowment of magical power. Following that, he could come above the gray fog and grant his own request.

But I'm being too idealistic... My understanding and control of this world has not reached that level...

Klein shook his head self-deprecatingly and prepared to leave.

At that moment, his gaze caught the crimson star that represented The Hanged Man beginning to pulse. An ethereal, formless voice spread out like ripples in water.

Ah. I've chanced upon The Hanged Man conducting the ritual.

Klein nodded thoughtfully. Sitting at the head of the long bronze table, he lifted his hand and tapped on that star from a distance, as if to acknowledge and respond.

His spirituality extended outward as it touched the pulsing crimson. He heard The Hanged Man's heavy voice overlapping with prayers and saw another blurry scene before him.

In that vision, The Hanged Man, draped in a black robe, stood before four plumes of fire. A wall of spiritual energy surrounded him, isolating him from any external disturbance.

Klein did not immediately respond—he simply watched and listened in silence.

"...You are the King of Yellow and Black and the Lord of Good Luck,

"I pray for your help."

...

After The Hanged Man finished his prayer, he waited for a moment. Hearing no response, he began dismantling the spiritual wall, extinguished the candles, and tidied up the altar. Finally, with a sweep of his hand, aqueous light glimmered in the air, and the table that had served as an altar stood empty and clean.

Water-based magic... The bestowment of the Storm... The Hanged Man is indeed a Seafarer, at least...

Klein nodded slightly. Before the scene vanished, he transmitted his response into the crimson cloud as he had envisioned.

...

At the same time, Alger Wilson was in the capital of the Rorsted Archipelago—the City of Generosity. He had not gone with the sailors to the famous Red Cabaret. Instead, he stayed inside the inn, sealing the door and windows before attempting the ritual The Fool had described.

After reciting the prayer with practiced words, Alger waited patiently for a response, but none came.

“It seems this attempt isn’t very successful... Perhaps Mr. Fool needs to try another method...,” he murmured, both relieved and slightly disappointed.

When everything was done, Alger planned to go downstairs for a bottle of strong lanch. Alcohol was useful for Folk of Rage in unleashing their powers, so the Mandated Punishers of the Lord of Storms were quite fond of such “beverages.”

As he pulled open the door and prepared to step out, his vision suddenly blurred. He saw billowing gray fog filling the corridor and a hazy figure sitting in its depths, as if high atop a throne.

“I’m aware.” The familiar, deep voice reverberated in Alger’s ears, causing him to freeze as a dull throbbing pain pulsed in his head. His eyes darkened. When he looked around again, everything appeared unchanged—the same squeaky floorboard, the same aged wall sconces, the same unkempt corridor.

“I’m aware.”

The voice still echoed in Alger’s ears.

His expression sank as he curled his fingers into a fist and lightly pounded his chest, yet he couldn’t bring himself to utter the words of respect to the Lord of Storms.

After a long silence, his expression returned to normal, though his gaze grew even deeper.

...

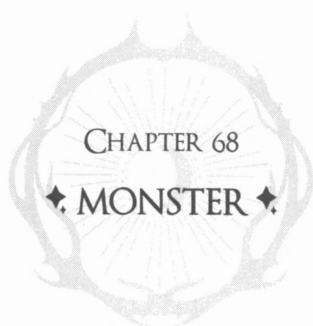
Klein did not linger long above the gray fog. When the remnant

voices finally quieted, he enveloped himself in his spirituality and plunged into the gray fog, descending into the material world.

The lights before him flew by rapidly, like scenes from a movie playing tens of times faster than normal. After a spell of dizziness, Klein recognized the curtains with crimson moonlight filtering through, along with the vague contours of his desk and bookshelf.

He picked up the silver knife again and dismantled the spiritual wall in his room. Then, amid a gust of wind, he opened the door and peered into the corridor. Once he confirmed no noises were coming from Benson's or Melissa's rooms, he finally relaxed.

This luck-enhancement ritual really is an indispensable multi-tool... How mysterious yet incredible..., Klein thought to himself as he closed the door and walked toward his bed. His mission tomorrow was to head to the black market of extraordinary items with Old Neil.



At dusk, the setting sun cast long shadows of the carriages and horses on the street. Having informed Benson and Melissa ahead of time, Klein had dinner at Blackthorn Security Company and was on his way to the dockside with Old Neil in a coach. Klein wore his cheap suit, wary that a quarrel might break out in such a shady location. If he damaged the tailcoat he usually cared for so painstakingly, he'd probably cry his heart out.

When the last rays of the sun took on a fiery tinge, the coach stopped. Old Neil, in his customary traditional black robe and bowler hat, strode past indifferent to the gazes of passersby toward the Dark Dragon Bar diagonally across the street. Although the bar was still a distance away and its heavy doors tightly shut, Klein could hear wave after wave of rapturous shouts emanating from within, as if cheering for a hero.

As they approached, Klein suddenly sensed something. He turned his head toward the warehouse opposite the bar and spotted a stocky man in uniform standing in a hidden corner on the rooftop.

The man carried a massive, grayish-white mechanical box on his back and held a thick, intricately designed rifle in his hand. The box was clearly connected to the rifle by a series of pipes.

"High-pressured steam rifle?" Klein muttered in shock. He turned

to Old Neil and said, "This bar can get their hands on weapons like this?!"

That's a military-grade item!

Although it used extracted phlogiston, the size and weight of the high-pressured steam backpack were still shocking—something that only a true red-blooded warrior could wield. The rifle's muzzle velocity was extremely high, endowing it with shocking destructive power. Matched with a suitable optic, it was nearly equivalent to an inferior sniper rifle.

"What?" Old Neil squinted as he looked over with a confused expression. "Did something happen?"

Something has most definitely happened.

Klein surveyed the surroundings and discovered a few more men holding repeating rifles, seemingly searching for something.

"What's all the commotion?" Old Neil walked up to the bar and asked a brawny man guarding its door outside.

The brawny man, clearly acquainted with Old Neil, smiled wryly. "The bar was nearly destroyed earlier. Apparently, a wanted man was here trying to buy materials and was recognized. This was the result. Good Lord, I wonder what he did. How dangerous did he have to be for people to react like this? My legs went limp the minute I saw all those guns—limper than after a whole night with Ginger Sunny!"

He didn't know the wanted man's identity, much less that there were Beyonders among those who came here for materials.

"Wanted man? Do you know his name?" Old Neil asked, his interest piqued.

"I think it was...Tris or something?" the brawny man answered uncertainly.

Instigator Tris?

Klein nodded in understanding. He had already deduced what had occurred here. Tris, unaware that Joyce Meyer already suspected him, had nonchalantly strolled into the black market to purchase materials without caution. He was likely recognized by an informant

from the Machinery Hivemind, the Mandated Punishers, or the Nighthawks—resulting in an intense clash.

“Was he caught?” Klein tapped his silver-inlaid black cane.

Judging by the scene, I’d guess not...

The brawny man shook his head slightly and gestured with his chin toward the rooftop of the warehouse across the street. “He rushed out before those terrifying guys arrived. Bloody hell, I’ve never seen a man run faster than he did!”

You really haven’t seen the true skills of an Assassin, or you’d be whisked away to some indescribable place for reeducation..., Klein thought.

“Is the market still open?” Old Neil changed the subject and asked.

“It just restored operations,” replied the brawny man affirmatively.

“That’s great.” Old Neil quickened his pace and pushed open the heavy door with his right hand.

Klein walked in, following closely behind. He nearly fainted from the stuffy air and the stench of alcohol that filled the space.

In the middle of Dark Dragon Bar stood a boxing ring. Two bare-chested men were locked in an intense brawl while dozens of customers shouted and cheered for their favored fighter, vulgarities mixed in the clamor.

Old Neil ignored the spectacle and led Klein around the boxing ring toward a billiard room at the back. In the billiard room, two people were laughing and chatting while holding cue sticks. When they saw Old Neil enter, they fell silent for a few seconds. After confirming his identity, they stepped aside to let Old Neil and Klein pass through a secret door behind them.

They proceeded through several rooms until the view before Klein opened up into a space roughly the size of a lecture hall from his previous life. Vendors had set up roadside stalls on the ground, with vials and jars scattered about. Passersby strolled through, scrutinizing the goods, chatting, or comparing prices.

“They have to give five percent of their profits to Swain. Ah, he is the boss of the Dark Dragon Bar, former captain of a Mandated

Punisher squad and older than I am. He's a man who wishes to drink himself to death," Old Neil explained in a garrulous tone.

Klein thought for a moment before giving his honest opinion. "A rather profitable business."

After all, his only investment was providing both a venue and protection.

"If any item catches your fancy but you lack the money, you can borrow from Swain. But of course, he charges very high interest..." Old Neil trailed off, gnashing his teeth.

As expected, it's like running a casino. They practice usury...

Holding his walking stick, Klein looked around and asked curiously, "Mr. Swain is a Seafarer?"

The captain of a Mandated Punisher squad would most likely be rank seven.

"No, he is only a Folk of Rage. Tingen is not a coastal city, so the Church of the Goddess holds more sway here than the Lord of Storms," Old Neil scoffed. "Actually, Swain had the chance to become a Seafarer, but he chose to forgo that opportunity out of fear of losing control."

Just as Klein was about to ask if the bar's owner had any experience with nearly losing control, he suddenly sensed something strange to his left.

There appears to be a hidden presence over there, muttering and recounting.

Klein turned his head and saw a young man with a pale face. He wore an old linen shirt and navy-blue trousers typical of the working class. His eyes were unfocused, yet a glint of madness shined through as he mumbled incessantly.

"His spiritual perception is very high...or perhaps distorted?" Klein murmured, creasing his eyebrows.

It was the young man's spiritual perception that had triggered his own.

Generally speaking, an alert from another's spiritual perception would certainly be a two-way interaction; it was nearly impossible to

conceal it from the other party. But here, “the other party” referred only to Spirit Mediums and powerful individuals with similar abilities. A Beyonder like Klein wouldn’t normally detect it unless the other person’s spiritual perception reached an extraordinary level or some abnormal distortion occurred.

When he made eye contact, the young man with the pale face and messy black hair walked toward Klein with an expression that made him seem half-asleep and half-mad. He stopped before Klein and stared blankly at him.

Suddenly, he guffawed. “Ha-ha, it’s the smell of death, the smell of—Aaaah!”

Before he could finish, he let out a devastating scream. His eyes clamped shut as crimson liquid flowed from them.

“Ah! Darn it!” The young man covered his eyes and clutched his head. He struggled and rolled on the ground, only calming after what seemed like an eternity. Throughout the entire episode, not a single customer or vendor looked over.

Klein pressed down his short top hat and glanced at Old Neil, his mouth hanging open in shock—a silent plea for guidance.

“Don’t mind him. His name is Ademisaul, an orphan. People call him Monster. He was born with unusually high spiritual perception, which means he can see and hear things he shouldn’t. That’s why he’s always raving about something or another and getting hurt,” Old Neil explained, shaking his head.

He could tell that my body had died once? Klein knitted his eyebrows together as he lowered his voice, “Haven’t the Nighthawks, the Mandated Punishers, or the Machinery Hivemind ever considered taking him in and recruiting him?”

Old Neil sighed, “No, we do not have a Sequence potion that suits him.”

Right, he was born at the starting line of half a potion...

Klein inquired curiously, “What Sequence would suit him?”

“The Sequence Nine that suits him is called Monster—that’s where his nickname comes from. It’s a pity that only the Life School holds the

beginning of this Sequence,” Old Neil replied quietly, careful to keep the conversation discreet from the surrounding mysticism enthusiasts.

The mention of the Life School stirred Klein’s memory. This secret organization had appeared in the early period of the current epoch. Its origins were shrouded in mystery, but its lineage was based on a master-apprentice system, and its theories were closely guarded. Klein recalled that they divided the world into three levels: the world of absolute rationality (or absolute truth), the world of the spirit, and the material world.

Rumor has it that they once produced an Soothesayer... But shouldn’t such an achievement belong to the Seer’s Sequence pathway? Confusing, honestly...

As he shook his head in thought, he noticed Ademisaul struggling to rise before he eventually wandered off to another corner. Klein refocused and followed Old Neil. They passed stall after stall—selling plants like moonflower, bergamot, and night vanilla, and minerals such as sterling silver, yellow crystals, and rubies.

“It’s really very well stocked...,” Klein muttered softly. The mysticism enthusiasts around him of all ages and genders occasionally stopped to examine the wares or chat with vendors, lending the place a bustling atmosphere.

“Walk around on your own. I’m going to settle my bill,” Old Neil said, pointing toward one of the rooms at the far end.

“All right.” Klein nodded without hesitation. Clutching his walking stick, he strolled leisurely down the lanes until he reached a stall selling self-made protection charms. He stopped to examine them more closely.

Just as Klein prepared to speak with the seller, he suddenly heard a voice at the stall behind him. “Is this powder ground from cow-teeth peony?”

Cow-teeth peony? Isn’t that one of the supplementary ingredients for the Spectator potion?

A spark of recognition lit up in Klein’s mind. Since Justice had repeated the formula for that potion several times, he had a remarkably strong memory of its ingredients.

CHAPTER 69

◆ PROTECTION CHARM ◆

Glancing over, Klein eyed the person inquiring about the cow-teeth peony.

The man stood less than a meter away, dressed in a black suit with a matching short top hat. In his hand, he carried a silver-inlaid cane, and on his face was a pair of gold-framed spectacles, giving him an air of quiet intellectualism.

“Yes, do you want some? This small jar costs three soli,” said the stall owner, who wore a long, mysterious black robe.

The inquirer, whose light blond sideburns peeked out beneath his hat, paused before replying, “Can it be cheaper? I still need to buy other ingredients, too. For example, this bottle of white-edged sunflower petals.”

After a few seconds of consideration, the stall owner replied grudgingly, “Two soli and six pence. I don’t think you can get a lower price than that.”

Seeing the bespectacled man purchasing the cow-teeth peony along with other ingredients, Klein immediately felt that he was overthinking things.

Just to be sure, he tapped twice on his brow to scan the man with his spirit vision.

No problems. He’s in excellent health and appears to be in a good

mood. Keep it up, sir..., Klein thought as he retracted his gaze and turned back to the stall selling homemade amulets.

Before him lay an array of amulets—some crafted from sterling silver, some from iron, and others forged from gold. Only a few emitted a weak aura, some with a faint crimson glow, others pale white or golden. These traces of weak spirituality indicated that the amulets were effective to a certain extent.

After examining them in detail, Klein confirmed that the stall owner possessed a solid foundation in mysticism. The artisan had carefully matched different power sources with their corresponding incantations and selected the appropriate materials.

Of course, a mere mysticism enthusiast would no doubt make some mistakes. Klein noticed that the stall owner did not fully grasp the incantations. One cannot simply translate a prayer into Hermes and expect it to work. The incantations had to follow a specific format and had their own unique patterns. Additionally, the stall owner had made varying degrees of error in choosing suitable symbols for each power source. This explained why only two or three of the dozens of amulets emitted a faint glow.

As for the effectiveness of two or three such amulets, Klein could only say it was better than nothing. An amulet imbued with obvious, potent benefits would require the craftsman to channel his own spirituality through a blade while carving the incantations and symbols. For even better results, ritualistic magic would be required. Neither of these was a feat an ordinary person could manage.

Klein tapped twice on his brow and then pointed with his cane at the upper left corner of the stall. “How much for these two?” he asked, referring not to the amulets with a rudimentary colored aura but to two half-completed items—objects in the shape of amulets that had not yet been carved with incantations or symbols.

To Klein, there was no reason to purchase the amulets with only weak effects. What he wanted was to transform these half-completed amulets into true protection charms.

Hmm, I’ll make amulets that can protect a person from danger—one

each for Benson and Melissa. As for my own, I can ask the Nighthawks to supply me with the ingredients... Ah, I must have been corrupted by Old Neil. I don't even feel any guilt thinking about something like that...

Klein's mind wandered as he watched the stall owner pick up the half-completed silver amulets. One of them was elongated and hollow in the middle, adorned with plumes of angel-like feathers in intricate craftsmanship. The other was simple in design—almost completely devoid of embellishments—with a vertical line down the center, representing the night, and a circle above it, symbolizing the crimson moon.

Klein, who paid close attention to appearances, took an immediate liking to them.

"This is six soli," the stall owner said, pointing to the intricate amulet in a measured tone. After a brief pause, he touched the simpler piece and added, "This one is five soli and three pence."

"That's too expensive. They're still far from being true protection charms," Klein haggled, a habit he'd developed under the daily influence of Benson and Melissa. After a brief battle of words, he managed to purchase the two silver accessories at five soli six pence and four soli and nine pence respectively.

Yeah, for now, they can only be considered silver accessories..., Klein thought, deducting the ten soli and three pence from the reimbursement of five pounds he'd received from the Nighthawks for his Divination Club membership.

Klein tucked the two silver accessories into his pocket and was about to head to another stall when he heard a gentle voice. "Sir, why did you not buy a finished amulet?"

Turning, Klein saw a teenage girl of about fifteen. She wore a yellow dress adorned with lace and held a cap decorated with ribbons.

"I intend to make my own," Klein replied, choosing his words carefully. "As you know, that is the wish of every devotee of mysticism."

He didn't wish to offend the stall owner or be seen as trying to snatch his business—though, in his heart, he had considered using his skills to earn a quick buck in the future.

The girl, with naturally wavy brown hair and the soft, round features of adolescence, stared at him with her light blue eyes and asked earnestly, "Can I seek your advice on choosing an amulet? I...well, my friend brought me here initially, and although I've visited several times and developed a deep interest in mysticism, I still don't know much about it. My friend is turning sixteen soon, and I want to surprise her with a proper amulet. I had previously asked her for advice, but I can't remember the critical points."

Klein gave her a gentlemanly smile. "What kind of amulet are you looking for? Something to avert misfortune? Something to avoid illnesses? Or something that bestows wealth? Different needs call for different sources of power—that is, different deities. Each god is associated with its own constellation, and those constellations, in turn, correspond to specific materials. For example, the incantation for averting misfortune belongs to the Queen of Calamity and Fear—the Evernight Goddess. As mysticism lovers know, her symbol is the moon, so the corresponding metal is sterling silver. Therefore, if you wish to avert misfortune, it is best to choose an amulet made of silver with the appropriate incantations."

The incantations must also be in the correct language and format. The corresponding symbol of the Queen of Calamity and Fear, the representation of the Path Number, the spell's characteristics, the relative positions of the symbols, and so on. But that's too complicated to explain fully right now.

The girl's eyes sparkled with curiosity. "Can a follower of the Goddess wear an amulet belonging to another god?" she asked hesitantly.

"No problem. The gods do not mind such small matters," Klein consoled her. He explained that while it wasn't an issue for the wearer, the creator of the amulet must be cautious. For instance, if a believer of the Lord of Storms were to craft an amulet for the Eternal Blazing Sun, they might inadvertently invite something malicious in return.

Of course, these warnings applied primarily to amulets made with the aid of ritualistic magic. An ordinary craftsman need not worry too much.

The girl heaved a sigh of relief. "I hope to get her an amulet that wishes her good health. Which deity should I choose? The Eternal Blazing Sun, the Earth Mother, or the God of Knowledge and Wisdom?"

Klein smiled. "There should be no problem with the Eternal Blazing Sun and the Earth Mother. The former is represented by the sun while the latter is represented by the Brown Planet," Klein said with a smile. "The corresponding material is gold, while the metal that symbolizes the Brown Planet is lead. I would suggest the sun, but I don't know if you brought enough money with you."

The reason for his suggestion was that he had noticed that among the three amulets with a rudimentary spiritual glow, one was clearly a health amulet under the domain of the sun.

"But..." Before the teenage girl could finish her sentence, she looked warily at the stall owner, who had been waiting quietly.

She thought for a moment before asking, "After I decide on the material, how should I distinguish the incantation and corresponding symbols?"

"Do you know Hermes?" Klein asked instead.

"I just started learning it," the teenage girl replied, a little embarrassed.

"Then let me choose it for you." Klein pointed at the health amulet made of gold and said, "This one is perfectly fine, be it in the incantations or the symbol."

The girl lifted the hem of her dress and half-crouched to pick up the health amulet, which was adorned with designs of sunrays along its edges. It felt warm in her hands, and she seemed to relax completely.

"Thank you, thank you," she said, straightening and curtsying in gratitude.

Klein laughed and said, "I'll leave the rest to you and the stall owner. I have other things to tend to." As he spoke, he noticed that the stall owner cast an odd glance his way, as if considering whether to share a cut of the profit with Klein. Smiling, Klein chose not to press the matter further. He continued touring the black market at a steady pace but didn't notice any truly extraordinary ingredients.

By this point, Old Neil had returned, having settled his debt. He held a dark wooden box in his hands. When he saw Klein's questioning gaze, he pointed to a room at the back and said, "Go in there if you wish to buy or sell extraordinary ingredients. After all, no one wants others to know what extraordinary items they're purchasing."

"Understood," Klein nodded thoughtfully. There was no need for him to venture there at the moment, so he headed toward the exit of the black market with Old Neil.

Suddenly, a querying voice reached Klein's ears, "How much for these elf flowers?"

Elf flowers... That's also an ingredient for the Spectator potion..., Klein thought as he glanced sideways and again saw the refined, bespectacled man.

"What's the matter?" Old Neil asked curiously.

"It's nothing," Klein replied, retracting his gaze.

Although he was a quasi-member of the Nighthawks, he didn't believe that all Beyonders needed to be cowed by the churches or locked away. It depended on the situation. Among them, Spectators posed little danger to society or the kingdom, and the chances of losing control as a rank nine were very slim.

...

After leaving the Dark Dragon Bar, Klein and Old Neil took a coach from the dock. They split ways at Northside and headed back to their respective homes.

The coach steered onto Daffodil Street and eventually stopped by the roadside. As Klein was about to disembark, he suddenly noticed a young lady in a grayish-white dress about to board.

This young lady had silky black hair and a somewhat round face, with thin eyes and unassuming features that made her look sweet and gentle.

Klein noticed her not for her beauty alone but because her body shivered ever so slightly in an unnatural way.

"Miss, are you ill?" Klein asked with concern.

The girl shook her head vehemently. "No, I—I'm just too tired."

With people behind him growing anxious, Klein got out of the carriage.

Once he had found his footing on the street, his thoughts returned to the young lady. He pinched twice on his brow to activate his spirit vision, planning to determine if she was indeed all right. Wanting to be a good Samaritan, he intended to send her to the hospital if she were suffering from a serious illness.

When he activated his spirit vision, the colors of auras began to surface all around him. Klein turned, ready to direct his gaze toward the young lady with the sweet, gentle face.

CHAPTER 70

◆ ARRIVAL OF 2-049 ◆

Clip-clop, clip-clop.

As the carriage rolled away, Klein—with his spirit vision activated—did not see the sweet young lady as he had expected. The only thing before his eyes was the brown carriage moving past him.

At that moment, all of the passengers had finished boarding; the carriage door was tightly closed as it slowly drove away.

About twenty to thirty human figures were packed inside, standing so close that their auras overlapped into an explosion of vivid, indistinguishable colors.

Klein shook his head quietly and raised his finger to tap his brow, deactivating his spirit vision.

To him, helping others was a simple notion that he would pursue if the opportunity arose. But since he had already missed that chance—and the situation hadn't been all that clear—there was no point in taking it to heart or putting off his own affairs.

Bathed in the crimson moonlight, Klein strolled slowly back home along the still bustling Daffodil Street. When he arrived, he found Melissa sitting by the dining table, diligently working on her schoolwork under the bright light of a gas lamp. She bit the tip of her fountain pen and frowned, deep in thought.

"Where's Benson?" Klein asked casually.

"Ah..." Melissa looked up, her face blank for a few seconds before replying, "He said he went around a few boroughs today and got so covered in sweat that he wanted to relax with a nice bath."

"All right," Klein chuckled. Suddenly, he noticed she was wearing a dress he had never seen before. It was a creamy white day dress with fashionable leg-of-mutton sleeves. The edges of the collar and lapel were decorated with thin frills, yet the overall design was simple and light—perfect for a girl of sixteen or seventeen.

"New dress?" Klein asked with a smile.

It was a purchase that both he and Benson had insisted upon.

Melissa hummed an answer, "I just got it back from Mrs. Rochelle. I figured since I was going to wash it later anyway, I might as well try it on first."

Klein was rather puzzled when he heard that.

"Mrs. Rochelle?"

Wasn't she our former neighbor?

Melissa nodded, explaining in all seriousness, "Mrs. Rochelle is actually a seamstress. She had been quite unlucky in life, so she took on mending work at home. I know she's excellent at her craft, and her price was much cheaper than buying directly from a women's clothing shop. Besides, it's tailored perfectly to my figure. It only cost nine soli and five pence and took just a few days. A dress of similar style would cost one and a half pounds at Harrod's!"

What a frugal girl... Sis, I know at least half the reason is your pity for Mrs. Rochelle... He did not reproach her for it, though. Instead, he smiled and asked, "When did you go to Harrod's?"

That was at Howes Street, near the Divination Club. It was a place that only the middle-class or above could afford to shop at.

"..." Melissa was momentarily at a loss for words. It took her a long while before she said, "It was Selena and Elizabeth. They insisted I accompany them there. I actually, well—I prefer gears. I like places with steam and machinery."

"It's nice for a girl to occasionally shop at a department store," Klein said with a chuckle as he comforted his sister.

After some idle chatter, he briskly headed to the second floor, eager to wash away the repulsive mix of smells from the bar.

Just as he was about to return to his bedroom for a change of clothes, Klein suddenly heard sounds coming from the bathroom near the balcony. A few seconds later, Benson emerged, drying his hair, which was already regaining its usual style.

"So? Did you compliment Melissa's new dress?" Benson asked Klein with a smile.

"I think I forgot. All I did was ask where it was made..." Klein replied after a brief pause.

Benson immediately chortled and shook his head. "What a sorry excuse for an older brother. When Melissa received the dress, she couldn't bear to put it down. After rushing to cook and wash the dishes, she immediately put the dress on and hasn't taken it off ever since."

"...Didn't she say she was only trying it on until her bath, so she could wash and starch it at the same time?" Klein subconsciously countered, recalling Melissa's own explanation.

"Hahhh," Benson sighed. "It's been scorching these past few days, and she spent so long in the kitchen that I believe she'd feel much better doing her homework after a bath."

That's true... Klein was suddenly enlightened. He and Benson exchanged a knowing smile.

So that's what kind of person you are, Melissa... There's nothing wrong with a girl wanting to look pretty. You don't need to find excuses to pretend otherwise... The corners of his mouth lifted as he shook his head gently and walked into his bedroom.

While he was taking his bath, Klein faintly heard the sound of knocking downstairs. Questions immediately filled his mind.

Doesn't the worker in charge of collecting coins from the gas meter come only once every two weeks?

Could it be Mrs. Shaud from next door? That can't be. I thought she strictly adhered to middle-class etiquette and wouldn't call at an inappropriate time.

In his puzzlement, Klein quickly dried himself. Putting on an old but comfortable shirt and trousers, he hurriedly ran down the stairs. But looking around, he didn't see any strangers.

"Was someone at the door just now?" he asked.

Benson, reading the newspaper leisurely, smiled and said, "It was Beech Mountbatten, one of the policemen in charge of Ironcross Street. He asked if we'd seen an eighteen- or nineteen-year-old boy with a round face today. He even showed us a sketch to see if we'd recognize him. Unfortunately, neither of us had seen him, or we could have gotten a reward. What about you?"

"Nope," Klein replied, already piecing together the situation.

Instigator Tris had successfully escaped from the Dark Dragon Bar by the docks. He'd fled to somewhere near Ironcross Street and Daffodil Street, and now the police were making rounds, going door-to-door.

This also meant that the operation to capture the Instigator had completely failed!

Klein didn't trouble himself with the situation. He had yet to begin combat training and was only a novice shooter, so dealing with a natural Assassin was nothing short of a death wish.

Nevertheless, he did not sleep well that night. He was plagued by constant worry that the Instigator might sneak in and hide in their house, leading to yet another bloodbath.

Thankfully, Daffodil Street remained quiet throughout the night, and the morning sun eventually dispersed the shadows.

Now relaxed, Klein changed into his good suit, donned his top hat, picked up his cane, and headed to Jutland Street. In the foyer, he greeted Rosanne.

"Good morning, Klein," Rosanne replied cheerfully. Then she lowered her voice and said, "I heard the big operation last night failed?"

"The operation to nab Instigator Tris?" Klein asked curiously.

"Mm-hmm!" Rosanne nodded heavily. She glanced toward the partition and said, "Apparently, an informant from the Mandated Punishers spotted the Instigator at the dock area. They planned to

wait for additional Beyonders and a Special Operations squad from the police department so they could nab him in one fell swoop without alarming ordinary folk. Unfortunately, that Instigator was extremely sharp—he immediately sensed something was amiss, broke out of the encirclement, and escaped.”

“At times like these, they need a Beyonder with tracking abilities—like me,” Klein joked.

“There was no shortage of trackers at the scene,” Dunn Smith’s deep voice suddenly sounded from behind. Rosanne whipped around and saw the captain in his black trench coat, leaning in the doorway with deep gray eyes fixed on her. She quickly raised her hands to cover her mouth, shaking her head to indicate she hadn’t said anything.

After taking a moment to think, Dunn Smith turned his gaze to Klein and said, “There were more than six Beyonders in total—from the Mandated Punishers, the Machinery Hivemind, and the Night-hawks. We traced the injured Tris to Ironcross Street. We found his temporary hideout, but the clues ended there. Whether through extraordinary methods or ordinary investigations, it was as if he had evaporated into thin air.”

“Do you need my help with divination?” Klein asked tentatively.

Dunn Smith shook his head lightly. “The Machinery Hivemind has a Mystery Pryer—a senior one as capable as Old Neil. I even suspect he’s already at Sequence Eight, though I don’t know the corresponding potion’s name.”

“There must be something special about the Theosophy Order to have lasted this long,” Klein consoled him.

For the rest of the morning, Klein continued his mysticism curriculum—reading historical literature and practicing various techniques as always. With lunchtime approaching, his mind began to wander. After a few more minutes, he put away the documents, heeding his stomach’s demands.

At that moment, Dunn Smith entered the clerk’s office. In his deep, resonant voice, he said, “Klein, come with me down to Chanis

Gate. Sealed Artifact 2-049 has arrived. The next operation might require your perception of that notebook.”

“...All right,” Klein replied, rising. His thoughts whirled as he imagined how the Sealed Artifact would look and wondered if the upcoming operation would be dangerous.

In the slightly tense silence that followed, he trailed behind Dunn down the stairs into the underground corridor. After passing a busy intersection, Dunn suddenly stopped and turned his head, saying sternly, “Watch and copy this movement. Keep at it without pause. Under no circumstance should you stop. Remember, you absolutely cannot stop. This is for your own safety!”

As he spoke, Dunn bent his arm at the elbow and then straightened it, repeating the motion several times without interruption. Confused, Klein watched the captain’s demonstration. Suddenly, a thought struck him, and he asked, “Does this have to do with the unique property of the Sealed Artifact?”

“Yes,” Dunn nodded with unusual solemnity. “Repeating this action allows us to immediately detect if you’ve been affected. As long as we save you in time, it won’t be life-threatening.”

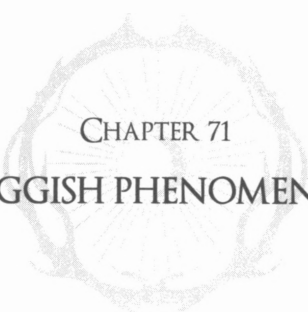
“Okay,” Klein said without hesitation and began mimicking the repeated bending and straightening of his arm.

“If your arm becomes sore, switch to the other one,” Dunn added.

Sealed Artifact 2-049 is certainly odd... But what significance does this gesture hold? It seems very dangerous... These thoughts flashed through Klein’s mind as he regarded the captain solemnly.

“All right.” He had too many questions, but with Chanis Gate in sight, he had no choice but to push them aside. *Besides, with my security clearance, I probably can’t learn any more details—I can only do as I’m told...*

Klein exhaled as he followed Captain Dunn down to the guard room outside Chanis Gate.



CHAPTER 71

◆ SLUGGISH PHENOMENON ◆

Klein repeatedly bent and straightened his arm at the elbow while watching Captain Dunn push open the guard room door with the side of his body.

The captain's meticulous caution and absurdly over-the-top "protective actions" left Klein feeling unusually tense—reminding him of the unsettling sensation he'd experienced as a child while passing by cemeteries at night.

A Grade Two Sealed Artifact. Dangerous. To be used with caution and moderation...

Even formal Nighthawk members don't know all the details. Its true danger remains unknown...

Amid his wound-up nerves, Klein found himself overthinking until his mind suddenly went numb—as if his brain's CPU had lost power.

Everything in his vision slowed down, including his arm movements. He saw Captain Dunn stop in his tracks, slowly drawing closer in apparent slow motion before extending his palm and gently pushing Klein on the shoulder. In an instant, Klein's thought processes and vision snapped back to normal, as if the prior moment had been nothing but an illusion.

"What happened?" he whispered, confused and a little frightened.

Dunn shook his head and, in a low voice, said, "Watch closely."

Immediately after speaking, the captain turned and walked into the guard room. Klein followed closely and saw four other people inside, some seated, some standing.

One of them was Leonard, the Midnight Poet; the other three were strangers to Klein, but they all shared one thing in common: They were all engaged in the same bending and straightening arm "exercise" with utter seriousness, not daring to pause even for a second.

"Klein Moretti has an incredible connection with the Antigonus family's notebook," Dunn announced briefly as an introduction.

Then he pointed to the other three and said, "The lady and these gentlemen are our colleagues from the Backlund diocese. They escorted Sealed Artifact 2-049 here. This is Ms. Lorotta, Sequence Eight Gravedigger and an expert markswoman."

The dark-haired woman, who looked to be about thirty, nodded at Klein in a friendly manner.

She was attractive and dressed in what appeared to be menswear—a black coat over a white shirt, formfitting black trousers, and black leather boots. The corners of her mouth were turned up in a slight smile.

After exchanging greetings, Dunn pointed to a man seated behind a desk in a gray, double-breasted trench coat. "Ayer Harson, an old guy just like me."

Before he could finish his sentence, Klein watched as Ayer Harson's movements turned sluggish, like a gear without lubricant or a joint rusted shut.

What's going on...?

Amid Klein's daze, he saw Lorotta push Ayer Harson gently. Only then did the gentleman's actions return to normal.

Was that what happened to me just now? Klein blinked and realized with a jolt that this was a manifestation of the dangers seeping from Sealed Artifact 2-049.

But what would happen if someone wasn't woken up in time?

Would they become a zombie?

Filled with questions, Klein greeted Ayer Harson, a charming middle-aged man.

"Borgia," Dunn said as he pointed to the last Nighthawk.

He was a cold man with a knife scar on one side of his face and eagle-sharp brown eyes that seemed to scrutinize everyone.

"Let's set off, everyone. The sooner we end this, the sooner we can seal 2-049 back up," Ayer Harson declared as he rose. His handsome face already bore a few wrinkles around his eyes.

So where is 2-049?

Klein surveyed his surroundings curiously but saw no sign of a Sealed Artifact. Of course, he couldn't see behind the table without activating his spirit vision.

"All right," Dunn turned and addressed Leonard Mitchell, "you're in charge of driving. It's best not to involve Cesar in matters like this."

Cesar, the clerk in charge of procuring and collecting supplies for the Tingen Nighthawks—and also their carriage driver—had previously driven Klein to the Welch residence to meet Daly the Spirit Medium.

"No problem," Leonard replied, putting aside his usual frivolity and nodding seriously.

At that moment, Klein saw Ayer Harson bending over and picking up a black chest from behind the table. The chest was exquisitely carved with resplendent stars and a full crimson moon, and it appeared to be sealed with some kind of formless barrier.

The Sealed Artifact must be inside. I wonder what 2-049 looks like...

Klein observed the chest curiously.

Thump!

Thump! Thump!

Intense knocking sounds suddenly erupted from the black chest. Its surface began to bulge in one place, then another.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

It was as though something horrifying had awakened within the chest, pounding wildly. Each knock seemed to pound against the hearts of everyone present.

It's alive? Klein thought, just as he noticed Captain Dunn's arm movements turning sluggish, as if his joints were filled with glue.

Borgia, the Nighthawk from Backlund, pushed Dunn's shoulder, helping him recover.

The effect of 2-049 looks just like someone doing the robot..., Klein mused. *If all of us are under its influence, wouldn't we end up as an awkward dance squad? Luckily, 2-049 seems capable of influencing only one person at a time.*

Klein silently monologued to relax his tense nerves. He did not dare to stop his arm exercises for even a second. Following Dunn's lead, he set his walking stick aside and joined the five Nighthawks as they made their way through the corridor and up the stairs to the second floor of Blackthorn Security Company.

Leonard had gone ahead and notified everyone on that level, so Rosanne and the others had hidden on the third floor. These incidents were unusual yet not entirely foreign to them. Another Nighthawk, Kenley, had replaced Dunn in his watch over Chanis Gate.

Klein heaved a sigh of relief when they finally reached the carriage. Glancing curiously out the window, he asked, "Won't 2-049 affect the ordinary people on the streets?"

From their journey underground to the carriage, Sealed Artifact 2-049 had already caused six sluggish incidents—two of which had targeted Klein himself and him being jolted awake by Captain Dunn and Leonard Mitchell, respectively. This frequency was rather alarming!

"No worries," the beautiful, dark-haired Lorotta explained in a languid voice. "2-049 will prioritize its target to humanoid creatures within a five-meter radius. The closer you are, the more likely you are to be chosen. As long as there are three people surrounding it, those merely nearby when the carriage passes won't be affected."

What an odd Artifact..., Klein thought as he continued his arm exercises.

During the journey to Ryer Bieber's house, Dunn and the rest of the Nighthawks remained silent, closely monitoring each other's condition.

Only Lorotta maintained a nonchalant demeanor—occasionally taking in the sights of Tingen’s not-so-clean streets and, at other times, praising Backlund’s underground drainage system.

Soon after, the familiar building finally came into Klein’s line of sight. The group of six made their way to the third level, their eyes fixed on one another in close observation.

The door to Ryer Bieber’s house was marked with the Tingen Police Department’s symbol. Entry was forbidden for unauthorized personnel. As Dunn did his stretching exercises with one arm, he produced a key with his free hand and opened the newly updated lock. He then turned around, allowing Ayer Harson, who was carrying the black chest, to enter first.

Thump!

Thump! Thump! Thump!

The Sealed Artifact inside the chest began pounding aggressively—more intensely than before. The force caused Ayer Harson’s arm to wobble uncontrollably, and Klein even suspected that the chest’s wall might be breached by the onslaught.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

Klein acutely noticed that Captain Dunn’s movements were growing sluggish. He was about to wake the captain when he felt a ringing in his head, and his thought processes and vision slowed to a crawl.

Didn’t they say that...it only affects one...person at a time...? Klein’s thoughts rapidly became sluggish as well.

At this moment, the prepared Lorotta and Borgia pushed him and the others back to full awareness.

Once his mind and vision were restored, Klein looked around with lingering fear. He blurted out, “Didn’t you say that 2-049 can only affect one person at a time?”

Good thing I never stopped doing my stretches!

“When Sealed Artifact 2-049 enters its berserk mode, it can affect up to two people at once. Now we can confirm that Ryer Bieber is indeed a descendant of the Antigonus family,” Ayer Harson said in a mechanical tone.

Lorotta chuckled and added, “Artifact 2-049 becomes very agitated when it detects even a trace of a descendant of the Antigonus family. Its power increases accordingly—you’d probably understand how it feels if you were in its presence.”

Well, I don’t...

Klein asked curiously, “So it’s a living creature?”

Lorotta smiled but did not answer directly. “You’ll find out shortly. As long as Ryer Bieber hasn’t escaped Tingen, 2-049 will lead us to him.”

Klein could only set his other questions aside as he turned to survey the room with the Nighthawks. Amid the loud, violent thumping from the chest, they locked the front door, walked down the stairs, and returned to the carriage.

Ayer Harson peered out the window several times, confirming that no pedestrians were within a five-meter radius. Then he placed the black chest on the carriage floor and twisted a mechanical lever to release its spiritual shackle.

The violent thumping abruptly ceased, and the entire carriage was engulfed in silence—so silent that not even a breath could be heard.

Klein held his breath as the black chest slowly creaked open.

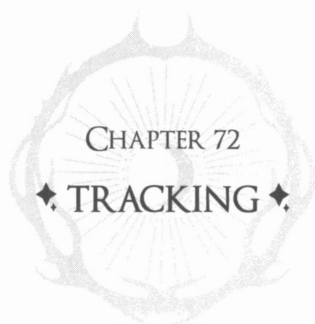
Clunk!

The chest toppled over as a brown, slender arm reached out—it was only about the length of a child’s finger. One by one, two such arms emerged from the floor until a structure roughly the size of a human palm appeared inch by inch. It had distinct elbow, finger, and knee joints. Its body was wrapped in oil-stained brown cloth, and its face was painted bright red and yellow—the colors of a clown.

It was a bizarre-looking wooden puppet!

Artifact 2-049 lifted its head and gazed at Klein with black, pupilless eyes.

Then its rigid mouth slowly parted to reveal a clown-like smile.



The wooden puppet's face was painted red and yellow to resemble a common clown. The corners of its mouth were lifted high, revealing an unusually comical smile. When its lips parted, a deep, dark cavity appeared.

Klein, locked in its gaze, felt his hair stand on end as an intense horror surged uncontrollably in his heart. Everything before his eyes dulled, as though he were viewing the world through a thick, brown glass. As Klein's thoughts gradually slowed, he instinctively wanted to call for help, but his neck felt constricted as if held tight by a rope. No sound could escape. Even a single word was trapped in silence.

Just then, Captain Dunn noticed Klein's sluggish movements and gave him a heavy push. Instantly, the brown glass before Klein's eyes shattered. He managed to spit out the word that had been lodged in his throat—*help*. The word reverberated through the carriage, panicked and sharp.

"It's getting stronger," Klein murmured in a certain tone.

One must be extremely cautious when near a strange Sealed Artifact like 2-049, lest they fall into terrifying peril. No, it was impossible to guard against it completely—it could only be avoided through other means!

"That's normal," Ayer Harson said steadily, nodding.

Lorotta chuckled softly. "It seems to like you. Don't worry. It's relatively less dangerous among the Grade Two Sealed Artifacts."

As she explained this in her naturally languid voice, the puppet rose. Its joints were so clearly defined they almost mimicked human movement. It began tottering toward its left side, moving slowly and laboriously, like a rusted steam engine in dire need of lubrication.

It's the robot dance again..., Klein thought, and a new theory began to form in his mind about the source of 2-049's danger.

It seems to assimilate the living things it controls.

If I hadn't been awakened in time by the others, would I have become a human-sized puppet—a real-life Barbie doll?

Just as these thoughts flooded Klein's mind, Dunn pushed Ayer Harson awake. The captain bent and straightened his arms, then pointed in the direction the puppet was slowly moving. "That way!" he commanded Leonard, the carriage driver.

Leonard couldn't drive the carriage through buildings, so he maneuvered around the block. As they proceeded, 2-049 constantly adjusted the direction that it was facing, persistent in its role as a compass for the Antigonus family.

Seeing this, Klein—who never ceased his arm exercises—felt like laughing amid the tension.

I heard that 2-049 was created by the Antigonus family... Is this an act of loyalty or the perfect example of screwing your own people over?

Leonard drove the carriage through the streets according to Ayer Harson's intermittent instructions, heading steadily in one direction. Whenever the strange puppet 2-049 approached the edge of the carriage, Ayer Harson would pull it back and reset its path. Each time that happened, the puppet's mouth split open wider, and two people would simultaneously fall under its influence.

Gradually, Klein's nervousness began to subside. He no longer found Artifact 2-049 as terrifying as before. As long as more than three people continuously maintained their arm movements and made sure to wake their partners in time, 2-049 was merely a puppet with slightly unusual properties.

The carriage moved swiftly and soon arrived at the dockside, where clusters of warehouses stood. After circling a few times, they confirmed that 2-049 was heading toward a grayish-white warehouse at the far end of the cluster. Ayer Harson's expression turned solemn. He carefully picked up the puppet and, with deliberate caution, stowed it back into the black chest.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

Under constant, ferocious knocking, Ayer Harson repeatedly woke up again and again with the help of Borgia and Lorotta as he flipped the mechanism lever with great effort. He then injected his spiritual energy into the lock, activating the symbols of stars and the crimson moon. When the invisible seal reappeared, Ayer let out a long, heavy breath of relief.

"Let's get out," Captain Dunn Smith said in a low, measured voice. "Leonard, secure the horse here."

Dressed in trench coats, suits, or shirts, the six of them left the carriage and walked toward the innermost warehouse. As they moved, they stretched and bent their arms almost in synchrony—a comical, ludicrous energy that Klein mentally dubbed the "Nighthawk Awkward Dance Squad." He could only inwardly complain to ease the absurdity of the situation.

There was, however, no other choice. According to his observations, the effects of 2-049 first manifested in the upper body. To detect these changes in time to prevent exposing themselves to further danger, their only options were bending and straightening their arms, turning their necks, or shaking their bodies. The latter two, however, made one look like a hooligan, while simple actions like blinking or tapping a brow were either too subtle or too exaggerated. Thus, this awkward dance was the best, albeit odd, method available. Klein sighed in resignation and followed Captain Dunn Smith and company forward.

As they approached the warehouse door, Klein's anxiety deepened. No one knew what kind of change the notebook would bring to Ryer Bieber! If the situation deteriorated, Klein dared not pin his hopes

on a second transmigration. Moreover, while chopping ingredients earlier, he had discovered that he was still capable of bleeding and injuring himself. His recovery speed was ordinary. He wasn't some invincible monster.

While they walked, Dunn suddenly raised his free hand and pressed his palm down, halting everyone more than ten meters from the warehouse door.

"Klein, divine whether there's any danger inside the warehouse. It'd be best if you could gauge the degree of danger," Dunn instructed, his deep gray eyes unwavering.

Klein nodded imperceptibly and paused his arm exercise. He reached his right hand into his left sleeve and removed a silver chain with a yellow crystal.

As he continued to bend and extend his right arm in a reduced range of motion, Dunn quickly watched for any sluggishness, ready to nudge him if needed.

Holding the silver chain in his left hand and letting the yellow crystal hang naturally. At the same time, he continued to bend and extend with his right arm in a much smaller range of motion.

When the yellow crystal stilled in the air, he half-closed his eyes, visualized a spherical light, and entered a trance. He silently chanted:

"There's danger in the warehouse.

"There's danger in the warehouse."

...

He repeated this incantation seven times.

When he opened his eyes, he saw the yellow crystal slowly turning in clockwise circles. It spun faster and faster, and eventually, Klein felt as though it was practically pulling on his left hand. "There's danger—grave danger," he intoned, giving his honest result. In his system, clockwise rotation confirmed danger while counterclockwise meant the opposite.

To other Beyonders, even a Mystery Pryer, using pendulum dowsing could only determine if there was danger, but they would be unable to obtain additional information regarding the level of danger.

Meanwhile, Klein discovered that when he performed spirit dowsing, the pendulum's spinning speed revealed the intensity of the response.

Although not extremely precise, it allowed for a rough assessment of the situation.

As expected of a Seer potion... Klein was rather pleased with the outcome.

Just as he was about to put away the yellow crystal pendulum, Leonard Mitchell—who had maintained silence at the back of the group—suddenly spoke, “Do another divination to see if there is danger in our surroundings.”

Dunn nodded in agreement. “Yes, I’m worried that the Secret Order won’t give up and may have placed Ryer Bieber’s hideout under constant surveillance. They could have followed us here and might cause trouble at some critical juncture.”

Klein took a deep breath and entered a calm, ethereal state once again. When the silver chain stilled, he recited in his mind:

“There is danger in our surroundings.”

...

“There is danger in our surroundings.”

...

He repeated it several times until, finally, when he opened his eyes, he observed that the yellow crystal pendulum had first moved counterclockwise with difficulty, then suddenly paused and began moving clockwise.

“There is danger in our surroundings,” Klein spoke cautiously, his nerves reactivating. He realized someone had tried to disrupt his divination but had lost the unseen confrontation.

No sooner had he finished speaking than an orange-yellow fireball—about the size of a fist—hurtled toward the group at blazing speed.

Captain Dunn, who had already drawn his long-barreled revolver before Klein’s divination, promptly raised his hand, aimed, and fired.

Bang!

The fireball didn't seem to be affected by the gunshot but continued its original trajectory, as though it were forcing everyone to scatter from their spots.

Klein originally thought nothing of any troublemakers following them. After all, there were six Beyonders present, including experts in Sequence Eight and even Sequence Seven. It was a lineup that was practically unstoppable in a small city like Tingen.

But when the fireball smashed down, he came to a sudden realization.

For them, the most dangerous enemy was not the one tailing them, the person who had tried to disrupt their mission, or even Ryer Bieber, in his unknown state in the warehouse—but Sealed Artifact 2-049!

Once they dispersed and became embroiled in battle, they wouldn't be able to wake one another in time. Then they would all turn into real-life puppets!

As these chaotic thoughts bombarded him, Leonard yanked Klein aside, and they both rolled on the ground away from the fireball.

Klein didn't have time to lament his clothing. He saw the Night-hawks split into two groups, remaining orderly even as they dodged.

Poof!

The orange fireball smashed onto the ground but didn't stir a single speck of dust. It disappeared as though nothing had happened.

An illusion? Just as this thought came to him, Klein saw Ayer Harson lift the black chest and throw it at least ten meters away.

"Keep your distance! And watch over it!" Ayer shouted.

Before he finished, Leonard and Borgia had separately approached it from different directions. They each stood at least seven meters from the chest to prevent anyone else from getting near.

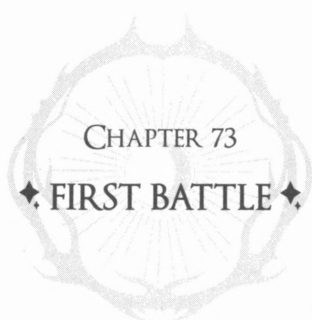
Dunn and Lorotta both drew their guns. They stood beside Ayer Harson, who had drawn a thin silver sword, and formed a semicircle as they rushed toward where the fireball had come from, all the while keeping an eye on their flanks.

Seeing this, Klein, who had left his cane behind in order to

maintain his arm movements, immediately heaved a sigh of relief. He realized he had overlooked an important matter.

Artifact 2-049 had a limited range of influence. As long as they maintained a sufficient distance from it, they need not worry about the danger it posed!

Klein jumped up at once. He stuffed his yellow crystal pendulum into his pocket with one hand and, with the other, reached into his shoulder holster and drew his revolver.



CHAPTER 73

♦ FIRST BATTLE ♦

Under the brilliant light of the afternoon sun, Klein, in his dust-coated clothes, quickly spun his revolver's cylinder to cycle to a live round. Thus, he readied himself to shoot at a moment's notice, allowing the light to reflect off the glistening brass barrel of the revolver.

He extended his gun-wielding hand, arm parallel to the ground, and watched for any changes around him.

At the same time, he was a little worried about Captain Dunn and Mr. Ayer Harson. After all, both were Nightmare Beyonders specializing in subtly influencing the enemy, and he wasn't sure if they were adept at face-to-face combat.

Just as these thoughts crossed Klein's mind, Ayer Harson slowed his forward charge, his expression becoming serene and sorrowful.

He opened his mouth and recited a poem that evoked a sense of peace, as if one were surrounded by a tranquil night:

*"When once the sun sinks in the west,
And dewdrops pearl the evening's breast;
Almost as pale as moonbeams are,
Or its companionable star,
The evening primrose opens anew
Its delicate blossoms to the dew;*

*And, hermit-like, shunning the light,”*¹⁰

...

As his voice resonated around them, Klein nearly let go of his tightly wound nerves and completely relaxed. Fortunately, he had experienced something similar before and was not directly in the direction Ayer Harson was facing. He quickly collected himself and entered a half-trance state to combat the influence of the poem.

Phew... He let out a sigh of relief. He no longer had any doubts about Dunn’s and Ayer’s abilities in direct combat.

Having advanced only recently and still lacking a deep understanding of Sequence potions, Klein had forgotten that Sequence Seven Nightmare was an advancement of Sequence Eight Midnight Poet. Members retained their previous abilities while enjoying a modest increase in power.

The only impression Klein had of Midnight Poets came from Leonard Mitchell. He knew that this “profession” similarly inherited the unique traits of a Sleepless. They excelled in combat, shooting, climbing, and perception, and were also adept at influencing those around them through various poetic styles. In simpler terms, they were violent poets.

Amid the sound of Ayer’s recital, the large wooden crates stacked around them suddenly seemed to ripple like water. A man in a black tuxedo and short top hat emerged from within.

However, this man’s face was painted in three vibrant colors—red, yellow, and white—causing the sides of his lips to appear highly curved, reminiscent of a clown. This created an absurd contrast with his formal attire, suitable for an evening banquet.

Tap! Tap! Tap!

The dark-haired markswoman Lorotta charged forward swiftly. With a gun in one hand and her other hand clenched into a fist, she advanced until she was mere centimeters from the tuxedoed clown.

The clown seemed to have been affected by Ayer Harson’s poem.

¹⁰ From John Clare’s “Evening Primrose.”

His body swayed slightly, and he wore a peaceful expression, as if he had no desire to fight back.

Pop!

Lorotta lunged forward in a boxing maneuver, swinging her fist toward the tuxedo clown's face.

Bang!

The air crackled as the clown shattered like a mirror; its broken shards quickly evaporated before disappearing completely into thin air.

Just then, the tuxedo clown quickly reappeared in the shadows of the wooden crates a few steps away, his outline swiftly forming in the air.

The figure under the influence of the poem moments ago was merely an illusion! It was a performance!

The tuxedo clown grinned again, his mouth stretching into a wide smile. He looked comical as he pressed down on his short top hat with one hand and snapped his fingers with the other.

Bang! With a snap of his fingers, the sound of a gunshot rang out. Lorotta leaped to her left and rolled on the ground, dodging the attack.

But aside from the illusory crack of a gun firing, nothing happened.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Dunn and Ayer each lifted their guns and fired steadily. The tuxedo clown deftly dodged to the left and right, sometimes retreating and sometimes rolling on the ground, as if he were an acrobat in a circus.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, Lorotta charged forward again, swinging her fist. Despite her reputation as a sharpshooter, she still insisted on engaging in hand-to-hand combat against the enemy.

Bam! Unable to dodge the attack in time, the tuxedo clown could only raise his left arm to block the punch.

Seeing him pause, Dunn and Ayer did not hesitate to take aim and pull the trigger.

Just then, the arm the tuxedo clown used to block Lorotta's fist burst into an orange-yellow flame. In the blink of an eye, the flame completely enveloped him and spread toward Lorotta.

Bang! Bang! Dunn and Ayer fired their revolvers, striking the ball of flame.

The flames burned rapidly, and soon, all that was left were black ashes floating in the air. But the tuxedo clown once again appeared behind a nearby stack of wooden crates, partially obscured.

He lifted his right hand and snapped his fingers again. *Bang!* Amid the illusory gunshot, Lorotta suddenly stopped in her tracks. On the ground before her, where mud had splattered, lay a bullet hole. This strike was no longer an illusion!

With this strategy, it was difficult to discern real from fake and reality from illusion.

Bang! Bang! Bang! The tuxedo clown snapped his fingers repeatedly, flashing in and out of hiding as he exchanged fire with Dunn and Ayer.

Seeing this, Lorotta narrowed her eyes and raised the dark gold revolver in her left hand. *Bang!* The tuxedo clown suddenly ducked, avoiding the fatal shot. His short top hat flew backward, falling to the ground with a visible scorch mark.

After rolling a few times on the ground, the tuxedo clown scaled the stacks of wooden crates with the agility of a curly-haired baboon. From his higher vantage point, he snapped his fingers and released several air bullets.

Ayer Harson took a few steps back, lowered his gun, and continued his previous recital:

*"Wastes its fair bloom upon the night,
Who, blindfold to its fond caresses,
Knows not the beauty it possesses;"*

...

The tuxedo clown hopped repeatedly between the crates, then suddenly raised his hand to pick at his ears as he looked at Ayer with a comical smile.

Could he have stuffed his ears in advance? The Sequence potion from the Secret Order sure is weird... A thought surfaced in Klein's mind as he observed the fight from afar.

Just as the thought flashed, he suddenly saw a figure appear at the top of a warehouse beside him, racing straight toward where Ryer Bieber was hiding.

The figure was dressed in the grayish-white uniform of a dock worker, and his face also seemed painted red, yellow, and white.

Is the tuxedo clown responsible for distracting Captain Dunn and the others while someone else goes to retrieve the diary?

Klein instinctively raised his right hand to shoot the figure on the roof.

He had just taken aim when the figure suddenly ducked, lunging directly into a roll.

Bang!

Klein pulled the trigger, unable to stop himself in time. He saw the figure suddenly pause, with blood spurting from his body.

The figure glanced back at him in shock. Then, bearing the pain, he continued charging toward the warehouse.

Damned if that wasn't a lucky shot... Klein's lips twitched as he pulled the trigger again. This time, the bullet struck the wooden roof beside his target.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Leonard and Borgia also fired, but neither managed to hit their mark.

Klein was just starting to wonder why they weren't as good a shot as he was when he suddenly froze.

That's right! Why should we stop him?

Didn't I divine that there was grave danger in the warehouse just now? Why not let that guy be the vanguard and step on the land mine for us?

Leonard and Mr. Borgia must have had the same idea...

With this thought, Klein tilted the barrel of his revolver upward and shot at the sky.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Amid the sound of the gunshots, the figure managed to reach the roof of the innermost warehouse without obstruction.

He lunged downward, slamming his elbow into the roof before dropping inside along with the debris.

Following the sound, the dark-haired Lorotta's eyes suddenly turned black. She made a strange pulling motion in the air with her left hand.

The tuxedo clown's acrobatic movements abruptly halted. An invisible hand seemed to grip him tightly by his ankle.

Dunn did not shoot immediately; instead, he lowered his revolver. He opened his mouth, and rather than speaking, he reverberated the air with a strange, weightless, and ethereal sound of spirituality—finishing Ayer's poem:

*"Thus it blooms on while night is by;
When day looks out with open eye,
Bashed at the gaze it cannot shun,
It faints and withers and is gone."*

...

The tuxedo clown's struggling movements suddenly became limp, as if he had lost the will to fight.

Ayer Harson lifted his handgun and took aim, his finger poised on the trigger.

In that split second, an abnormally devastating cry rang out from inside the warehouse. "Aaaaah!"

The cry carried immense fear, as though it came from someone encountering unspeakable horror.

Just as the hair on Klein's body stood on end, the cry ceased, and the innermost warehouse fell silent once again—a silence that made one's skin crawl.

Bang!

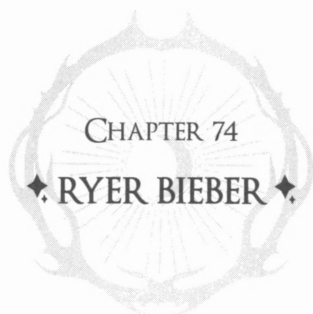
Affected by the cry, Ayer managed only to shoot the tuxedo clown in the belly.

"Hahhh... Hng... Uh!"

The silence in the warehouse was broken again by a sudden wave of what began as soft gasps for breath. It gradually grew louder until it reached a crescendo that tugged at everyone's nerves.

Thump! Thump! Thump! Thump! Thump! Thump!

Inside the black chest, 2-049 turned frantic, its frenzy reaching a peak.



“Hahhh... Hng... Uh!”

Thump! Thump! Thump!

The loud panting and the intense knocking alternated at first before overlapping, making Klein and the others extremely nervous, as though they’d heard some evil murmur.

Taking advantage of Ayer, Dunn, and Lorotta’s brief distraction, the tuxedo clown suddenly pulled a long slip of paper from his pocket.

Pa!

With a snap of his right hand, the slip of paper ignited into a long whip burning with black flame. He lashed it toward the side of his ankle.

A fleeting but shrill scream sounded as the tuxedo clown escaped the invisible shackles and backflipped away.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Dunn, Ayer, and Lorotta’s shots missed simultaneously, striking the wooden crates instead.

The tuxedo clown did not linger. With his right hand pressed against his wound, he bolted in a direction away from the cluster of warehouses.

He moved so fast that, in the blink of an eye, all they could see was the back of his receding figure.

Before he vanished, his right hand, held against his abdomen,

swiped abruptly toward his left arm. With that, the wound on his stomach vanished as if he hadn't been hurt at all.

Meanwhile, the spot on his left arm where he had touched suddenly became badly mangled, and a silver bullet was embedded in the torn flesh.

Dunn and the others didn't chase after him, as the panting from the innermost warehouse had grown so loud that it triggered their spiritual senses and made their nerves quiver.

Bang!

With a sudden explosive sound, the door of the warehouse burst into pieces, flying in all directions.

Then something wrapped in a tattered cloth flew out through the door and landed not far from Klein.

When Klein cast his gaze over, he realized it was an arm. Its bloody flesh had been chewed, and its pale bones were cracked irregularly as they jutted out.

Splat! Splat! Splat!

One after another, more similar objects were flung out from the warehouse. First came a bloody, dilated eye, followed by an ear that had been brutally ripped off, and finally, half of a beating heart and intestines filled with a yellowish-brown substance.

If Klein hadn't seen the even more gory, bloated cadaver in Ryer Bieber's home, he would probably have vomited on the spot again.

His nerves were on the brink of breakdown. After a great effort to hold back his urge to shoot into the pitch-black entranceway, he ejected the empty shells from his revolver and reloaded it with new demon-hunting bullets.

Bang!

Dunn drew close as he sent a steady shot into the warehouse.

But it was as if his bullet had sunk into the sea—there was no sound of impact at all.

“Hahhh... Hng... Uh!”

The loud panting grew more fervent as grayish-white colors filled the open doorway.

With another two loud shots, Ayer Harson's and Borgia's bullets tore through the whiteness, yet they were unable to prevent the "color" from spilling outward, nor did they leave any wounds that caused liquid to seep out.

Klein held his breath, restraining himself from shooting blindly. He watched as a complete outline slowly emerged from the grayish-whiteness.

It was a humanoid creature more than two meters tall. The joints of its limbs were bent in unnatural directions, as though they had been forcibly snapped.

Broken white bones jutted out from beneath its skin. The entire grayish-white surface was covered in grooves, reminiscent of a human brain stripped of its shell.

A rotting, sticky substance covered the monster's body, yet its head looked relatively normal, marked by deep smile lines and pale skin.

As it opened and closed its mouth, Klein could see inside the cavity a porcelain false tooth on the brink of falling out, a few strands of bloody saliva, and tiny pieces of bone and flesh.

Ryer Bieber... Is he even human anymore? Klein drew a silent gasp as his heart pounded rapidly.

Bang!

Leonard's demon-hunting bullet struck Ryer Bieber's forehead, tearing right through it and leaving behind a deep hole.

Grayish-white liquid flowed out and dripped onto the ground. The liquid writhed and sizzled, transforming into fat, milky-white maggots.

Yet the monster appeared completely unaffected. It was neither fast nor slow as it lunged at Borgia, who was closest, though its actual target seemed to be the black chest containing Sealed Artifact 2-049.

"Loss of control of Beyonder powers!" Dunn shouted in a deep voice. "Lorotta, it looks like a dead soul. Try to find its weakness!"

"Got it." Lorotta said no more as she raised her hands and pressed them to her eyes.

Her pupils turned gray, then colorless, as if she had entered the

world of spirits—the kingdom of dead souls. From that higher vantage point, she scanned the enemy, searching for the key “node.”

Klein saw that a normal gunshot was ineffective, so he refrained from wasting more bullets. He tapped his brow to activate his spirit vision, assisting Gravedigger Lorotta.

In his view, only one color remained in Monster Bieber’s aura—a dull grayish-white filled with madness. Apart from that, Klein saw nothing else.

At that moment, Ayer Harson and Leonard Mitchell began singing in unison:

*“Oh, the threat of horror, the hope of crimson!
One thing at least is certain—that this Life flies;
One thing is certain, and the rest is Lies;
The Flower that once has bloomed forever dies...”*

...

The power that ushered in a peaceful slumber extended outward. The twisted, grayish-white monster suddenly slowed, as if unable to resist the charm of the poem.

Then it opened its mouth and let out a shrill cry, one that ordinary people could not hear.

“Aaaaah!”

...

Boom! Klein felt a sharp pain in his head as he automatically exited his spirit vision. He sensed warm liquid flowing from his nose and, when he subconsciously wiped it away, discovered his hand was covered in blood.

Ayer and Leonard fell backward simultaneously, with blood visible at the corners of their lips, noses, and eyes.

Borgia, Dunn, and Lorotta each stepped back as their faces paled and color drained away.

The monster had screamed only once, yet its roar exceeded what the six Beyonders could withstand, leaving them weak and defenseless.

Wham!

It closed in on Borgia and suddenly swung its twisted arm.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Borgia and Dunn shot twice each, but neither was able to damage Monster Bieber.

Wham! The blow sent Borgia flying, his long-barreled revolver clattering to the ground.

He struggled a few times to stand up but was unable to do so at that moment.

A sticky substance seeped from the corner of Monster Bieber's mouth as it lunged toward the black chest.

Bang!

At that crucial moment, Ayer Harson's bullet struck the chest and sent it flying far away. Monster Bieber missed its grasp, and its momentum carried it forward by more than ten meters.

A small crack appeared on the surface of the black chest, and as the thumping from within grew more intense, the crack became even more obvious.

"Found it!" the dark-haired Lorotta finally spoke. "I need you to control it for at least three seconds."

"All right." Without further preamble, Dunn pressed his hand against his brow and closed his eyes.

As he seemed to fall asleep, ripples of shapeless waves slowly spread out one after another.

Monster Bieber paused for a moment. The madness in its eyes quickly receded, and its thin, transparent eyelids began to droop uncontrollably.

Dunn's body started shaking as long, writhing shapes bulged from underneath his coat like slippery, scaleless snakes.

Lorotta raced over and, with a roll, slid beneath Monster Bieber's body.

She supported herself with one hand and launched a clenched fist upward, landing a blow on Monster Bieber's crotch like a cannonball.

Plop!

Ignoring the corrosive pain in her hand, she braced herself against the ground and pushed upward, drilling her fist deeper inside.

Rip!

Lorotta pulled out her forearm, dragging out a length of intestine, trailing a brownish-yellow substance and blood.

Within the intestine, one could faintly see an ancient notebook.

“Aaaaah!”

Monster Bieber let out a blood-curdling scream. Its body flared brightly, as though it were melting.

“Get down!”

Just as Ayer Harson’s hurried shout ended, Klein saw Monster Bieber suddenly swell up.

Boom!

With a loud explosion, the shockwave tossed Klein—as far away as he was—into the air before he fell back down hard.

He struggled to stand against a swirling headache and nausea, watching as Monster Bieber turned into a pile of putrid, rotting flesh. He could see Dunn and Lorotta a dozen meters away, looking as though they had been knocked out.

Ayer Harson, Borgia, and Leonard Mitchell were on the ground, too—a mix of groaning in pain and struggling to stand but failing.

Klein was just about to let out a breath of relief when he suddenly saw a familiar object about two or three meters away from him.

The black chest had stopped rolling, its cracked side facing up toward the sky.

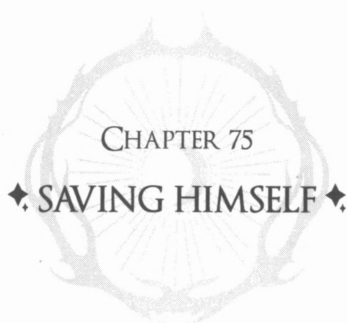
A skinny brown arm reached out from within.

Sealed Artifact... 2-049... Fuck!

The blast from before had dropped the black chest near him!

Klein’s heart leaped to his throat as he immediately prepared to jump in the opposite direction, away from 2-049’s effective range.

But just then, with a ringing in his head, his mind suddenly turned sluggish.



CHAPTER 75

♦ SAVING HIMSELF ♦

Shit! I've been controlled by the puppet!

Captain and the others are either unconscious...or have yet to recover. They can't even get up... They won't be able to...wake me up in time...

No... I have to...save myself!

Everything before Klein's eyes happened in slow motion. All his joints and his brain seemed to be coated with an ever-thickening layer of glue.

He had no interest in becoming a human puppet, so he seized the opportunity—before he was fully under its control—to find a way to save himself.

I definitely can't...hit myself... There must be an...external force...

External force... I'll give it a try...

Without time for hesitation or the luxury to think things through, Klein grasped an idea in less than three seconds and immediately moved his “rusty” knee joint. With that, he took one counterclockwise step.

At the same time, he did not attempt to escape the invisible rope that seemed to hang around his throat. All he did was begin to internally recite:

“The...Immortal Lord of...Heaven and Earth...for Blessings...”

He wanted to harness the mysterious world above the gray fog to wake himself and escape Sealed Artifact 2-049's assimilation!

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Klein's knees and ankles emitted unpleasant sounds of protest. With slow, contorted movements, he took another step counterclockwise.

"The Sky Lord...of Heaven and Earth...for Blessings..."

Klein's thoughts became more halting. He felt as though he were a computer overloaded with bloatware and antivirus programs. He lifted his left foot in a jerky motion and took another step in the required spot.

"The...Exalted Thearch...of Heaven...and...Earth for...Blessings..."

Klein's mind was slowing, stiffening. He took the final step purely on instinct.

At this point, he knew he was almost fully under the puppet's control. Even if Ayer Harson could get up in time to save him, he probably wouldn't be awakened with a push.

But his strong will to live drove him to recite the final line of the incantation:

"The...Celestial...Worthy...of...Heaven...and...Earth.....for.....Blessings..."

Just as he finished his incantation, chaotic, hysterical shrieks and murmurs abruptly sounded in his ears. They shattered his solidifying mind into countless shards of uncontrollable thoughts.

Klein's brain became a gurgling cauldron of soup. In his torpor, he felt his body grow lighter as his spirit drifted into the air.

Endless gray fog and crimson stars appeared before his eyes—vast, mysterious, and hazy.

Klein's scattered thoughts quickly settled as he finally regained the ability to think, focusing on the magnificent palace before him.

"Phew... Good thing it worked," he whispered, his voice tinged with lingering fear.

According to his previous observations, once someone fell under

the control of Sealed Artifact 2-049, it was tantamount to death. Under normal circumstances, no medicine could save them.

Fortunately, his luck-enhancement ritual and the mysterious world above the gray fog did not adhere to normalcy!

Pacing back and forth, Klein began considering his situation.

I can't just stay here forever, right?

Once Captain and the others wake up and come close to me, I won't be able to explain what's happening...

As things are right now, I have only the shell of my body left. I'm more zombie-like than a zombie...

But if I take the risk and return, there's no guarantee of safety... What if I get controlled by 2-049 again?

...

While pondering his dilemma, Klein suddenly smacked himself on the forehead and let out a soft chuckle. "It looks like I haven't gotten used to my status as a Seer!"

Before he finished his sentence, he appeared at the head of the long bronze table, seated on the high-back chair with the strange symbol.

Klein extended his hand and grabbed the fountain pen that materialized out of thin air. Then he scribbled a sentence on an illusory piece of paper:

Returning to the real world is very safe.

Next, Klein pulled out a projection of a spirit pendulum from his packet. After some experimentation, he discovered that any item he possessed could also be projected above the gray fog, though they appeared much more illusory.

Klein held the silver chain with his left hand and lowered the yellow crystal until it nearly touched the paper. Slowing his breathing, he half-closed his eyes and began calmly repeating to himself:

"Returning to the real world is very safe."

...

"Returning to the real world is very safe."

...

Again and again, Klein repeated the sentence, performing the spirit dowsing in its entirety without skipping any steps.

When he opened his eyes, he saw the yellow crystal slowly oscillating, guiding the silver chain in a clockwise spin.

Clockwise is positive while counterclockwise is negative... Returning to the real world is very safe...

Klein heaved a sigh of relief as he stored the chain away out of habit. Then he released his spirituality and wrapped it around his body, conjuring the sensation of a rapid fall.

The hazy fog and crimson stars swiftly turned ethereal as they zoomed upward. Soon, Klein saw himself still frozen in his original position—the brown puppet with half of its body still hanging out of the chest. He also noticed that the Sealed Artifact had apparently stopped all motion.

As his physical senses reached his brain, he was about to try moving his arm to determine his physical condition when he suddenly heard a voice concealed within the wind:

“Do you wish to be awakened? You can be saved as long as you promise me one thing. This one thing is to pick up that Antigonus family’s notebook for me. Nod if you agree. I know you are still capable of completing that action.”

Who?! Hmm... Looks like 2-049 isn’t trying to control me again... That’s right. It will not repeatedly influence the same person. There will be a break... Klein almost started in surprise, but he revealed nothing on his face.

Just then, the voice added quickly:

“If you do this, you will receive additional rewards. I know you are a Seer, and I also know that the Church of Evernight does not have the eighth rank of your Sequence. But our Secret Order can give it to you. Heh, frankly, I used to be a Seer. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have dared to return. To show you my sincerity, I can tell you now that the corresponding Sequence Eight of the Seer path is Clown.”

Clown? Secret Order... Klein nearly didn’t manage to stay frozen in his puppet state.

He never would've made the connection between Seer and Clown. Were they about to become the twin headliners of a circus?

"All right, make your choice. Believe me, you have no time left to waste." The voice once again carried on the wind. In the distance, Dunn and Lorotta remained unconscious. Borgia seemed heavily injured, moaning without moving. Ayer Harson and Leonard Mitchell were in relatively better shape as they attempted to roll over and sit up.

Why me? The Secret Order... It must be that tuxedo clown from before. After he escaped, he secretly returned in a bid to fish in troubled waters... But why is he seeking help from me? He can single-handedly take on anyone here at this point...

Hearing the voice, all sorts of doubts flashed through Klein's mind one after another.

Since the person claimed to be a Seer, Klein attempted to analyze the situation using the thought processes of a Seer.

He dared to return because he'd divined something hopeful in this situation. He believed that Monster Bieber would be destroyed and that they would all suffer a heavy setback.

He didn't take the notebook himself or deal with us directly because he likely divined that it would entail immense risk. Therefore, he suspects that either the captain or Ms. Lorotta are feigning their unconsciousness—and that this is a trap laid out for him.

He didn't make further divinations to determine my present state, probably because he might not have the time. If he waited any longer, Mr. Ayer Harson and the others would have regained some of their combat strength. Also, he belittles me and thinks it unnecessary.

He understands a Seer very well and is confident that I'm unable to escape the puppet's control... He is using me as cannon fodder to probe for any potential traps...

On the other hand, this also proves that I look no different than usual on the outside even while conducting the luck-enhancement ritual...

With his brain no longer a sludge, Klein felt that his line of reasoning was crystal clear. He was quite confident about the thoughts and goals of the tuxedo clown.

As for the clown's promise, he believed not one word of it. *Cannon fodder has no rights!*

As these thoughts flashed through his mind, Klein took control of his neck and nodded with difficulty. In doing so, he confirmed that he had indeed escaped the control of Sealed Artifact 2-049.

Immediately, a transparent "curtain" stirred about three meters to his side. It revealed the outline of a figure with a face painted in bright colors and dressed in a tuxedo—none other than the Secret Order member who had fled previously.

Since Klein had been in a twisted pose in his attempt to leap out of 2-049's effective range, his back was now facing the black chest and the puppet. The tuxedo clown stood to his side, clearly keeping away from the Sealed Artifact and the barrel of his revolver. No doubt, he was very careful.

The clown pulled a long slip of paper from his pocket and snapped it in his hand until it was as stiff as a wooden stick. He held this "stick" at a distance of two to three meters and prodded Klein's shoulder to wake him.

This fellow knows 2-049 very well. He knows that if the scent of an Antigonus family descendant is present, the puppet will go ballistic and be able to control two people at a time... He also knows that throwing a rock doesn't seem effective...? At the very least, I've seen Captain and present company attempt similar things...

Although Klein didn't know why 2-049 hadn't tried to assimilate him again, he didn't dare remain within five meters of it any longer. Therefore, he waited with bated breath for an opportunity.

Just as the stick was about to touch his shoulder, Klein suddenly raised his left hand and grabbed the edge of the stick, yanking it backward.

Caught by surprise, the tuxedo clown was pulled forward by his hand. He staggered a few steps as the gap between him and Klein closed—now less than two meters.

At the same time, Klein readied the revolver's trigger with his right hand.

Bang! Bang!

He shot twice—not aiming directly at the tuxedo clown but behind him, firing to the side of Sealed Artifact 2-049!

Before the gunshots rang out, the tuxedo clown had taken the initiative to roll from his staggering state, instinctively moving out of the bullet's path.

Klein released his grip on the stick as he rapidly backed away several meters, rushing out of the danger zone.

After a few rolls, the tuxedo clown was about to jump backward and away when his head went abuzz and his thoughts rapidly turned to mush.

Oh no!

He forced me to...dodge in the direction of the Antigonus puppet!

I'm within...five meters...

How could he...not be...controlled by...the Antigonus...puppet...?

...

The tuxedo clown stilled. With what seemed like rusted joints, he attempted to crawl out of the effective range.

But Klein had already turned around. He held his revolver with both hands as he aimed at the slow-moving target.

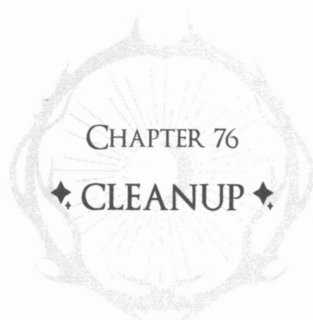
To him, that was no different than shooting a fixed target.

Having witnessed the tuxedo clown's battle with Dunn, Ayer, and Lorotta, Klein knew that he was agile and adept at rolls and flips. Therefore, even when they were only a meter or two apart, Klein had cautiously given up on landing a shot. Instead, he forced the clown to dodge toward the "home turf" he'd envisioned—within range of Sealed Artifact 2-049!

Furthermore, even if the puppet were ineffective, the tuxedo clown would only realize that he had fallen into a trap. He would escape by leaping backward and would not pose any significant threat to Klein.

Bang!

Reflected in the inscrutable gaze of the tuxedo clown, Klein calmly pulled the trigger.



Bang!

The silver bullet traversed a short distance of a few meters before accurately piercing the tuxedo clown's neck. Blood gushed out immediately, dyeing his skin and bow tie red.

Unable to cry out, the tuxedo clown's throat gurgled as he gasped for breath. He wished to lift his hand to shift away his fatal wound, but his joints appeared to be filled with glue. His movements were stiff, slow, and jerky.

Bang!

Having entered a half-trance, Klein was not startled by the sight of blood. He calmly pulled the trigger again, as though it were his usual target practice.

A ghastly hole appeared on the tuxedo clown's forehead as crimson red spewed out. The luster in his eyes dimmed.

The power of this intricate firearm exceeded Klein's expectations.

With his knees buckling and his arms hanging down, the tuxedo clown slowly collapsed to the ground. His eyes were dazed with confusion.

Finally, his body convulsed a few times before it slowly relaxed and stopped moving altogether.

Having landed a bullseye, Klein turned around with a flourish. He swung open the chamber and allowed the spent shells to fall down.

Then, dressed in his suit and short top hat, he made his way over to Ayer Harson. He pulled out the final silver demon-hunting bullet from his pocket and inserted it into the revolver's chamber.

The only reason he did not turn back to look at the tuxedo clown's tragic fate was his discomfort over his first kill. But it was necessary—he had no idea what would happen if the tuxedo clown fell fully under the puppet's control.

Furthermore, he did not dare risk entering Sealed Artifact 2-049's range. After all, no one knew if a fluke might prevent his self-rescuing luck-enhancement ritual this time.

As for any items on the tuxedo clown, Klein only cared if there was the so-called Clown potion formula or corresponding clues. However, this was not something he was in a hurry to pursue. In a while, he could handle it together with Dunn, Ayer, and the others. If the Nighthawks got their hands on the formula, it practically meant that he had it, too—no way would they be unwilling to share the potion formula of Sequence Eight. At most, he would be required to spend some time accumulating merits and contributions. After all, he had only become a Seer recently; it would still be a long time before he fully digested it.

As his thoughts churned, Klein quickly walked over to Ayer Harson. The gentleman in the gray, double-breasted trench coat struggled to sit up but failed every time, covered in dust and mud from his falls.

"Mr. Harson, what do you need me to do?" Klein asked, crouching down. He pointed the revolver in his hand at the ground in case of a misfire.

Ayer caught his breath, then lamented, "The monster was much too strong. If it weren't for its weakness..." Pausing, he pointed at a sky-blue metal vial beside him and said with a self-deprecating laugh, "I was trying to consume some medicine, but my hand shook..."

The vial was about the size of Klein's thumb, no longer than five

centimeters tall. Its screw cap had fallen to the ground, and the liquid had completely spilled out.

Klein reached out to pick up the vial. Squinting at it, he answered helplessly, "Mr. Harson, there are only a few drops left."

"Go to...Borgia and search his body. It's in his...his inner pockets," Ayer said as he gasped for breath.

"All right." Klein stood up and casually asked, "Is this restorative medicine?"

An item adjacent to mysticism?

"No, it only has certain restorative effects. The main goal is to stimulate our minds and squeeze out the potential...of our bodies. It allows us to maintain a decent state for a short period of time until we return to where we can receive proper treatment."

Ayer attempted to sit up, only to fail again. "It's called Goddess's Gaze... Remember to give half a vial to Borgia, too."

Without further delay, Klein turned around and briskly approached Borgia, who was groaning in pain. He found the standard sky-blue metal vial in the half-conscious Nighthawk's pocket.

After removing the cap, he carefully held the vial to Borgia's mouth. Sensing it, Borgia opened his lips with great difficulty.

The bottle tilted, pouring a dark red liquid into Borgia's mouth.

Klein estimated the quantity and stopped just in time, then screwed the cap back on.

The medicine was incredibly effective. It took Borgia only a few seconds after drinking to regain focus in his eyes. "Thank you," he rasped. With that, he pushed himself up from the ground, first dealing with his own wounds before walking over to the unconscious Lorotta and Dunn. Then he retrieved the Goddess's Gaze from the latter's inner pocket.

Klein returned to Ayer's side and fed him the remaining half-vial.

After Ayer panted a few times, his actions suddenly became nimble. He soon stood up as though he had never been injured.

"I'll help Borgia. You go help that partner of yours," the charismatic older gentleman said, pointing at Leonard Mitchell.

Klein had no objections. He turned around and jogged to the poet, Leonard.

"There's no need. I can drink it by myself." With his disheveled hair hanging over his forehead, Leonard smiled as he raised the sky-blue vial in his hand.

Seeing Leonard dexterously push himself up with one hand, Klein, who was about to grouch to himself, suddenly blinked in surprise.

Leonard's injuries are not as serious as I expected...

He had the ability to consume the medicine from the very beginning!

That also means that he could see me walk counterclockwise as I did the luck-enhancement ritual!

No, that's not so bad. I had recited the incantation in silence, and the luck-enhancement ritual does not manifest in any external way. Otherwise, the tuxedo clown wouldn't have fallen for it...

But even so, Leonard, who had long recovered but chose to watch by the sidelines, had seen quite a lot. For example, my sneak attack on the tuxedo clown, and the fact that I wasn't affected by 2-049...

Just as Klein's eyes began to narrow, Leonard came to stand beside him. Looking straight ahead, he chuckled softly and said, "I actually wanted to save you just now, but then I realized that you didn't need it. Don't worry. There are always special people in this world who can do things others can't—like you, for example..."

"...and me." Smirking, Leonard walked past Klein toward Dunn and Lorotta, who had woken up.

Narcissist..., Klein thought silently, feeling a little more relaxed than before.

From the looks of it, Leonard Mitchell is also hiding some secrets of his own...

Pensively, Klein regrouped with everyone else. He watched Captain Dunn put on his glove before picking up the Antigonus family's notebook, which was covered in blood and yellowish-brown stains.

The notebook's cover was made of thick black card, suffused with an aura from an ancient, distant time. There were no signs of softening or rotting and it was nearly identical to the one Klein had seen in

his dream. He even suspected that once he flipped it open, he would see a Fool in splendid headgear.

However, he soon realized he was overthinking things when Dunn flipped open the notebook for a final confirmation. Klein was unable to discern the words from his angle, but he was certain that there was no drawing of a Fool with gorgeous clothes and a splendid headdress.

"Ahem. This is it." Dunn closed the notebook and held it securely in his hand. Then he turned to Ayer and the others. "Let's store this notebook and Sealed Artifact 2-049 behind Tingen's Chanis Gate for now. We can wait until all of you are recovered or until Backlund sends someone over."

Klein felt a little disappointed yet relieved to hear this. He had longed to see the Antigonus family's notebook again and uncover the reason behind the deaths of the original Klein, Welch, and Naya. However, he also sensed that the ancient item was steeped in misfortune. It brought nothing but tragedy, so he dared not touch it. Handing it over to the church's headquarters and sealing it away was probably the best choice... He secretly heaved a sigh of relief.

"All right." Ayer, Harson, Borgia, and Lorotta nodded in unison. They then turned and walked up to Sealed Artifact 2-049. They prodded one another and stuffed the puppet—which had resumed moving at some point—back into the cracked chest, monitoring it closely.

"All is well," Ayer said, his voice now lightened by levity.

Inside the dimly glowing black chest, the puppet, wrapped in oil-stained cloth, rolled over with its body creaking, aligning its painted face with the light source. On its eerie face, beneath its black, pupilless eyes, two scarcely noticeable crimson cracks appeared.

Meanwhile, Dunn, Leonard, and Klein, who had mustered his courage, began searching the tuxedo clown's body. They found paper flowers, handkerchiefs, poker cards, glass shards, and all sorts of strange items. However, aside from that, there was nothing of worth or any potential clues.

Hmm, other than the wallet with seventy to eighty pounds and more than ten soli..., Klein lamented to himself.

With money in mind, he immediately looked down and inspected himself. His face nearly crumpled. His formal suit, which had cost several pounds, was torn in five or six spots from his rolls on the ground and was covered in dust and dirt stains.

Dunn shot him a glance and said with a small smile, "Any losses during a mission can be reimbursed."

Reimbursed... Upon hearing the term "invented" by Emperor Roselle, Klein's mood instantly took a turn for the better.

Hmm. This suit just needs some proper cleaning and mending before it can be worn again. It will still be presentable...

When the reimbursement comes, I can buy another set, then I can rotate them!

Yep, I'm not the kind of person who uses a reimbursement for something other than what it was intended for...

However, I should consider getting a set of clothes for combat in the future, such as a black trench coat like what Captain has... Clothes with slightly poorer material would be much cheaper than a tailcoat... Tsk, is that the reason why the bastard, Leonard, never wears suits...?

"Let Frye take care of the body. We'll see if he can find what the man originally looked like or any relevant clues." Dunn touched the tuxedo clown's face paint with his glove.

Then they searched the innermost warehouse and found splotches of bloody flesh that looked as if they had been smashed by boulders. They also saw one white bone after another strewn everywhere.

"Ryer Bieber was probably absorbing the power from the notebook via an ancient ritual—just like how we consume a higher-rank Sequence potion. A ritual like that is incredibly dangerous. It must be performed in a strictly controlled environment, isolated from all disturbances, and would have required him to enter a deep sleep for a certain amount of time. That was probably why he had not yet left Tingen," Dunn speculated after inspecting the warehouse.

Hearing such a description, Lorotta laughed. Her black hair contrasted sharply with her pale face. "What a pity—we woke him up

too soon. That cranky temper from being abruptly awakened really left a deep impression on us.”

“That’s also a form of losing control,” Dunn said, looking at Klein as though explaining a lesson.

“Why didn’t he just leave Tingen and attempt his absorption elsewhere?” asked Klein, perplexed.

Ayer laughed and pointed to his head. “People influenced by ancient or sinister powers often lack that kind of foresight.”

It was then that Dunn drew a sharp breath and said in a slightly pained voice, “Since you seem to be in good condition, Leonard, stay back and keep any ordinary people from coming close... The rest of us will search for items among Ryer Bieber’s remains. We’ll return to Jutland Street with them, along with the Sealed Artifact and the Antigonus family’s notebook. Then I’ll send Frye, Royale, and the police here.”

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