

# CIRCLE OF INEVITABILITY

## Chapter 1: Foreigners

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It wasn't the most glamorous of jobs, but it put bread on the table. Plus, the free time at night allowed me to study. Few people ventured to the morgue, but when they did, they were there delivering bodies or taking them away for

cremation. I had to make do without books, as I couldn't afford them, nor did I see any hope of saving up enough for them.

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

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

"One day, a new corpse was brought in.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And then?"

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

The male guest was taken aback.

"Were you just pulling our leg?"

"Haha!" Laughter erupted around the bar.

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

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

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

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

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

"Looks like she's crafted quite the tale.

"I'm sorry you misunderstood."

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

"What an intriguing story.

"And how might I address you?"

"Isn't it common courtesy to introduce oneself before inquiring of others?"

Lumian replied, returning the man's smile.

The foreigner nodded.

"My name is Ryan Koss.

"These are my companions, Valentine and Leah."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lumian gave a nod of acknowledgement to the three foreigners.

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

"Lee?" Leah blurted out.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Is he really that scary?" Lumian inquired.

Ryan shook his head in response.

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

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

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

Ryan Koss furrowed his brow.

"*La Fée Verte*'... Absinthe?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ryan turned to Lumian.

"Is that all right?"

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

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

Pierre's face lit up with a smile.

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

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

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

She tilted her head, causing her bells to tinkle.

Pierre nodded in confirmation.

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

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

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

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