

CIRCLE OF INEVITABILITY

Chapter 11: Madame Pualis

The azure sky was speckled with fluffy white clouds, gently blown by the spring breeze that carried with it the fragrance of the forest. White geese pecked at the lush grasses, grazing beside the meandering river. A lass, draped in a grayish-white frock, stood intently observing them with a long pole in her hand.

Her countenance was bathed in the golden sun rays, exposing her thin, downy hair. The girl's brown tresses, elegantly tied in a white cloth, revealed her youthful and lively features.

Glancing at Lumian sitting under a tree by the river, Ava Lizier scrunched her face slightly.

"Are we not here to discuss which legend is easier to investigate? Why have you turned into a stone statue reminiscent of the ones from the cathedral?"

Ava was the daughter of Guillaume Lizier, the shoemaker. Being one of the few youths in the village, she had an amiable relationship with Lumian and Reimund.

"I'm contemplating a problem," Lumian responded, still gazing at the white geese and the rippling waters.

"What problem?" inquired Reimund Greg, who was tending to Ava's flock of geese.

Lumian pondered before replying, "What if you come across a beast with a thick hide that your weapon cannot pierce, what would you do?"

"Obviously, I'd find a way to flee. The mountains are teeming with wild beasts. We need not hunt it," Ava replied, feeling that there was nothing to worry about.

Lumian grunted in disagreement.

"What if that beast is exceptionally rare, and the lords in the city adore it, and are willing to pay a hundred Louis d'or for its carcass?"

"A hundred Louis d'or, two thousand verl d'or..." Reimund breathed heavily.

He had never seen a Louis d'or before, nor had he used one. His instinct was to convert it into verl d'or first.

With such a hefty sum of money, he could start a small business in Dariège. He wouldn't have to fret over shepherding anymore.

He quickly thought and suggested, "Borrow a shotgun?"

"The beast's skin cannot be penetrated," Lumian rejected flatly.

Even though she knew the prey was just a figment of imagination, with no value in the real world, she couldn't help herself.

"Is it a powerful creature? Fierce?"

Lumian paused to consider her question.

"It's about as fierce as me."

That was all the assurance he needed to continue his hunt.

Reimund, who had been holding his breath, let out a sigh of relief. "Good. Go back to the village and round up some people. We'll surround the beast and drain its strength. Once it's down, we'll tie it up."

He knew that Lumian could fight, but that was all.

"In that case, we can only expect to get ten Louis d'or, or even less," Lumian reminded.

Ava, with her stunning lake-blue eyes, had an idea. "I've seen them hunt before. Maybe we can dig a trap and make it fall. That way, we won't have to worry about it getting back up."

Lumian nodded his approval. "That's a good idea."

Realizing that Ava and Reimund had little to offer in terms of planning, Lumian took control of the conversation.

"Which legend do you think we should target next?" he asked.

Ava shook her head. "Neither of them fit the bill. They're either centuries old or were only seen by one person, who is long dead."

Reimund agreed. "That's right."

"If you don't ask the right folks, how would you know there ain't no clues?"

Lumian clicked his tongue and chuckled. "You lot don't have any grit. If you wanna give up at the first sign of trouble, you might as well be tending geese and sheep for the rest of your days."

Ava and Reimund were fuming at Lumian's words.

When it came to riling people up, Lumian was one of the best in all of Cordu.

Ava blurted out, "I don't think any of them are suitable 'cause there are more suitable ones."

"What is it?" Lumian's eyes sparked with interest.

As soon as Ava spoke, she regretted it, but she'd been planning to bring up this issue. She just didn't want to reveal it to Lumian and Reimund so easily.

After a few seconds of tense silence, she glared at Lumian.

"There's a real witch in the village."

"Who is it?" Lumian's heart tightened.

Could it be Aurore?

If Ava found out that Aurore was a Warlock, he and Aurore would have to flee Cordu and go somewhere else to avoid the Inquisition's wrath.

Ava looked around nervously and lowered her voice. "Madame Pualis."

Madame Pualis, the administrator's wife and the padre's mistress? Lumian found it hard to believe.

"Are you serious?"

If Pualis was indeed a witch, how could Lumian have missed it when he found out about the lady's affair with the padre?

"No way?" Reimund was exceptionally surprised.

Ava tiptoed and looked in the direction of the village entrance.

"I'm not certain, but Charlie, the administrator's valet, let it slip once.

"He told me that Madame Pualis is a soul messenger who can talk to the dead and help them return home. He also said that she can create secret medicines and charms."

Lumian listened intently but remained skeptical.

With magazines like *Psychic*, *Lotus*, and *Concealed Veil* flooding the market, it wasn't uncommon for the administrator's wife to be familiar with such terms and trick the servants and villagers.

"We should go to the cathedral and snitch," said Reimund, his eyes wide with excitement.

Lumian paused before responding,

"If Charlie knows that Madame Pualis is a witch, then the administrator should know as well, *non*?"

"*Oui*," agreed Ava.

Lumian continued, "Madame Pualis is also the padre's mistress. If we go to the cathedral and snitch on her, we will probably be sent straight to the administrator."

"What?"

"Madame Pualis is the padre's mistress?"

Ava and Reimund were shocked.

"I saw it with my own eyes." Lumian chuckled. "Pretend you don't know. Don't tell anyone. Otherwise, you might disappear one day."

Ava and Reimund agreed in unison, their expressions unusually solemn, their fear of the padre and the witch intertwined.

"If we can confirm that Madame Pualis is a witch, we'll go to Dariège and tell the bishop at Mass," Lumian assured them.

"*Oui*," Reimund nodded fervently.

They had to be sure before they snitched. Otherwise, they would be in trouble if Madame Pualis was innocent.

After discussing these matters, Lumian, who didn't want to waste any time, stood up and said to Ava and Reimund, "I'm off, back to my studies.

Otherwise, Aurore would be chasing me with a wooden stick. You two take care of the geese."

"Okay." Reimund was thrilled at the prospect of being left alone with Ava.

Ava looked displeased.

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As Lumian approached Cordu, he began to hide his tracks, constantly paying attention to whether there was anyone nearby.

He had to be careful, especially now that the Padre and his crew were on his tail.

According to his observations, the padre, Guillaume Bénét, was not one to forgive easily.

He made his way towards Ol' Tavern, trying to stay as inconspicuous as possible.

Suddenly, he heard the sound of bells ringing in the distance.

Lumian turned to see Ryan, Leah, and Valentine approaching Naroka and the others.

The bells on Leah's veil and boots rang clearly and melodiously.

They've been wandering around the village for the past two days, chatting with people and asking questions. I don't know what they are up to... Lumian was puzzled and a little wary.

As he thought about the deserted town square and the shepherd, Pierre Berry, who had returned to the village unexpectedly, Lumian knew that something was about to go down.

Is something about to happen in the village? He needed to speak to Aurore, his smart and knowledgeable sister, and get her opinion.

Lumian managed to sneak into Ol' Tavern and spotted the woman who had given him the tarot card sitting in her usual spot, eating.

Lumian leaned over and took a glance.

"Omelette au lard? Don't you find it a little too cloying?"

In Dariège, this dish was the go-to for ordinary folks to impress their fancy guests. Lumian, however, had his doubts about it being too greasy and heavy for city women.

The lady savored a slow bite of the golden omelet and shut her eyes to savor it.

"It's a real gem. It's got this local flavor that's just exquisite."

"You're having lunch so early?" Lumian asked, seated across from her.

The lady's light-blue eyes betrayed a hint of exhaustion as she smiled and replied, "It's breakfast."

What time is it... Lumian didn't dare let slip his thoughts.

He scanned the nearly empty Ol' Tavern and hushed his voice.

"I saw a ruin in my dream and came across a monster."

"Oh." The lady didn't bat an eye. Her expression even held a hint of teasing mischief that Lumian couldn't quite decipher.

Lumian composed himself and recounted his tale.

"How do I vanquish this monster?"

The lady beamed and countered, "Is it dead or alive?"

"It's still kicking. I can't seem to kill it..." Lumian trailed off then answered on reflex.

He pondered in earnest for a beat before replying slowly, "I can feel it breathing. So, it's gotta be alive."

"If it's still breathing, then try harder. Lop off its head. Or pour oil and light it up. Bury it alive, even. Who knows? It might just kick the bucket," the lady suggested nonchalantly while relishing her meal. "When you've exhausted all options and still come up short, then come to me. But I'm not your nanny

who'll coddle you through every little problem. If you want to learn, you've got to figure it out on your own."

She's quite the charmer... Lumian wasn't crestfallen or dispirited. It seemed the lady was hinting that she'd lend a hand if things got truly dire. And a monster like this wasn't even worth mentioning.

But what's trivial can be a real headache... Lumian felt a migraine coming on. He resolved to heed the lady's advice. He'd start by trying to behead it, burn it, bury it alive, and anything else he could think of.