

CIRCLE OF INEVITABILITY

Chapter 12: Undercurrents

As Lumian left Ol' Tavern, he resumed his surreptitious ways, skulking down the path he always took home.

Sure enough, he spotted one of Pons Bénet's goons hiding behind a tree, spying on passersby.

The padre doesn't know when to quit... Lumian muttered to himself. But Lumian couldn't retaliate.

His personal abilities were limited, and he couldn't risk bringing attention from the Church of the Eternal Blazing Sun in the Dariège region. The Inquisition would be all over him in a heartbeat, which could spell doom for Aurore.

Unless Lumian was pushed to the brink and had no other choice but to abandon the town, his only option was to expose the padre's unsavory activities and force him to retire to a cloister.

But that was easier said than done. Lumian needed to be careful and cunning, just like when he let the foreigners discover the padre's affair with Madame Pualis.

Lumian didn't want to make a big fuss about it. He knew that Béost, the administrator and territorial judge, was a stickler for his reputation. If Lumian brought Madame Pualis's predicament to light, he wouldn't get any favors in return. No, it would be more likely that Béost would turn on him, filled with bile and vitriol.

That would leave Lumian with little choice but to flee Cordu, with both the padre and administrator hot on his heels.

He proceeded with caution, taking a detour through a narrow alley that weaved between several houses.

Along the way, Lumian relied on his wits and the surroundings to conceal himself. He ducked behind walls, slipped through doors, and took refuge behind trees whenever necessary. As he neared the end of the alley, he heard the sound of voices.

"Guillaume, why we waste our time chasing zat keed all day? Let's go to Aurore's house tonight and catch him. We 'ave ze advantage of numbers, and Aurore's fightin' skills ain't enough to stop us. We can even get reinforcements from ze city if needed."

Guillaume... The padre is here too... Lumian stopped, retreating into the corner to eavesdrop on their conversation to see what plans the padre had for him.

Guillaume Bénét's voice was mesmerizing.

"Surely, you don't think that's the extent of Aurore's capabilities? I wouldn't be surprised if she had supernatural abilities beyond mine."

"Ah..." Pons Bénét was obviously surprised. "A witch, you say? Guillaume, maybe it's time for you to venture to Dariège and seek out ze Inquisition. If you can catch a true witch, ze Church will undoubtedly grant you a great reward. And wiz zat, you may finally attain ze extraordinary strength you've been yearnin' for all zese years."

"Imbecile," Guillaume Bénét scolded his brother. "Don't you know what's happening in this village? The Inquisition has noses like hounds. They won't overlook any anomalies. When the time comes, we'll be in hot water."

"Even if Aurore desires to deal with us, I have other solutions," he said. "We mustn't arouse the Inquisition's attention."

So, what is happening in the village now? Lumian took this seriously and was curious.

Combining his observations of abnormalities, he sensed that something terrible was brewing and developing in the village, like a turbulent undercurrent under the calm sea.

To Lumian's dismay, Pons Bénét didn't elaborate on the topic. Instead, he focused on something else.

"Do you 'ave any way to deal wiz a Witch?"

"You don't need to know," the padre, Guillaume Bénét, responded in a hushed tone. "Next, we can put aside dealing with Lumian, but we still have to maintain appearances. We can't let anyone suspect my desire for revenge. That will provide the connections the foreigners need and have a negative impact. What you need to do now is to remind each relevant person and scare those yokels who might notice. Don't let them spill the beans in front of those foreigners."

"Guillaume, you mean zat zose foreigners are 'ere to investigate zat matter?" Pons Bénét appeared fearful and concerned.

Look at you. All brawn, no brains. You're nothing like your brother, a natural-born leader... Lumian mocked Pons Bénét inwardly.

Despite his disdain for the padre, whom he saw as a crude and greedy stallion rather than a man of the cloth, Lumian couldn't deny that he had a certain rugged charm. His direct, domineering style and clear mind won over the masses in the countryside, making it easy for them to idolize and rely on him.

Guillaume Bénét sneered.

"No need to worry. So long as those foreigners don't find any real evidence, I'll still be the padre of Cordu.

"Pons, you need to understand that ruling through fear and intimidation won't lead to peace or prosperity. The Church doesn't want a ruined town that can't pay taxes. We need friends and followers to maintain control. By offering them protection, we can gain their support.

"The Church trusts us locals with our relatives, friends, and followers to handle matters here and doesn't bring in outsiders who could make a mess. As long as there's no solid evidence, the higher-ups will continue to believe in me.

"Alright, I'm off to the cathedral."

That does sound logical and persuasive, but your wisdom and insight are limited to Dariège... Aurore told me that when the Church confronts villages that are overrun with evil gods, they obliterate them entirely and raze the land to the ground. They don't just slay the adults, but even the kids... Lumian found himself almost swayed by Guillaume Bénét's words. Luckily, Aurore had warned him about the fearsome reputation of the Church of the Eternal Blazing Sun and the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery. After the padre departed, Lumian took a different path and made it back home unscathed.

Aurore, clad in a pristine apron, bustled about the oven.

"What are you up to?" Lumian inquired with curiosity.

It was still two hours to lunchtime.

Aurore tucked a strand of her blonde locks behind her ear and beamed, "Trying out a new toast recipe. Rice bread."

"You don't have to go through all this trouble..." Lumian was moved to his core.

He believed Aurore was going out of her way to make something special just for him.

Aurore giggled and retorted, "What are you thinking? Can you be any more self-absorbed?"

"For me, baking is a form of amusement. It's a great way to pass the time. You get it?"

"Then why don't you like going out? There's plenty of fun out there," Lumian probed. He always felt Aurore was a homebody because she was too concerned about the risks her Warlock status posed.

Aurore swiveled her head and shot him a withering glare.

"You mean drinking and gambling?"

"Remember, I'm my own person, not relying on or attaching to others."

Lumian grasped the first half of her statement but was at a loss with the latter.

"Ah? Could you expound on that?"

Aurore gave him a deadly glare.

"Long story short, your sis is a major introvert most of the time!"

"What do you mean by most of the time?" Lumian queried, confused.

"Humans are walking contradictions," Aurore mused, turning back to the oven.

"Don't you recall? Sometimes, I'm a chatterbox, eager to venture out and listen to the old ladies' gossip. Other times, I'll play with the kids and regale them with tales. Every so often, I'll cut loose and ride Madame Pualis' horse around the mountains, hollering at the top of my lungs."

At the time, you shone like a dew-kissed rose, luring people in only to prick them... Lumian couldn't help but grumble to himself.

Since Madame Pualis was mentioned, Lumian decided to change the subject.

"Aurore, uh, Grande Soeur, I heard a rumor about Madame Pualis."

"What is it?" Aurore did not hide her curiosity.

"She's a Warlock who can talk to the dead..." Lumian related to his sister what Ava had divulged. He also brought up the anomaly he'd observed and Guillaume Bénét's comments.

Aurore halted her work and listened to her brother's account intently.

Her mien grew noticeably graver.

After Lumian had finished, Aurore offered him a smile and assuaged his fears.

"Don't fret too much. Those three foreigners must be here for something that the padre and his comrades did in secret. It might have to do with Madame Pualis.

"Don't mess with Madame Pualis for now. I'll keep an eye on them.

"Explore the village more, mingle with those foreigners, and try to suss out what's going on. Heh heh, compared to that, the lady who gave you the Wand card is far more intriguing.

"If things do deteriorate, we must contemplate departing Cordu. We can start making arrangements now."

"Okay." Lumian nodded in agreement.

After a brief silence, he inquired curiously, "Aurore, if we must depart Cordu, where do you envision moving to?"

"Trier!" Aurore declared without hesitation.

Trier was the capital of the Intis Republic, the apex of culture and art across the continent.

"Why?" Despite considering Trier himself, Lumian posed the question casually.

Every Intisian coveted a chance to visit Trier.

In the eyes of the Triers, there were only two types of individuals in Intis: Triers and outsiders.

Aurore responded nonchalantly, "A prophet once said, 'As long as Trier endures, mirth and glee will never falter1'."