

CIRCLE OF INEVITABILITY

Chapter 5: Card

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Another Pierre.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Pierre Greg immediately turned alert.

"A new prank?"

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

Reimund hesitated for a moment, gathering his thoughts.

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

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

"Why are you asking this?"

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

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

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

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

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

Merde, there were actual clues!

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

"Did *Pépé* mention anything about where the Warlock lived or where he was buried?" Reimund asked eagerly.

Pierre Greg shrugged. "Who cares?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Many thoughts immediately surfaced in his mind.

Maybe I should take a cue from the padre and administrators of the Church and praise her beauty? Or perhaps I should switch gears and hit on her? Alternatively, should I show my inexperience and hastily turn around to leave?
As Lumian made up his mind, the lady interrupted his thoughts and said with a smile, "Been having dreams, have you?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He was both enticed and wary.

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

"Tarot?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lumian chuckled.

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

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

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

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

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

The woman didn't seem to mind his hesitation.

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

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

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

"What does this mean?" Lumian asked.

The woman's lips curled into a smile.

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

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

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

Could this card truly be cursed?

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

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

It was obvious that she lived there.

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

Is this really an ordinary card?

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

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

At this moment, Reimund approached Lumian.

"What's the matter, my friend?"

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

"I reckon your sister, Aurore, is far more beautiful." Reimund then lowered his voice. "Lumian, my *pépé* has been gone for ages. What should we do next?" Lumian, who was in a hurry to leave, pondered for a moment before answering,

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

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

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

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

"Agreed." Reimund immediately agreed.

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

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

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

Aurore shook her head.

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

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

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

"Alright." Lumian tried his best to relax.

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

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

Without warning, he jolted awake within his reverie.

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

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