

CIRCLE OF INEVITABILITY

Chapter 2: "Prank"

Ryan apologized politely to Lumian. "Forgive me, I did not expect such a situation," he said.

Lumian chuckled.

"Are you suggesting we need another glass of *La Fée Verte*?"

Without waiting for Ryan's response, he changed the subject.

"What brings foreigners like you to Cordu? Are you here to buy wool or leather?"

Many of Cordu's residents made their living as shepherds.

Ryan breathed a silent sigh of relief and seized the opportunity to explain their true purpose.

"We came to visit the Eternal Blazing Sun Church's padre, Guillaume Bénét, but he seems to be absent from both his home and the cathedral."

Pierre, who had enjoyed Ryan's free absinthe, kindly reminded him that there was only one church in Cordu.

The other locals around the bar counter were all drinking, but no one answered Ryan's question. The name seemed to represent some kind of taboo or authority that couldn't be openly discussed.

Lumian took a sip of wine and thought for a few seconds before offering his assistance.

"I can roughly guess where the padre is. Do you need me to take you there?"

Leah didn't stand on ceremony. "If it's not too much trouble," she said.

Ryan nodded in agreement.

"Once you've finished your drink."

"Alright." Lumian raised his glass and finished the light-green alcohol.

He put down his glass and got to his feet.

"Let's go."

Ryan expressed his gratitude, "*Merci beaucoup*." He gestured for Valentine and Leah to stand up and thanked Lumian, "Thank you so much."

Lumian's face lit up with a smile. "It's no problem at all. You heard my story and I enjoyed a complimentary drink. That makes us friends, n'est-ce pas?"

"Oui." Ryan nodded.

Lumian's grin widened, stretching from ear to ear. He opened his arms wide, beckoning the other party in for a hug.

"Ah, it is good to meet you, my cabbages," he exclaimed with fervor.

Ryan, who was about to be enveloped in a bear hug, froze.

"Cabbages?"

His expression was a mixture of perplexity and embarrassment.

Valentine and Leah mirrored his expression.

"It is a term of endearment we use for our friends," Lumian explained with innocent sincerity. "Everyone in the Dariège region is aware of it. It has been a tradition for centuries, believe me, my cabbages."

Leah couldn't help but glance around, producing the tinkling sounds.

Pierre and the others nodded in agreement, assuring the newcomers that Lumian's words were true. However, the grins on their faces hinted that they

were pleased to see foreigners struggling to comprehend their affectionate greetings.

Lumian stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"Don't you fancy it?"

"Then I shall opt for a different option. It can also be used for friends.

"My dear bunnies, my darling chicks, my lovely ducks, or perhaps my adorable lambs? Which one tickles your fancy?"

But Ryan's expression was as stiff as a board, and Valentine's brow furrowed in confusion.

Leah let out a sigh, a mix of exasperation and amusement.

"Let's just stick with cabbage, shall we? At least it sounds normal."

Phew. Ryan let out a quiet sigh and gently grasped Valentine's elbow. He gave a slight nod and remarked, "They all seem like precious treasures in the family."

Without awaiting Lumian's response, he swiveled his body and addressed the bartender, "How much will it be?"

"Two verl d'or," replied the bartender, eyeing the glasses lined up on the counter.

Ryan settled the bill, and Leah shifted the conversation to a different subject.

"Lumian is an uncommon name."

"At least better than names like Pierre and Guillaume," Lumian countered with a grin. "If you were to call out Pierre in this place, a third of the people would turn their heads. Call out Guillaume, and another third will respond. As for this gentleman..."

He gestured to the skinny middle-aged man sipping his free drink.

"His full name is Pierre Guillaume."

Leah flashed a smile, skirting the topic of cabbage.

As they departed from the tavern, Lumian turned around and surveyed the surroundings.

"What's the matter?" Leah inquired with curiosity.

Lumian pondered for a moment and replied thoughtfully, "It's not just the three of you foreigners who came to the tavern today. Another person arrived earlier, but I don't know when they left."

"What did they look like?" Ryan asked with a serious expression.

Lumian took a moment to reflect.

"A lady. Very sophisticated. You can tell she's from the city with just one glance. I can't describe her appearance. Why don't I sketch her for you?"

"Do you know how to draw?" Leah queried, aware of Lumian's idiosyncrasies.

Lumian chortled.

"I don't."

"In that case, let's locate the padre first," Ryan decided, drawing the conversation to a close.

Cordu was a place devoid of street lamps at night, yet the twinkling stars above provided a faint glimmer that allowed the four of them to navigate the road. The yellowish light emanating from the windows on either side only added to the ethereal ambiance.

As they approached the Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral situated in the village square, the grandiose structure appeared somewhat blurry in the darkness, as if it was merging with the night.

"We've been here before. There's no one here," Valentine grumbled with a frown.

Lumian smiled and said, "No one at the front door doesn't mean there's no one elsewhere."

He then proceeded to lead Ryan and the others around the front of the cathedral towards the cemetery, where they found a dark brown wooden door.

Lumian didn't wait for Ryan to knock. Instead, he reached over and fiddled with the keyhole before opening the side door with a creak.

"That's not very nice, is it?" Ryan frowned.

Leah nodded in agreement, her bells tinkling.

"We're here to visit the padre, not to fight him."

"Alright," Lumian acquiesced.

He closed the wooden door and knocked lightly.

"Hey, is anyone there? I'll come in if you don't answer," he muttered in a low voice that was barely audible in the night.

There was no response from inside the cathedral.

Without hesitation, Lumian pushed open the door and gestured inside.

"Go on in."

Ryan hesitated. He looked at the darkness behind the door and glanced at his companions.

"Okay." He took a step forward, slow but firm.

Leah and Valentine followed closely behind.

The four silvery bells adorning Leah's boots and veil were eerily silent.

The environment was dim and eerie as the four of them made their way forward.

Out of nowhere, Ryan came to a halt and muttered in a low voice, "What's that noise?"

"Yes, I heard it too," Lumian agreed.

Without wasting any time, he forcefully pushed the door aside, and it opened with a loud clang, revealing what lay beyond.

The dimly lit space resembled a confessional. A beam of starlight shone through, revealing a naked man in his prime, lying atop a fair-skinned woman.

The scene stunned everyone, including the man and the woman.

Suddenly, the man sat up and bellowed at Ryan and his team, "*Sacrebleu!* You've ruined the holy church's plans!"

Amidst the reverberating roar, Lumian, who had quietly approached behind the group, waved his hand and spoke quickly, "Ah, it seems we have discovered our padre. *Au revoir*, my cabbages!"

Before anyone could react, Lumian dashed towards the side door, leaving his words to drift away in the wind.

As the team stood in shock, Leah, Ryan, and Valentine couldn't shake the words of the middle-aged man, Pierre Guillaume, from their minds: "*...you should steer clear of this one. He's the most mischievous bloke in the whole village.*"

...

Lumian sauntered down the country road, hands tucked in his pockets while whistling a tune under the stars.

"As expected, the padre is having an affair with Madame Pualis."

"*Mon dieu*, these foreigners exude an air of prestige. The padre would never dream of crossing them. He must pay an exorbitant sum to keep his sordid dalliances under wraps and preserve his standing within the cathedral."

"Hmph, he only has himself to blame for lusting after Aurore. I have been biding my time for this chance..."

As Lumian muttered to himself, he returned to his abode on the outskirts of the hamlet.

The structure he called home was a peculiar semi-subterranean two-story affair. The ground floor doubled as both a kitchen and a lounge. A hefty oven and a grandiose stove dominated the room.

"Aurore! Aurore!" Lumian hollered as he trudged up the stairs.

No reply.

The upper storey was divided into three chambers and a lavatory, all the doors stood open.

Lumian peeped into each room but couldn't find his sister.

He mulled it over for a moment, then marched to the end of the corridor and clambered up the ladder that led to the roof.

The roof was a fiery orange, painted by the twilight sky. In the center sat a figure, holding their knees and staring contemplatively at the sparkling stars.

This was an exquisite woman, exceptionally so. Her long and thick locks were a shade of gold, her eyes a pale blue, and her facial features were intricate and refined.

Her gaze was fixated on the cosmos, her countenance serene, akin to that of a statue.

Lumian remained silent. He shifted to her side and sat next to her.

He lifted his head, gazing at the dense forest in the distance, absorbing the susurrus of the wind blowing through the trees.

After a while, the woman raised her arms and stretched, paying no heed to her appearance.

"Aurore, I don't understand why you come up here so often. What's so interesting about this view?" Lumian commented.

"Call me *Grande Soeur*!" Aurore scolded playfully, tapping Lumian's head with her finger.

Aurore sighed and thought to herself, "A philosopher once said that there are only two things worth revering in this world. One is the morality in one's heart, and the other is the cosmos above one's head."

Lumian noticed his sister's slightly melancholic expression and flashed a grin.

"I know the answer to this question. Emperor Roselle said so!"

"Pfft..." Aurore laughed.

She took a sniff and raised her beautiful golden eyebrows.

"You've been drinking again!"

"This is called socializing." Lumian took the opportunity to recount what had just happened. "I met three foreigners..."

Aurore could not help but laugh.

"I'm really afraid that the padre will have a heart attack."

Her expression then turned serious. "Lumian, don't provoke the padre anymore. It'll be troublesome if we get a new one."

"But I can't stand his face..." Lumian complained before Aurore stood up.

She looked down at her brother and smiled.

"Alright, it's bedtime, my inebriated brother," Aurore said with a smile as she threw out some silver dust.

Aurore flew down from the roof like a bird and entered the window on the second floor, leaving Lumian behind.

Lumian watched this quietly and shouted anxiously, "What about me?"

"Climb down yourself!" Aurore replied mercilessly.

Lumian pursed his lips, his smile fading bit by bit.

He watched the silver specks of light disappear in the night sky, sighed softly, and muttered to himself, "I wonder when I'll be able to possess such extraordinary powers..."