

CIRCLE OF INEVITABILITY

Chapter 4: Shepherd

Lumian sprang to his feet, his eyes flashing with determination. "Then let's go to your father."

He had always been a man of action, and he knew that investigating the village legend couldn't wait. If he dallied, his sister Aurore would surely catch wind of it, and she would never allow him to proceed.

In Aurore's eyes, delving into the realm of extraordinary powers was tantamount to playing with fire.

How can I not know that there's danger? Aurore wouldn't lie to me about this. But even if the world is ablaze, I have to keep walking. I can't let Aurore face this alone... As he got up, this thought flashed across Lumian's mind.

Every time Aurore mentioned that the world was becoming more dangerous, the seriousness and worry on her face couldn't be any more genuine!

Reimund Greg looked at Lumian with confusion etched on his face.

"Why are you looking for him?"

Lumian fixed him with a withering look. "Ask him how long ago the legend of the Warlock took place."

Why is this guy struggling to comprehend such a simple matter? Perhaps I need to find some time to test his intelligence.

Reimund still looked baffled as he gazed at Lumian.

"Why do you need to know such details?"

Uh... Should I bother trying to explain it to this clueless fellow? Or should I simply come up with a plausible excuse? He weighed his options.

Lumian's mind raced as he considered his next move. He knew that he couldn't keep his investigations a secret from his friends, but he also knew that pursuing the truth about the legend was a risky move. However, he quickly came up with an idea.

He flashed a grin that he usually reserved for moments when he was about to deceive someone.

"..." Reimund took two steps back, sensing that something was amiss. "Spill it!"

Lumian adjusted his dark-colored shirt and linen jacket before smiling.

"I believe the legend of the Warlock is worthy of our attention."

"What's so important about it?" Reimund asked after some thought.

"There was indeed a Warlock in our very village of Cordu in the past," Lumian said with a serious expression. "Think about it, my friend. When I lie, I don't provide specific details like the time, place, and background that anyone could easily verify. However, this legend mentions a Warlock who lived in Cordu, and if it were a fabrication, it would be too easy for someone to expose it as such."

"But that was ages ago," Reimund countered.

"I'm also referring to the people who were around when the legend first started circulating," Lumian explained, his smile widening. "They could have easily confirmed whether or not a Warlock lived in Cordu at that time. And since the legend has been passed down through generations, it's highly likely that it's based on a real event."

Reimund remained unconvinced.

"But when you make up stories, you often use phrases like 'more than a hundred years ago,' 'centuries ago,' 'long, long ago,' to make it impossible for anyone to verify."

"That's precisely why I need to confirm it with your father," Lumian replied, a sly look in his eye that said: "You see where I'm going with this, don't you?"

"That's true..." Reimund nodded slowly, accepting Lumian's explanation, but he couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't quite right.

As they left the square and delved deeper into the village, Reimund had a sudden epiphany.

"*Mon Dieu*

, why do you want to confirm if such a legend is true?"

"Warlock, *mon ami*, that's what we're searching for! If we can confirm the house where he lived and the place where he was buried, we might uncover his secret and gain magical powers that go beyond mere mortals," Lumian replied, his truthful words dripping with deceit.

Reimund's expression turned skeptical: "Don't tell me lies."

"*Mon ami*, most of those tales are created to scare little children. How can they be true?"

"And on top of that, anyone who seeks the power of a Warlock will end up in the Inquisition!"

The Intis Republic lay on the Northern Continent, where the orthodox deities were the Eternal Blazing Sun and the God of Steam and Machinery. These two churches divided the faith of almost all the people, and they didn't allow the Church of Evernight Goddess, the Church of the Lord of Storms from the Loen Kingdom, the Church of Earth Mother from the Feynapotter Kingdom, the Church of the God of Knowledge and Wisdom from Lenburg, and the Church of the God of Combat from the Feysac Empire to come in and preach.

The Eternal Blazing Sun Church's Inquisition was feared by all. Countless heretics had been locked up and subjected to unimaginable torture.

Lumian laughed.

"Why are you fretting now, my friend? You said it yourself, most of those legends are false. The chances of finding a Warlock's remains are slim to none.

"Besides, even if we do stumble upon the remains of a Warlock, we don't have to take on his forbidden power. We can give it to the Church and get a handsome reward. Oh right, a Warlock's grave is sure to be overflowing with treasures."

The Church that Lumian spoke of was the Church of the Eternal Blazing Sun. The Church of the God of Steam and Machinery wasn't found in Cordu, instead it was usually located in large cities and places with factories.

Seeing the temptation growing in Reimund's eyes, Lumian couldn't help but click his tongue in satisfaction.

"Do you really want to be a shepherd, my friend?"

The 'shepherd' he was not talking about the romanticized idea of a pastoral shepherd that city dwellers often had. No, this was a profession. Every morning, they would have to lead a flock of sheep out to graze and watch over them.

Cordu was located in Dariège, Riston Province. Being a shepherd was a profession here, a tough and lonely profession.

They worked for sheep owners, herding dozens, even hundreds of sheep back and forth between the mountains and plains.

This was known as a herding. Every autumn, the mountains around Cordu would wither, and the shepherds would lead the sheep out of the mountain

pass to the warmer plains far away, sometimes crossing borders into Feynapotter, Lenburg, and other countries. By the beginning of May, they would have brought the sheep back to various villages to shear them and wean the lambs. In June, they would trek up the mountains and into the tall ranges. They'd live in shacks and make cheese while grazing the sheep until the weather turned cold.

The shepherds spent their entire lives on the move, traveling from place to place. They only had a small window to return to the village, which made starting a family nearly impossible. Most of them were single, and the few widows who had no choice but to herd sheep for a living were highly sought after by the shepherds.

Reimund fell silent.

After a long while, he hesitantly said, "I'll listen to ya. It does sound like fun, and I could use somethin' to pass the time."

In the ordinary course of events, once the family decided which child would become a shepherd, they would dispatch him to a certain shepherd's location to assist between the ages of fifteen to eighteen. There, he would learn the ropes of shepherding. Three years later, the youngster would officially become a shepherd and seek employment elsewhere.

Seventeen-year-old Reimund, however, had found several reasons to postpone this matter for over two years. If his circumstances did not alter, he would have to start learning how to herd next year.

"Come on," Lumian said, patting Reimund's shoulder. "Is your father in the fields or at home?"

"Recently, there hasn't been much work. Lent is approaching swiftly. He's either at home or at the tavern." Reimund let out a voice of envy. "You don't

know anything about this? You're definitely not a farmer. You have a fortunate sister!"

Lumian put his hands in his pockets and sauntered ahead, disregarding Reimund's lamentations.

As they approached the rundown tavern in the village, a person emerged from the side street.

This individual was dressed in a lengthy dark brown coat with a hood. A rope was tied around his waist, and he wore a pair of brand-new, supple black leather shoes.

"Pierre? Pierre of the Berrys?" Reimund cried out in surprise.

Lumian halted in his tracks and turned to look.

"That's me," Pierre Berry replied with a wide grin and a wave of his hand.

He was a scrawny man with sunken eyes and greasy, curly hair. His stubble suggested it had been quite some time since he last shaved.

"Why are you back?" Reimund asked in confusion.

Pierre Berry was a shepherd and it was only the beginning of April. He should be tending to his sheep in the fields beyond the mountain pass. How in the world did he find himself in the village?

He had only just begun his journey, and even if he had gone to Lenburg or the north of Feynapotter, it would take him a month to return to the Dariège mountains.

With his warm, smiling blue eyes, Pierre exclaimed joyfully, "Isn't it almost Lent? I haven't celebrated it for years. I can't miss it this year!"

"Don't you worry. I have a companion to help me look after the sheep. That's the beauty of being a shepherd. Without a supervisor, as long as I can find someone to help me, I can go wherever I please. I'm free as a bird."

Lent was a widely celebrated festival throughout Intis. People welcomed the arrival of spring in different ways and prayed for a fruitful harvest for the year.

Although it had nothing to do with the Church of the Eternal Blazing Sun or the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery, it had already turned into folklore and didn't involve the worship of pagan deities. Therefore, it had gained the tacit approval of the orthodox factions.

"You want to see who'll be chosen as the Spring Elf this year, don't you?" Lumian teased, flashing a grin.

In Cordu, the people selected a gorgeous girl to play the role of the Spring Elf for Lent. It was all part of the celebration.

Pierre laughed along.

"I hope it's your sister Aurore, but she definitely won't agree, and she's not the right age either."

"Alright," he said, pointing towards the tavern just a stone's throw away. "I'll head to the cathedral to pray. Drinks on me later."

Reimund absentmindedly replied, "No need. You don't have much dough."

"Haha, as the good Lord Himself has said, 'Even if there's only one coin *de cuivre*, we have to share it with our *frères pauvres*.'" He recited an adage that was well-known among the shepherds in the Dariège region.

Lumian beamed at Reimund, saying, "Pierre's loaded. He's definitely treating us to a drink!"

He pointed to Pierre Berry's spanking new leather shoes.

Pierre Berry was thrilled.

"My new boss is not too shabby. He gave me a few sheep and some wool, cheese, and leather."

The shepherds were compensated with food, a small sum of money, and communal animals, cheese, wool, and leather. The amount they received was dependent on the agreement they had signed with their employer.

For shepherds who had to travel long distances, having a good and suitable pair of leather shoes was the most pressing and practical desire.

As Lumian watched Pierre Berry strut towards the town square, his gaze gradually became solemn and filled with suspicion.

He silently muttered to himself, *Going away for a week or two or maybe even a month just to attend Lent?*

Lumian paused for a moment, his eyes scanning the area before he turned and strode towards the local watering hole with Reimund.

The tavern was a nondescript establishment with no fancy moniker to speak of. The townsfolk affectionately referred to it as Ol' Tavern.

Upon entering, Lumian's eyes darted around the room in their habitual manner.

Suddenly, his gaze came to a halt.

There, before him, was the foreigner who had departed so hastily the night before.

She was alone, not in the company of Ryan, Leah, and Valentine.

Her dress was a long, flowing orange garment, and her locks were a rich brown, tousled in gentle curls. Her piercing, sky-blue eyes were fixed on the scarlet-hued drink that graced her delicate hand.

Beautiful and elegant, she seemed out of place in the seedy, dimly lit tavern.