

Prologue

The Boy

The boy swallowed a scream when he stepped on a nail. The pain couldn't matter. He had to keep running. His throat was raw, and the thunder of steps behind him faded. He only recognized his feet slapping against stone. All he tasted was copper and smoke.

Only what was before him mattered. With his remaining strength, he pushed himself over a short wall of crumbling bricks, remnants of a house abandoned before its foundation was complete. He stumbled down a slight incline and fled into the forest. The leering canopies cut up the horned moon, and the boy staggered as far as he could without tripping over exposed roots.

The veil of night shadows, the sweat, and the tears obscured the branched labyrinth. Even if the boy found himself lost forever in the woods, it'd be better than where he'd been an hour before. As his limp worsened, the forest's thorns and low oak claws clamped around him like a wolf on a girl's shawl. Briars snatched off the fabric of his coat sleeve. His blood fell on the leaves, the forest sticking to his skin.

The boy hobbled to a tree with bulbous joints and a dark split up its skirt. When he touched the rough, unyielding bark, all he could see were the half-rings on his wrist where teeth had cut his skin, the black crust under what fingernails he had left, and the bruising blue-yellow of cold moonlight.

Falling to his knees, the boy crawled as far into the hollow as he could. The bark scraped his exposed elbow. He made himself small like he did when he and Papa played hide-and-seek before the war. He did his best with his broken body. It had been such a long run out of the pit, out of Hell. Without help, he couldn't have made the steep climb out of the place, with its howling and decay and lanterns. With its stench of sulfur and something worse than burning trash, worse than

a slab of forgotten lamb meat. It hurt leaving the others who'd been dragged and flung into the pit.

The boy's mind was clear, if only for a small shard of time. The pounding in his ears faded. If he could, he would sleep, stay lost forever, but a realization soured in him. No, he couldn't, not when he survived an ordeal others could die from. He had a duty graced by God to save those who helped him escape.

Not only that. Maman was preparing for his birthday before the monsters took him. Maybe she still had the cake and its eleven candles ready. She would've spoken to the police by now, the boy knew it, and Papa would be pacing and worrying his hands, crumpling his hat between his fingers like he always did.

The boy could only pray he would find help before anyone else died. But that meant moving after his prayers.

God help me, God help me. Mother Mary, please. He needed to get the Lord's prayer out quick like Maman. *Father in Heaven, hollowed be Thy name.* What was it, again? *Give us our day bread. Your king dumb comes. Your wheel be spun.* He clutched the silver crucifix at his neck. *Forgive us our deaths, as we've forgiven our deaders.* His thoughts fractured into webs of half-forgotten Latin litanies Maman had taught him, and they went on until he couldn't tell if he was praying or cursing.

He needed to move, but he didn't.

Something growled. God, his stomach hurt. The woods had the stink of rain settling on dirt. When he was in the pit, he heaved, but nothing came out after a few days. The filth had wrung him clean. He'd heave and cough and sob now, but he couldn't.

The devils had been stupid to keep his hands free. After one had found him alone at the edge of town, they liked chasing him in the dark tunnels with the marks from their hard fists staining him like wet ash. Their hands. Reaching, tearing, groping. No, it did no good to dwell. He had lives to save, a birthday to prepare for.

When the boy exhaled, it came out as a snort. He froze, and his world was the forest rustlings and the violent *throom doom throom doom* against his ribs. He was both present and away, as if his soul scabbled up the tree trunk and peered above him like a yellow-eyed owl.

Something crunched like bone to the left of him. The boy couldn't tremble. Sensation drained from him, and he'd never been closer to God before his eyes snapped up.

Only then did he find his screams when he stared at two fanged slants of light, a pair of grinning eyes.