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PROLOGUE

Nineteen years ago...

Screams echoed down the abyssal passageway. The damp and frigid air of the stony undercroft nearly stole the young acolyte's breath on her hurried flight toward the guttural cries. Her heart hammered against her ribs.

"Slow your pace, infernal child," Sacton Crain grumbled from behind, as he hobbled to keep up with her.

Each cell she passed housed no less than a half dozen women and children—most of them Lyverians seized by the Red Men. While the putrid odor of death, defecation, and decay surely must have nauseated Sacton Crain, the girl had grown used to it, having spent most of her days in the temple's rotting bowels.

The cries led her to a cell in which a Lyverian woman, not much older than herself, lay writhing, kicking, and screaming on the gritty floor. Her limbs and forehead bore the carvings of the cross, cut by a crude knife, all of them trickling fresh blood. Arms pinned at either side of her body by three other Red Veils, she lay drowning beneath a cluster of red robes.

"Give her to me!" Her Lyverian accent clung heavily to her hoarse words, as fresh blood leaked from her nose where she must've been struck. "Give me my child!"

Sacton Crain slipped past the acolyte into the room. "What was so pressing that you dragged me out of bed as if the dead were afoot?"

"A birth, Your Grace." Mother Vona, the only Red Veil who'd been permitted to keep her tongue, loomed over the fussing woman, her stern eyes dulled with apathy. "See for yourself."

Beside Mother Vona stood another prisoner—a Vonkovyan, given the filthy golden tone of her hair—in threadbare clothes that barely clung to her body. She held a small bundle in her trembling arms.

Sacton Crain hobbled over to her, and the moment he peered down at the child, his brows lowered. "Was it you who assisted?"

"Yes, Your Grace," the Vonkovyan prisoner answered. "I heard her whisper to someone in tongues." She glanced at the woman on the floor, betrayal twisting the Vonkovyan's expression. "There was nothing but shadows there."

"Lies!" the woman screamed, wriggling against the willful hands pinning her wrists to the ground. "I prayed to the gods. *My* gods!"

Mother Vona swung her gaze toward the Lyverian mother. "Silver eyes are an abomination. You've birthed a demon. Your gods have forsaken you. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

The restrained woman screamed, fighting against the Red Veils as they scrambled to hold her down. "Give me my child! Give her to me now!"

Sacton Crain knelt beside the woman and stroked his hand across her cheek. "There, there. Evil brought into the world must be extinguished, for we are merciless shepherds of the sacred tenet."

The older Red Veil set her eyes upon the acolyte and nodded toward the prisoner holding the baby. "Take her to the Eating Woods. Offer her as a sacrifice, so that we may be blessed with a mild winter."

A cruel and brutal fate for a child no more than a couple of days old. If whatever lived in those woods didn't strip the flesh from her small body, the animals that lurked for scraps of food in the night surely would. Without question, the acolyte gave a curt nod and stalked toward the woman, who held the baby outstretched.

No sooner had she accepted the child than the acolyte watched in horror as Sacton Crain sliced a blade across the Lyverian mother's neck.

A stuttering breath caught in the woman's throat, and she choked, gurgling and gasping, while the blood poured out of her onto the gritty floor. Managing to free one of her hands, she seized Sacton Crain's, her blood dripping from the blade still caught in his grasp.

Raspy words, spoken in her native tongue, were interrupted by errant spurts of blood from her mouth, and Sacton Crain's eyes widened, his body still, seemingly paralyzed by her touch. His gaze remained rooted on the woman, mouth open as if he might scream, but his voice seemed strangled by something unseen.

"An ancient power...loosed...from thrall. Two worlds smothered...by a pestilent...pall." The Lyverian mother's words were broken by her dying breaths. "From the tree of rot...the insects...crawl. Decay and blight...unslain by steel...will bring...the strongest men...to kneel."

The final words spoken by the young mother lingered like a heavy blanket of doom, and when she finally collapsed, releasing Sacton Crain, he scrambled backward, clearly shaken by what she'd whispered to him.

His jaw trembled when he said, "No one must know of this. No one must ever know of this!"

The Vonkovyan prisoner screamed as the three Red Veils surrounded her, the sound quickly silenced when they stabbed their small blades into her body.

Panic curled in the acolyte's belly, her breaths uneven, heart pounding as she took in the gore.

"It is fortunate that you do not have a tongue to speak a word of this, or you'd meet the same fate." Mother Vona tore her gaze from the bloody visual and turned toward her. "Dispose of the child with haste."

Lowering her head, the acolyte nodded again and slipped from the cell with the too-quiet babe in her arms. She scurried through the tunnels of the undercroft—ones she knew well, as her mother had also been imprisoned by the Red Men. It was only by the mercy of Sacton Crain that she ascended to the position of acolyte, instead of rotting away in the same cell that had ultimately seen her mother's death.

Her mother would've hung her head in shame to see her daughter

carrying a freshly born infant to her death, yet even though such a thought troubled her, the acolyte refused to falter in her duties. Doing so would mean punishment—possibly getting sent to those infernal woods herself.

En route to the heavy wooden door at the end of the corridor, she swiped one of the baskets used to gather herbs in the garden and paused to lay the child within. She lifted one of the small oil lanterns that had been left beside a wooden chair and turned up the lit flame.

Lifting the hood of her cloak to conceal her face, the acolyte pushed against the wooden door, fighting against gusts of wind, and stepped out into the wintry air. Frosted vapors of breath dissipated into the moonless night, and the icy snow crunched beneath her boots. God weeping, the child needn't have feared an animal's vicious teeth, as that unforgiving bite of cold would surely be her demise before anything else.

While the lamp's flame remained housed in glass and brass, it flickered as it dangled from her outstretched arm, and with the basket clutched in the crook of her elbow, she held her cloak and took swift steps through the slumbering village, past the small shops and the stony fountain. A few burning hearths offered a small bit of light as she kept on toward the narrow footpath beyond the village, where the darkness swallowed her. Eyes scanning her surroundings, she watched for any sign of wolves that were said to attack a lone passerby on occasion. Needles of cold air sliced at her face on a strong gust, and the quiet wailing from inside the basket sent a fearful shiver down her spine.

She groaned when her hood flew back, exposing her ears to that punishing chill. *Damn the cursed child for refusing to be quiet!* The louder she cried, the stronger the acolyte's urge grew to smother her, until, by some grace of God, the child finally stilled. Unsure if she preferred the sound or silence, she scurried faster, contemplating leaving the baby along the footpath instead. Except, if Mother Vona found out she'd not offered it up to the Eating Woods? Oh, what punishment that would bring.

When she finally reached the stretch of woods, she scampered

along its edge, keeping her distance from those trees that might've been inclined to reach out and snatch her up. The wind settled to an eerie stillness, the child finally calm, until only the sound of the acolyte's panicked breaths could be heard beneath the crunching of snow.

Giggling echoed through the adjacent woods, and she snapped her attention there, her eyes scanning through the dense fog and thick tree trunks that she could see by the light of the lantern.

Nothing but the stench of rot and decaying vegetation.

Even so, she slowed her steps, not daring to keep her eyes off those trees, until something struck the tip of her boot. Angling the lantern toward the ground, she frowned at a small, bloody mass lying in the snow. An animal, given its bent form and cloven feet, but the lack of skin and only stringing bits of flesh clinging to its bones made it impossible to identify.

A creeping terror crawled up her spine. Swallowing back a gulp, she stepped around the poor beast, and a glance at the child's glowing, silvery eyes reminded her that she'd soon suffer the same fate.

She looked away, shaking her head.

The will of the Red God.

Even if she thought the Red God was merciless and cruel at times, who was she to question his will?

At last, the acolyte reached the archway to the forest, where vining branches, twisted around weathered bones, served as the entryway to the forlorn-looking trees beyond. Teeth chattering, the acolyte lay the basket on the stones, not daring to share so much as a hand across the threshold.

A sharp skitter of claws against snow had her whirling around with her heart pounding in her chest. A half dozen ravens had gathered at her back, the sight of them unnerving. Still, better the ravens than whatever lived amongst those trees.

"Eleanor."

The acolyte gasped and jumped back from the archway.

"Mine sweet Eleanor." The voice that reached her ears sounded too much like her mother's. "What dost thou hold there, my daughter?"

The acolyte frowned at her mother's archaic tongue. Such formality of words had not been spoken since her great grandmother's youth.

A spectral shadow slipped through the trees, a flash of white reminiscent of the stark, white shift her mother had worn the night they were captured and taken to the temple's undercroft. The acolyte had been no more than a child then, terrified when both she and her mother were forced into the padded carriage that collected those accused of suffering lunacy. In the months that followed, she'd watched her mother endure cruel interrogations, poked and prodded by witch prickers, and made to undergo treatment for bad humors. In time, that stark white shift had collected dirt, grime, and blood—a motley collection of her mother's suffering.

"Come, Eleanor. Escape with me to the woods." Another flash of white, followed by the telling red of her mother's long hair, as if she were trifling about through the trees. A distant echo of her mother's laugh, one she'd not heard in years, brought a tearful smile to her face. "Let us make merry until night giveth way to dawn!"

The ghostly figure twirled and slipped behind the trees, and the acolyte stepped closer.

"Come, Daughter. Cast off thine shackles and live as thou wilt."

The ancient tongue still troubled her, even if her mother had slipped from time to time herself and spoke as her own grandmother had before her, but the whimsy in her mother's voice compelled Eleanor closer. Closer.

A wailing cry from the child in the basket failed to break her focus, as she watched the figure mince through the trunks of the trees, stoking the fallen brush.

Mother! She reached out her hand, her fingertips stretching just past the archway. *Wait for me, Mother!*

The child screamed in the basket, her cries so filled with terror, the acolyte broke from her trance to see those tiny glowing eyes staring up at her amid a face as red as a beet. The ravens had flocked closer, cawing as if to chastise. One flew at the young acolyte, and she threw up her hands, swatting at it. Another joined the first, their sharp claws scratching against the exposed bits of her skin.

Get away! Get away!

She swatted at them with the frantic thrashing of her hands, unknowingly inching backward to avoid their attack.

Something cold gripped her wrist, and she turned to find a tall, beastly creature with bark-like skin and antlers staring back at her.

The wrathor.

A scream tore through her chest at the same time as a hard yank sent her flying through the archway.

Into the Eating Woods.



Shrill wails of agony rang out in the distance, and the Crone Witch straightened from where she bent over a patch of frosted moonberry. She twisted toward the Eating Woods, pausing to listen. Wasn't unusual to hear the occasional scream of some poor, unwitting soul who'd gotten a bit too close.

Fools.

She turned back to her toil, but another sound rose above the first. A long, nasally cry of a child, higher pitched and more frantic. Like that of a newborn.

Frowning, she lifted her lantern and hobbled around the corner of the cottage, toward the center of her yard, where she could see something at the foot of the distant archway surrounded by a cluster of ravens.

A small babe in a basket?

Scanning the surroundings showed no one, but those cries went on, until the Crone Witch could no longer ignore it. Keeping to the edge of the trees, she limped closer. Closer still—until she came upon the basket in which a baby lay trembling, its tiny hands having come loose from its swaddling. A raven sat beside the child, roosting close, which seemed to fascinate the babe, as it no longer screamed. Those eyes, silver eyes, remained riveted on the bird.

Eyes of silver and deathly pale skin.

The child her priestess had prophesied would arrive with a new moon.

The Crone Witch glanced up at the black sky and trailed her gaze downward, to where a flitting piece of red fabric had caught on a sharp tine of the archway's bone. She lifted it from the pointed tip, noting a wet saturation, and released it, watching it vanish into the trees. What she surmised to be blood coated her fingertips.

Perhaps the child's mother, eaten by the woods.

Masculine voices emerged from the distant tree line ahead of her, and the old woman dimmed her lantern, scurrying to hide amongst a copse of shrubs. She watched as an older man approached—a hunter, judging by the bow strapped to his back, the earthy tone of his clothing, and the snares he carried at his hip. A boy, no more than twelve, walked alongside him, garbed in the same clothing. Both of them headed toward the baby, and as they seemed to catch sight of her, the older hunter frowned.

"By God, is that a baby?" The boy lowered himself alongside the basket, and the older hunter knocked him backward with a swift shove of his shoulder.

"Keep your distance."

"But it's just a babe, Pa. So tiny, like Margaret."

The boy's father nodded toward the child. "Look at its eyes. An aberration." He looked around, his palm resting on the hilt of a dagger at his hip. "Ravens flock to evil. Whoever left it here, did so with intention. And we will do the same."

"But the animals will get it, won't they, Pa? Won't the ravens eat the eyes out of it?"

"I should think something far worse. It is the will of the Red God, boy. Leave the child."

"It'll freeze," the boy argued.

"Leave it! Go now, finish these snares." The older hunter handed them to the boy, casting an uneasy glance toward the ominous trees at his back. "Keep them hidden in the shrubs."

Setting traps anywhere near the Eating Woods was against the law and the parish doctrines, as the animals that dwelled in proximity were considered to be infested with evil. Unfortunately, as winter raged

on, food had become increasingly scarce, forcing hunters to venture beyond their usual grounds. Punishment, if one were caught committing such a crime, was banishment to the Eating Woods, as anyone who consumed the meat was thought to carry evil in their bellies. "I'll set a few a ways down, and we'll retire for the night. Come find me when you've finished."

"Yes, Pa," the boy answered solemnly.

"Stay away from that archway, and do not touch that child. Understand?"

The boy lowered his head and nodded.

With that, his father strode off, farther down the tree line, and the boy set to work laying his snare in the shrubs, as his father had instructed. When finished, he stood over the babe and shooed off the bird, which cawed and flapped its wings at the boy.

"Be gone, you wicked beast!" With a long walking stick, he batted the creature away and stared down at the child. "Father says to leave you be. But perhaps it's more merciful..." He drew his dagger from his hip, its tip sharp and glistening. "You are an ugly monster with those eyes. Perhaps I should pluck them out of your skull."

The Crone Witch pushed up from her hiding spot and crept toward the boy with light steps, so as not to make a sound, until she stood at his back. So close, she could feel the tickle of his stray hairs upon her nose. He drew back his dagger, as if to strike the baby, and the old witch caught his wrist from behind.

Gasping, he spun around and let out a small cry that died in his throat.

Still gripping his limb, she slapped her hand over his mouth, eyes stern. "You would pluck the eyes out of an innocent babe, would you?" Brows raised, she lowered her hand from his face.

"I... It was not my intention, I swear it."

"But it is your intention to let the Eating Woods devour this child?"

"Pa... He says it is the will of the Red God."

The Crone tightened her grip on his hand, her long, pointed nails digging into his flesh. "The will of your god will be your demise. For,

one day, it is you who will become *the Banished. Maledicio tej'per nomed vetusza deosium.* I curse you by the name of the ancient gods.

The crackling sound of sizzling skin brought a smile to her face, as she watched the sign of the gods burn into his hand—five stars and a moon. His eyes turned a milky white, as the curse she'd cast hooked itself into the boy's heart.

"Goddess Death," she rasped. "You will perish in the name of the goddess. For that is your fate."

"God...is...death."

The Crone Witch sighed. "Close enough." The moment she released him the boy's eyes returned to normal.

Trembling, he let out a shaky breath as he lifted his cursed hand, and a whimper escaped him. "What does it mean?"

"In time, you will know. Now, run along. Your father waits for you."

The boy's shallow breathing sent puffs of white steam from his lips as he backed away. He spun on his heel, tripping over his feet, and darted off in the direction of his father.

The Crone Witch snorted, watching him disappear into the darkness, then turned toward the infant, where the ravens had gathered around the basket once again. "You are a bit of trouble already." She reached into her cloak for a small wooden box that she'd kept close to her heart for nearly a millennium, and she opened it for a tiny black rose hip inside. When the largest raven flew toward her, she held out her arm, allowing the creature to land there. She placed the rose hip in its beak, and it flew back to the ground, setting it on the baby's chest.

A soft orange glow indicated the heat it released across the child's skin, warming the little one down to its little bones. The skin of the rose hip split, and out of it grew a thorn and stem as it elongated into a perfect, silver-tipped black rose atop the child's chest.

Not even as the infant's tiny fingers clung to the petals did the rose falter in shape.

"You belong to her now. May the gods be merciful." Her eyes fell on the raven that remained beside the basket, while the others kept guard around it. "I look forward to seeing your Corvugon return one

day. Goddess bless." When she nodded, the raven cocked its head to the side, as if absorbing her words.

She turned her head back toward her hovel but paused as one of the ravens cawed at her back. Ignoring it, she kept on, grumbling to herself. "Cursed bird."

The blasted thing flew into her path, flapping its wings at her.

"Be gone! I've fulfilled my promise! It is done!" As she tried to sidestep the creature, it flew toward her head, pecking its beak in her silvery hair. "Enough! Leave me be!" She swatted and flailed her hands, but it refused to fly off. "Alright! Alright! I will find it shelter!"

The bird once again settled to the ground beside the basket.

The old Crone snarled at it. "You are a wretched thing." With a huff, she hobbled back toward the child. "I will ensure the babe has a place to stay, but it won't be with me. I want nothing to do with an abandoned child." Groaning, she snatched the basket into her arms. "May the gods grant me eternal sleep after, so that I should never have to see your loathsome, beaked face again." Carrying the basket, she headed toward a house in the distance that belonged to the old winemaker of the village, Godfrey Bronwick. A kind, old man with a granddaughter not much older than the infant. One who might serve as a playmate to her.

The old wood creaked as she climbed the stairs of the cottage porch and placed the basket on the doorstep. Soft cooing drew her attention to the baby inside, whose eyes glowed like an animal's—frightening, in a way. The old woman sighed and ran her sharp fingernail over her thumb, drawing a small sliver of blood. "*Argenticulos tej cinere, sole fractur'per mortiz.*" *Eyes of silver to ash, a curse only broken by death.* She smeared the blood over the baby's lips, feeling the slight suckling at the pad of her finger. The infant's eyelids lowered and when they reopened, the stark silver from before had dulled to a winter gray. "Much better." The old woman cocked her head to the side and stroked a finger over the baby's warm cheek. "May you fulfill your destiny, little one."

With that, she knocked on the door and hobbled off into the night.