

Prologue

Invidious

A familiar draft crept through the brick-lined window of a brick-laid wall of a barren room. Pascale's eyes hopped between the alternating patterns of the darkened terracotta, herself tucked on a warped stool that found uneasy purchase against the corner walls. A desk sat to her left, with a candlelight flickering across the northern wall and straining to reach the southern window. Wax pooled unevenly on the chamberstick base.

Comfort was far and between in the Estate Proper, especially now, but Pascale found restless relief in the quiet moments that lingered in small and precious measures. Doubts, small but forceful, invaded the unusually quiet space and quickly replaced any momentary peace. Time had stopped mattering, only for the fact that time was well past due. Anger welled and subsided. Concern flooded and drained. Emptiness settled. Pascale continued her methodic tracing of the brickwork.

Suddenly, unmistakably, the faint scraping of a wooden handcart across cobblestone traveled through the open window. Pascale froze as it grew louder. She waited before approaching the window to confirm what she already knew: the heavy scraping betrayed a handcart burdened with loss. Where four had left this morning, only one walked solemnly up the southern road, accompanied now by the amorphous masses which filled the cart in tow. The lone survivor marched on, head bent low, straining under the toil of their dark procession.

Pascale, now flanked on both sides by a fluttering of newly lit rooms and openings, shuttered her window quietly and dragged her stool from its corner back to the desk. She mustered only a few short lines, scrawling hastily in a black leather book, before she extinguished the light and surrendered, unwillingly, to another sleepless night.

That road is like a bloodline connecting to the heart of this cursed place, but I guess it brings life and death in equal parts. It can be hard to know which one will find its way. But today, death. And worse...

Doom.