

## PROLOGUE



A human wall stretches around Heulensee. Women and girls kneel shoulder to shoulder in terrified reverence, linked together by white-knuckled hands. Their mouths hang open. Viewed from afar, you might imagine they are singing – that this is a celebration, or some benign folk ritual.

The scene is about as benign as the tumour which killed my papa. The women aren't singing; they're screaming.

They wail, heads tipped back, eyes red and white with terror. The wall of bodies sways and buckles with the weight of collective emotion. Some wear their fear proudly with unwavering falsetto screams; others are quieter, and the terror shudders free from their mouths in gasps.

My silence makes me an outlier. It makes me a target.

I stand behind Mama as the sole missing brick in our feeble defence. Beside her, my sister, Dorothea, wails. Terror twists her

face. It wrinkles her forehead and makes her pretty eyes bulge from her skull.

Mama turns to me, eyes wild. ‘Scream, Ilse!’

An apologetic smile is all I can offer. I want to render them in my image, even if just for a moment. Rid them of the fear that pains them. They are so determined, so full of horror – but their bodies are fleshy and easy to break. Secretly, I don’t think their efforts will do much to protect us when the monsters come.

The looming threat of our demise sparks a realization: if I am going to die, I would like to do so by my sister’s side. I nestle between Mama and Dorothea, perched awkwardly on my knees. They grasp my hands, knuckles popping. Something feral touches their eyes. They begin to howl. The sound runs through my bones.

From this angle, I can just make out the inky smear of the Hexenwald on the horizon. The sky above the trees blushes crimson. It’s the only warning we receive before the forest overflows. On any other day, the forest seems almost benevolent. The Hexenwald’s deceitful appearance is perhaps its most lethal trait. Whispering boughs mask a multitude of sins.

The trees serve as a breeding ground for all manner of monsters. Perhaps today will be like the summer when colossal serpents, *Lindwürmer*, emerged from the forest and swallowed four children whole. Maybe I will smell the same decay as the night an entire family was drained by bloodthirsty *Nachzehrer*, vampiric creatures who only know thirst.

While I cannot predict what will spill from the trees, one thing is certain. No matter how hard I try, I will not feel afraid.

‘Please, Ilse,’ Mama begs, my obvious distraction triggering desperation in her eyes.

I part my lips, hoping that Mama’s own fear will leap down

my throat. That it will dig its claws into my heart or my brain – wherever I am *supposed* to feel it.

I begin to groan. It's a hollow sound. There is no weight behind it, no driving force. My heart thumps steadily, blood meandering through my veins. I think the absence of my terror must be glaring, but my performance seems to fool Mama and Thea. They relax their grip on my hands.

'Yes, Ilse!' Mama presses a fervent kiss on my cheek and goes back to screaming. The shock of her lips on my cheek is bitter-sweet. I cannot remember another time she's kissed me.

The ground shakes beneath my knees.

'It's coming,' Thea shrieks. 'The Saint is coming!'

The vibrations in the earth rattle my kneecaps and travel up my spine. They grow and grow until they're so close that they mirror the steady beat of my heart. *Thud, thud, thud*. Heat billows behind me – the displacement of air by something huge beyond comprehension. Moist, rotting breath grazes my nape.

The screaming stops.

Mama's grip on my hand tightens. Thea's, too. The air which hung heavy with terror moments ago is now totally still. I swallow. It sounds like a gunshot in my ears.

The next breath is so close that it makes my hair flutter.

'Are you afraid?' A deep, echoing voice asks from behind me. It sounds like the rumble of thunder which precedes the worst of a storm.

'Yes,' we shout. I am the only one who is lying.

A rush of air almost topples me; a shadow briefly blots out the sun. The beast lands in front of us, more macabre than I remember it. The Saint of Fear. It is a disgusting patchwork: its body is that of a wolf, but ten times the size; at the crown of its head,

a deer's antlers branch out, reaching for the sun; its skull is that of an overgrown ram. I say skull, not head, because there is no flesh or fur to cover its awful maw. There is only bleached bone, deep hollows for eyes, and a permanent, toothy sneer. Heretics call it the *Untier*. The monster.

I strain to keep my gaze pinned to the floor, the way it wants me to – but I cannot stop my eyes from drifting upwards. Caves call to children, and the pits in the Saint's skull call to me. Deep in the socket, eyes the colour of blood flick to meet mine. The Saint falters mid-stride and releases a breath, more of a growl than an exhale.

I stare back into my lap, focusing on the pinch of Mama's nails against my palm. Rancid breath moistens my cheek. One of its bloody claws pins the edge of my dress to the dirt.

'Are you afraid?' it hisses into my face, each syllable echoing unnaturally.

*Lie*, my brain orders. 'Yes.'

A rumble comes from deep in its chest. 'You will be.'

A distant wail echoes. A chorus of whispers rise from the women. I let go of the exhale caught between my throat and lips, stealing a furtive glance at Thea. When she looks back at me, there is more white than blue in her eyes.

The wind dies down. The birds cease to sing. The Saint swings its colossal head towards the trees of the Hexenwald. Mama grips my hand so tightly that my skin blanches around her fingers. Anyone privy to this spectacle, unaware of Heulensee's macabre traditions, might believe that the monster before us is our foe.

No, this bloody-mawed creature is our *saviour*. The worst is yet to come.

An amorphous cloud of white floats free of the forest. Not

the serpentine Lindwurm, nor the insatiable Nachzehrer. As it glides over the lake, it separates into three distinct entities: three women, floating just above the water. Their arms and legs dangle, motionless as corpses. I watch them in the way I might ogle a snake before it strikes.

‘The *Hexen*,’ Mama whispers, her voice cracking. ‘This is the end.’

Through all the eight years of my life, monsters have poured from the Hexenwald like blood from a wound. But never – *never* – have the Hexen shown their faces. They are the root of all the evil that has preceded them. They orchestrate; they do not bloody their hands.

Until today.

The Hexen reach our shore, gliding over the pebbles, then the grass, then the cobbled street. They hang just in front of the ancient Saint, staring it down with pupil-less eyes. One is grey-haired, her face weathered by time; one is maternal in her beauty, soft of cheek and hip. Between them, they clutch the youngest – no older than me, perhaps eight years old. She does not levitate so much as she hangs.

‘We have come for the Saint of Fear.’ They do not open their mouths, but they speak in discordant harmony.

I know their presence should stir something in me. They are predators, and I am their prey. Our relationship is the basis of life in this isolated valley; the creatures of the Hexenwald hunt, humans flee. But rather than fear, I feel anticipation. It is the same sense I get just before a storm breaks.

The eldest of the Hexen floats forwards. She cocks her head at an unnatural angle, eyes boring into the Saint’s skull. The imposition of her gaze enrages the beast; it snarls, raising its hackles.

‘Leave this place,’ it barks. ‘Do not folly with a Saint. I have slain the beasts you sent to terrorize this village; I will slay you just the same.’

The women’s jaws fall open in unison; laughter tumbles out. It is flighty, girlish. Utterly strange from their cold, unsmiling faces.

‘I will tear you, limb from limb,’ the Saint growls, incensed. ‘Then you shall see.’

The Hexen stop laughing. A wind whips around them, lifting the muddied hems of their dresses. The eldest turns her back and glides away, drawing level with her companions. I think they might be retreating – until her head rotates a half-circle atop her spine.

Eyes burning white hot, the woman says, ‘Feast.’

The Hexen plunge through the air, jaws hanging open. The oldest smiles so widely that I think her cheeks might split; the middle adopts a rigid face so uncaring that I think she must be made of glass; the youngest screeches, a sound that makes my teeth ache. Gauzy, iridescent ether fills the sky, pulsing around them.

The beast roars. It leaps forward, plunging serrated teeth into one of the Hexens’ legs – the youngest of the brood – and slams her to the ground. Her spine snaps at an angle, mimicking the staccato peaks of the mountains beyond the Hexenwald.

Mama screams. This time, it holds more than just terror. Her pupils narrow; tears stream down her cheeks, unbridled. The young Hexe’s death snaps something vital inside her. It snaps something in the remaining Hexen, too. They wail. It’s a magnetic sound, wrenching my focus away from Mama. Ether rolls off them in waves – the same way it seeps from the Hexenwald on a clear day. Their fists harden at their sides, and their assault resumes.

The eldest howls, anguish pinching her features; the other

laughs so shrilly that my eardrums begin to ring. Their outburst infects the Saint of Fear. Its eyes begin to water, and it moans with grief; its colossal heart beats so loudly I hear it at a distance, mirroring the maternal Hexe's erratic laughter. The Hexen set upon the weakened beast, tearing out great hunks of its flesh with their teeth.

The Saint swings its head, and I swear it looks directly at me as it bellows, 'I need *more*.'

My feigned scream is blunt. Powerless. Foaming at the mouth, the Saint breaks free from the Hexen and turns on us. The women shriek, clutching each other in desperation. The Hexen cackle as the Saint lumbers towards our ranks, one paw dragging limply behind.

At first, I think the Saint is coming for me – that it plans to punish my heresy once and for all. I throw myself in front of Thea, desperate to shield her from what comes next – but then the Saint diverts. It stalks down the line.

I look to the right just in time to see Klara Keller's head torn from her neck. The stump of her spine spurts blood. I gawk at the empty space where the girl's head should be, unable to comprehend her metamorphosis from person to corpse. My lungs calcify, denying me the breath I'm desperate for.

The Saint stares at me. It wants me to see Klara's lifeless eyes staring out from between its teeth. Her mouth is still ajar, as if she might reanimate at any moment and tell us not to worry. Slowly, slowly, the Saint grinds its jaws shut. Her face compresses and distorts and—

Mama uses our conjoined hands to shield my eyes. It does not stop me from hearing Klara's skull crack between the Saint's teeth.

By the time Mama removes her hand, what's left of Klara

kneels limply. She wears her best *dirndl*: a white apron, now bloody, with a dress the colour of forget-me-nots. How proud she must have been putting on that dress this morning, never anticipating it would be the last thing she'd wear.

Klara's mother and sister do not move; they maintain their grip on her hands, keeping her headless body upright. Even in death, Klara steadies the wall.

'Now,' the Saint roars, 'are you afraid?'

The women around me rally. They think the Saint is addressing us all. I know the truth: it has seen me. It knows the steady absence in my heart. Klara Keller died because of *me*.

Spittle flies from Mama's mouth. Further down the line, Klara's mother clutches her daughter's corpse and bellows. Terror becomes a tangible force, exploding from the women's feeble bodies, shrapnel feeding the Saint.

The beast changes. It rears up to stand on two legs, not four. Its antlers branch out, skeletal prongs sharpening. It walks like a man, not a beast. Teeth longer than the rest drop from its bony jaw.

The Hexen levitate, retreating to the lakeshore, and begin to chant. The Saint pursues them but gravity itself seems to be working against the creature. The Hexen's faces contort; they chant louder, louder. Groaning, the Saint collapses to the floor, body pressing into the earth.

The scream that Thea lets loose is the closest I have ever felt to fear. It is an urgent plea – a call to action. She scrabbles against me, anchoring our bodies. Her panic brings the reality of our situation into sharp focus: if the Saint of Fear dies, so do we.

And it will be my fault.

My chest shudders with guilt, blending with my longing to save

Thea and my desperation to be fearful, to be the way a girl *should* be. I let my mouth hang open, begging Thea's terror to inhabit me. Something else rises from my depths. *Fury*. A sound erupts from deep inside, somewhere primal.

The Hexen scream. I look up just in time to see them thrown across the lake, their limbs flung out like rag dolls. They crash deep in the Hexenwald. Trees collapse in their wake. There is the cracking of wood, the settling of leaves, and then there is silence.

The Saint turns to face us, panting. Thea draws me tighter against her, as if she can shroud me in the folds of her dress. I drop my eyes to the floor and whimper – the image of a subservient, fearful girl.

The Saint of Fear draws its maw level with my ear. My hair flutters as it whispers, 'Do not disappoint me again, Ilse Odenwald. It will be your sister's head next time.'

Without hesitation, the beast leaps over the wall of our bodies and retreats to its den. The villagers call after it, offering thanks and shaky prayers. Klara Keller's mother blows it a kiss. *A kiss*.

Thea collapses into a flood of tears. I kiss her cheek and turn to Mama to do the same, but her expression shows no relief. Mama stares at me with cold calculation, her eyes caught somewhere between suspicion and loathing.

She sees the absence in my heart. The glaring, angry silhouette my fear should occupy. It is a void – a hungry black hole that will consume everything she holds dear.

We both know the clock is ticking.