Prologue

The woman, her fine features smeared with dirt and traced by paler streaks still damp, struggled to her feet from a thicket. All around her rose trees of titanic proportions, ancient wooden colossi whose massive trunks, clad in reddish bark split by deep fissures, rooted themselves in the black earth like the pillars of the world itself. Their distant crowns seemed to pierce the vault of heaven, looking down upon her from their immense height with crushing indifference. With feverish movements, she finished freeing herself from the still-warm cord and placenta, then tightened her hold on the newborn screaming in her arms.

As the clouds gathered, they swallowed the moon; its last wan light died among the foliage, and the treetops vanished altogether into the heights. Around her, the patter of rain upon the vegetation swelled into a clamour, like a hoarse whisper rising from the forest itself. Weak, trembling and stained with blood, the woman made one final adjustment. Then she broke into a run, her faltering stride nevertheless holding true to its course.

Jolted as she leapt over the roots that crowded her path, torn by brambles with thorns like daggers, she pressed on without hesitation in the same direction. The darkness troubled her not at all, and as she ran she took great care not to look at the fragile life struggling against her breast. Soon shadows began to prowl alongside her, amid a tumult of rustling leaves and the dull crack of branches. Whenever she dared turn her head, all she could make out in the darkness was the fleeting gleam of blinking eyes, like enormous fireflies.

As the wind rose, drawing ominous creaks from branches striking against one another, the forest opened onto a clearing where rocks, hewn into geometric shapes, thrust up towards the sky. At the edge of the clearing, the trees were no more than towering shadows beginning a ritual dance. She advanced slowly into the sanctuary.

She paused as she approached the bare stone slab standing at its centre. Then wolves emerged from the bushes before her. Each beast towered over a man on horseback; their jaws could have taken her head in a single bite. Yet they did not charge. They spread out in slow, deliberate movements, forming an arc around the stones, and came to a halt, their jaws closed. They were waiting for what they believed was owed to them.

Her gaze fixed ahead, she covered the last few steps and laid the screaming child upon the stone just as the first bolts of lightning slashed across the black sky. The beasts rose and approached the altar without haste, as though performing a rite. The mother, meanwhile, stepped back as they advanced, one step for each of theirs. Yet she could not help casting a tearful glance at the child, her face contorted, her hand trembling as though tempted to reach out.

An iridescent light broke through the undergrowth behind her. So brilliant was it that the woman had to close her eyes, and the entire clearing seemed to blaze with a thousand dazzling colours beneath the dull storm. At that same instant, a voice rang out:

— Absolutely not!

When she opened her eyes again, the wolves were already fleeing, tails between their legs, without a growl, without so much as a glance at the offering abandoned on the stone. Beasts of such size… and not one had waited to see what carried that light.

The woman did not try to discover whom the order had been meant for. She turned and fled, faster even than she had come. Only once, between the trunks, did she look back: in the clearing, a tall figure of light was advancing at an even pace towards the altar, where the child was still screaming.

She never saw what followed, but the pressure in her chest eased, allowing her at last to breathe as the light and the cries faded into the distance.