

Prologue

Paris, November 1804

“No, please!” ‘

The young street tough’s wail was the whimpering of a beaten child. His name was Gabin Dury and he was dying. A member of the King of Beggars’ new Court of Miracles, he made a living as a housebreaker and occasional leg-breaker. But his favorite sideline was far more sinister. Using the sewers and back alleys of the city, he was a predator. His prey was the young, the innocent and the weak. It didn’t matter whether they were boys or girls. It was the power he felt when he grabbed one, beat them a little and sodomized them for an hour or more. Then he’d dump them, content in the knowledge that they’d keep their mouth shut. Nobody wanted to admit they’d been used that way.

“Yes, I think so.”

The voice speaking was cultured and soft. “You are perfect. Bathed in blood and corruption. A fitting meal before visiting mass death upon the mewling masses of nugatory peons. But in the end, the proper order shall return to this world. Be content, you are a meal that will herald a golden age.”

“He smells like food.”

A rasp of talons across stone drifted to Gabin’s ears, causing him to shiver. But a hand of iron held him in place, preventing any chance of fleeing.

“Soon, my pet. Very soon. First, I take what I need. Then you shall feed.”

There was a slight loosening on Gabin’s arms as he was slowly turned to a deeper, darker part of the back alley.

“I have money! You can have it all! I can get more, give you anything you want!”

Gabin tried to reach for secret pocket in his belt. But the grip on his shoulders tightened and he gasped in pain.

“Money? Is that all you rustics think of? No thoughts of duty? Service to your betters? Just filthy coins! And a desire to use them to rise above your proper station! This is why a Corsican *parvenu* is about to place himself as a ruler. No! It shall not be allowed! Not ever!”

A pair of hands clamped down on Gabin’s head. Their grip was pure agony, lancets of pain shooting through his skull like icy knives. He opened his mouth to gasp, when a wide maw clamped down and drowned out the sound. Rows of sharp teeth tore through his lips, filling his mouth with blood. He tried to shriek in pain, but the jaws fastened down over him seemed to suck the air from his lungs.

But the suction within Gabin’s chest didn’t abate. In fact, if anything, it seemed to increase. The young rapist struggled in vain as he felt the small bits of air, which he was trying desperately to pull in through his nose, being stolen and consumed by the other. Blackness entered his vision as the mouth continued to prevent him from breathing. There was a sensation that more was being taken, like his very soul was being ripped from his body.

A moment later, Gabin Dury slumped and was dropped to the ground. His face was a torn and tattered ruin, a mask of shredded and split flesh. The Parisian rapist was barely alive and sinking fast. He had mere seconds left to live.

“Feed, little one. Feed to your heart’s content. Then dump his body into the Seine. We have so much to do. We have a coronation to prevent. Soon you’ll be dining on the flesh of the First Consul, little one. Flesh not good enough to be a king, but it will serve as an adequate meal, despite the nouveau riche flavor.”

The sounds of teeth and talons tearing and chewing drifted through the alley. The horrific dissonance continued for quite some time into the night.

CHAPTER I

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The Paris Morgue was a new facility. Clean, built along scientific lines, it was another example of the modern world as interpreted by the leadership of the French Empire. The Citizen employees operated under a rigid standard, rules that cost them many employees at first. The old habits of pocketing valuables were strictly prohibited. All items, even tattered clothing, were duly recorded in the huge ledgers provided by the new director. A system was now in place, efficient and precisely what the Revolution had promised back in 1792.

At precisely 8 a.m., said director walked into the mortuary. He was a tall man with light colored hair and pale eyes. His clothes were always freshly laundered, but looked well-worn. He was an older man, in his middle forties at least, with a scarred, lined face that caused even the most belligerent citizen to pause. His name was Jean-Pierre Séverin and it was said he was friends with First Consul Bonaparte.

As was his habit, Séverin greeted the staff as he headed for his office. There was a calm to him that translated to the Morgue employees, all of whom worked with impressive efficiency. The nightly log was brought before him by Blaise Leroy, the long-established deputy medical examiner for the city of Paris. Leroy was a tall man with rounded shoulders and wispy white hair. He'd been a medical examiner since long before the Revolution, surviving because of a complete lack of political sense. His work upon the dead was correct and exact, if completely uninspired. His only vice was said to be a love for street theater, puppet shows, mimes and performers.

"A fine lovely morning, Citizen Director," Leroy said, placing the night log before Séverin with a slight flourish.

He remarked upon the weather in this manner every day. It didn't matter if the weather agreed with his morning sentiment. To Blaise Leroy, it was always a fine day, whether the environment agreed with his statement or not.

"A bit cold, but I like such weather," Séverin replied, always attempting to hold to the facts in their morning conversations. It was his habit, precision.

"Only two corpses brought in last night, Citizen. The first was a poor, elderly seamstress, Madame Masson. Her son reported that she had refused to quit working, despite several fainting spells lately. I examined her myself. No signs of flux or any ailments. Symptoms of a weak heart. The second was somewhat odder. A young drowning victim. The fish and other river creatures feasted well upon his corpse."

Leroy almost sounded delighted as he spoke of the grim happenings of the night. This was often off-putting to many, but not to Séverin. He knew and understood that this was an armor that his subordinate had built around himself after a lifetime of being surrounded by death in its myriad forms. By presenting a happy and friendly outward appearance, Leroy was untouched by the daily dark events of the Paris Morgue.

"How is a drowning victim odd?" Séverin leaned back in his wooden chair and studied the man. Most believed Leroy to be a fool, but Séverin prized the man's perspicacity.

Leroy smiled with open delight. He liked nothing better than these morning exchanges with Jean-Pierre Séverin. Often the coroner of Paris was a position for a civil servant. Most of those appointed were there as either a step to a higher position, or as a last job before moving to the country to grow roses or some other nonsense. But Séverin was different. He behaved as if he was in this job because it was an essential facet of life. No death was considered unimportant. The man was willing to examine the corpses of frozen beggars if he doubted their method of passing. A good man. And a very intelligent one.

"A drowning victim presents certain simple signs. Pulled from the Seine or one of its many banks. Bloated body from the immersion. Water in the lungs and a body consumed by various marine life. Or, if found outside of the river, by rats, kitties or doggies. When any of these elements are missing, I mark the

discovery as odd," Leroy explained with the calm of a schoolmaster explaining a particularly difficult lesson to a favored pupil. But there was no condescension in his tone.

"And what is missing from this unknown victim?"

Séverin watched Leroy closely, absorbing the lesson. Leroy possessed an astonishing range of knowledge and one profited intellectually when he explained the details of his profession.

"Several. The corpse was not bloated from the water. Odd, but the man may have been in the water only for a brief time. The stench of the river was upon him, but weaker than I would have expected. And the corpse was in terrible condition. He was quite literally torn apart."

Leroy ticked fingers off his hands as he discussed the ghastly minutia of the previous evening.

"And the lungs?"

Séverin sensed he was meant to ask this question. And he complied, allowing the older man his moment of triumph.

Leroy raised a finger, pointing to the ceiling. The pose was theatrical; the mummer's version of a leader making a point that will save or condemn the life of another. A universal gesture, but one rarely used in the real world.

"Therein lies the true oddity, Monsieur! The lungs—they are gone!"

Leroy's smile widened and he seemed to glow as looked down upon his supervisor.

"Gone?" Séverin repeated, knowing this would lead to the full tale.

Leroy wished to present the details in a method worthy of an opera. There was little reason to deny the elderly man his moment.

Leroy nodded, his head bobbing rapidly. He resembled one of the puppets he loved so well as his nearly bald pate waggled. Comical, but his words were not:

"The lungs, liver, kidney and heart were gone. Torn away. I presume a particularly nasty pack of wild dogs are loose in some part of the city. The damage was quite significant."

Séverin rose, a fluid gesture of liquid grace belied his age,

"Please show me this oddity, Citizen Leroy. I'm quite intrigued by your account. Lead the way!"

Leroy gave another sketch of a bow. He scooped up the ledger and led Séverin through the corridors towards the main chamber. But suddenly he shifted away, turning to an older portion of the building before opening an anteroom door.

"I surmised you might wish to examine the poor gentleman yourself. Therefore, I placed him in this chamber. The light is far better than the holding area and the stench is less formidable. Additionally, I placed several lamps within—if you need further illumination for your examination."

"Well considered."

Séverin gave Leroy a nod and stepped within. The stench struck him immediately, an invisible force that almost staggered him from his feet. The scent was that of blood and meat, the smell of a butcher's shop, but there was also an underlying scent, a corrupt rot underlining the redolence of flesh and death. A horrible aroma, one all too familiar to those who worked at the Paris Morgue.

With a flourish worthy of a street theater actor, Leroy pulled the long sheet from the corpse.

"As you can see, the poor man is in a most terrible condition."

And he was at that. If anything, Leroy had been kind regarding the condition of the body. The form on the table was that of a man, thought that was difficult to determine at first glance. The face was a torn and tattered ruin, with most of the lips and nose missing. The missing flesh caused the teeth to be fully visible. This gave the dead man a rictus grin, an abhorrent smirk from beyond the grave.

But it was the body that held Jean-Pierre Séverin's full attention. The chest and torso were a ripped ruin, a shredded mass of shattered bones and mangled meat. The skin had been cleaved apart, revealing an anatomy with many missing organs. Whole sections of the frame were simply empty, as if internal parts of the body had been wrenched out by mighty talons. The sight was nightmarish, gruesome and grisly.

Yet, Séverin appeared unmoved. Pulling a tiny brass magnifying glass from his jacket, he examined the visible wounds with silent care. He moved slowly about the corpse, starting at the facial disfigurement and finishing below the sternum. Finally, he straightened up, his normally placid visage replaced a somber expression.

"Why is there oil upon the forehead of the corpse?" he asked, pointing to the dead man's skull.

Leroy's eyes widened in surprise. The oil was quite dried up by now, but Séverin had detected it regardless.

"My apologies, Citizen Director. I forgot to mention it. The representatives of the Papal States are in town. They are making arrangements for the forthcoming coronation of our First Consul. Well, to make a long story short, one the delegation requested to perform the last rites on all those who passed away while they were in town. Not an unusual request when the Papal Representatives visit our city. It was approved, of course."

"Of course."

Séverin's response was distant and he appeared to be concentrating elsewhere.

"Monsieur Leroy," he said, "please check your records and see if any other odd bodies occurred prior to this one. And if any others appear, please contact me immediately. Day or night."

Leroy appeared surprised for a moment, but then merely shrugged and gave his half-bow again.

"If that is your wish, Citizen Director. What shall we do with this poor man?"

"Send him to the charnel house and have the remains buried. Not merely sent to the pauper's burial, if you please."

Séverin stared at Leroy as he gave his orders, his pale eyes boring into the older man's watery brown orbs.

"As you wish," replied Leroy. "That is slightly unusual, usually reserved for bodies well past the stages where eventual burial is possible."

Leroy opened the ledger and wrote down his superior's orders in flowing script.

"This time, it is necessary as well," said Séverin. "I will explain all in the distant future. I must go for now."

Séverin stepped towards the door, but then looked over his shoulder at his colleague.

"One further detail: the priest? Was he a tall young man with green eyes and red hair?"

Leroy shook his head: "Neither the priest nor his assistant could be described in such a manner. The holy man was close to my age. Quite round and jolly. Execrable accent! I believe he was a Roman, or some such. Still, was quite gentlemanly in a Roman way. His companion was younger, not more than twenty or so, taller, quite handsome."

"A Roman as well?" asked Séverin who wanted as much clarification as he could receive. Every detail might be critical in the near future.

Leroy shook his head.

"No, not at all. He spoke little, but judging from his accent, I would say he was Swiss, or some kind of German. He had a harsh way of emphasizing his vowels. Is it important?"

"Not at all. I'm merely curious. You miss little, Monsieur Leroy. At what time did these holy men arrive at our little establishment?"

Leroy pulled out an old and somewhat battered repeater watch and replied:

"At precisely six forty-five a.m. They were never late by more than a moment or so. And never earlier either."

"Just after Matins.¹ That makes some degree of sense. I shall return then and meet these men personally. Remember what I requested. Send word of any similar corpses either prior to this date or from this day on. You may leave word at my house."

Séverin headed for the door. He would be back in his home within the hour and would pen a quick note. It was rare he requested the attention of the First Consul, but so far, Napoleon had never rejected one of his pleas.

¹ Matins is the monastic nighttime liturgy, ending at dawn, of the canonical hours. In the Roman Catholic pre-Vatican-II breviary, it is divided into three nocturns. The name "matins" originally referred to the morning office also known as lauds. When the nocturnal monastic services called vigils or nocturns were joined with lauds, the name of matins was applied at first to the concluding morning service and later still to the entire series of vigils.

"And he will provide me with anything I require. For, if I am correct, the nightmare of nine years ago is returning to both of our lives. Not to mention every living soul in all of France."

On that terrible though, Jean-Pierre Séverin increased his pace. Few things in this world frightened him, but the corpse in the Morgue heralded a terror that still caused him to quake with fear when alone in the