The boy fled through the forest, but the night was reluctant to give up its prey. The trees reached out to grab at his cloak, the ground rose up to trip him and hamper his progress. The moon hid behind clouds rather than provide the child a light to guide him home, guide him to safety.

 The rhythmic thudding of feet running across the cold earth never faltered, though the runner’s breaths were coming in increasingly ragged and desperate gasps. But fear and adrenaline lent him wings when his energy failed. *Run*, whispered the wind, keeping steady with the boy. *Danger*, it reminded him. *Thud, thud*, replied his heart, a metronome to keep the steady beat of the chase.

 Not far behind him were his tireless pursuers, deceptively quick contrary to their appearances. They easily loped through the forest, never faltering. The smell of decay rolled off them in waves, waking a primordial instinct in all living things to *stay away*. It was not natural, it was not right. A few fingers and toes, ears and nose may have fallen off during the chases, but the animated corpses never slowed their pursuit.

 Let it be said that no good ever came out of raising the dead.

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 He was running, running, but slowing down. Suddenly he stumbled, shoe-laces caught on the jagged end of a root protruding from the ground (And wasn’t that a funny premonition in itself?). Falling, he managed to catch himself before his face hit the ground, but let out a cry of pain when a sharp rock cut through his palm. The boy hissed and clenched his teeth, biting his lip to prevent any other sounds from escaping. Not that it mattered. If he couldn’t untangle his shoes before *they* reached him, then he would have more to worry about than a measly cut. Fingers fumbled in the dark as they tried to undo the laces, but in the dark, with his cold, stiff fingers, it was an impossible task. The sounds of pursuit were getting louder, and the child panicked before tugged the boot off with great difficulty. Finally free, he leapt to his feet and continued on, wincing slightly every time his sock-clad foot stepped upon a stick or pinecone.

 Even in his adrenaline-and-PSI-boosted state, he couldn’t run forever. He was faltering, stumbling, slowing down. Slowing down, or his pursuers (*predators*) were speeding up, he couldn’t be sure in his exhaustion-addled state.

 And then he fell.

 Slimy, decayed hands reached out for him, latching onto his limbs. He screamed, suddenly turning over in an attempt to shake off the iron grip of those hands, then froze.

 “Is that you Lucas? My, how you’ve ggggggrown! Why, there’s so much of you that I could eat for three days and three nights and still have leftovers!”

That voice… it’s mocking him. The form, the oufit, the hair that hung in clumps from a slowly-peeling scalp, were all dreadfully familiar yet grossly grotesque, like seeing a familiar face turned into a chimera (he could never forget the shock of the Drago’s appearance right before the attack). Yet he knows no matter how perverse, the Pigmask Army would never be able do to something like this, *could* never be able to do something like this. It’s magic and nature and PSI twisted- and so does his stomach. How many times had he imagined that that face would be there when he woke up, as if the past three years had been nothing more than a bad dream? How many times had he wished? The wind whispers frantically, but it’s far away and he can’t hear the voices on the breeze.

*She looks just like someone you once knew.*

“Mom?”

Life was just far too cruel.

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 “Kumatora, Duster, have any of you seen Lucas after he visited Hinawa? There was a ruckus last night in the Sunset Cemetary.”
 “We thought he was with Flint! I mean, he is his dad and all…”

 “This isn’t good— it was Flint who wanted to ask about Lucas’s health. I don’t think he’d be able to take it if something happened to him. The fool, forgetting his living son until he too disappears…

 “Maybe he’s doing this for the attention then? I never did like that boy, always skulking around the forest, being rude to Mr. Fassad…” It’s a new voice, one of the gossip-harpies frequently seen in the town square.

 Alec shakes his head. “Lucas would never do such a thing. Something must have happened…”

The villagers sent out a search party when Lucas never returned home from visiting his mother’s grave. They never found a trace of the boy. Flint was silent as he heard the news, reliving a certain memory of three years prior. Soon after, he disappeared into the Sunshine Forest.

All that was ever found of Lucas was his one shoe.

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Epilogue:

“Sir! There was a commotion in Tazmilly Village last night, near the castle! A horde of zombies was going after a villager”.

“…”

The soldier sweated. Being low in the hierarchy of ranks, this was the first time he had any direct interaction with the Commander, and while he heard that the masked boy was kind to his subordinates, all that he was right now was downright intimidating in his silence. Nervous, the soldier babbled on, wringing his pink-clad hands.

“We managed to rescue the kid, sir. Poor thing was all beat-up and wounded, we weren’t even sure if he was still alive. Still in intensive care, but there’s no sign he’s gonna make it. The others were all in a panic, sir, because he looked so much like you that they mistook his identity—“

“!!” Somehow, this elicited a response in the so far stoic and emotionless Commander. The soldier fell silent, unsure if he overstepped his place. Maybe he was being too casual and not showing enough respect to authority? Maybe he shouldn’t have mentioned that last bit, it wasn’t as if the Commander would care…

Wrong. “The King… would be pleased to hear so… please inform Dr. Andonuts that he was a new task, and test subject…”

Target found and dealt with, and mission accomplished.