

All Things Darkly Illuminated

Book 1
The First Gateway

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The Vatican works on putting a team of researchers together to evaluate demonic possession cases. But as the team travels the United States, it realizes how much wider the scope of the problem is. Can a move to the last bastion of Catholicism in Southeast Asia answer the team's questions about exorcism in the modern era?

Chapter 0

Hundreds of years ago, the woman on the bed would have been bowed to the ground, free of her bonds. She would have her face to the dust, her arms to the skies, her body bent in all places where it should have been soft or strong. And before her would have been a man cloaked with sunlight and hope – a mere man, the people would whisper, but one who had been given the blessing of the Messiah to cast out the evil from the woman's body.

She would have spoken a language unknown to humankind – one that seemed to reach out from the depths of the earth, that clung to the skin long after she had been saved, that threatened to pierce through the calm of the mere man before her.

He would not have faltered. He would not have wept.

Hundreds of years ago, the woman on the bed would have been dragged through the streets. She would have been burned as an example to anyone who dared speak against the word of God. Or she would have been taken to a prison somewhere beneath her city, where she would have been forgotten. Or she would have simply died after being fed a mixture of herbs, after being starved for days, after she had frothed at the mouth in the wake of seizures and nightmares. Perhaps she truly had a disease for which no one had a name. Perhaps her body truly was inhabited by a soul far more ancient, far more evil than hers.

We would never know. The man before her would have written nothing about her past, questioned nothing about her future. He would have simply sketched her twisted body in ink as brown as caked blood. He would have shown her marked by ropes or stabbed by knives or crushed beneath a wooden wheel. She would have no name. She had no voice.

Decades ago, the woman on the bed might have been a curiosity. People would have put her on display for all and sundry to wonder at, to tremble at, to weep at. She could well have been burned at the stake while people held their hands to their hearts and sobbed at her plight. They would have walked away, shaking their heads, thinking that the world was full of mysteries that no one would ever hope to fathom.

And the man before her would simply have written it all down, as though he were merely witnessing a circus. She was a contortionist, or the amazing woman whose face changed from one minute to the next, or the creature of darkness that screamed while she was chained with rusty manacles to the wall. The manacles would bleed their rust for days. Her blood would join the tracks when her spirit gave out.

Perhaps she would be starved, until she was a mere frame of pictures of evil rushing across her countenance. Or she would be brought back to her family when her masquerade was over. Or she would die, like all the rest of the women put on exhibit.

Years ago, the woman on the bed might have been attended to by a priest. He would have read something from a book – in a language that only few knew, and that only few ever dared to study. He would call on the name of someone in the Heavens, someone who once gave a mere

man the power to cast out demons. And then that someone would work through him – for days... weeks... months... years if it came to that. There would be endless sessions merely asking the spirit for its name. And then telling the spirit to leave. And then ensuring that the spirit never came back.

The priest before her would grow gray hairs long before his time. Someone next door would make the Sign of the Cross. Someone creative would add ghosts and screams and ceilings dripping with blood, write the script, shoot the movie, and take her story to Hollywood.

Again, she became the show before an audience of many, and who witnessed a mere representation of what was quite a simple tale.

Chapter 1

The tale went something like this.

Once upon a time, a human being did something. Like all human beings, this one, a woman, had a life and a soul. And she was naturally curious. Curiosity makes scientists of us all.

But when the wrong doors are opened wide, it is not always knowledge that flows through.

She opened a gateway. And things changed.

She had unnatural strength. She sometimes did not recognize her own family and friends. When she spoke, a thousand voices seemed to expel filth and anger in unison. When she did not speak, she growled. In the presence of a priest, she thrashed. Under the guidance of a psychiatrist, she appeared normal. All was well, until she came into contact with Holy Water, or a blessed object, or even the Bible. Then she would laugh from the very depths of the earth and mimic whoever was reading the Gospel.

That woman on the bed today would be dealt with in the manner that the Vatican ordained. After hundreds of years of assuming that she was under the control of the Devil, the church recognized that she could have a pathological disorder, and had to rule it out before proceeding forward.

After hundreds of years spent assuming that the demon could be expelled by force, the church recognized the gentle word of God and its power to drive out evil without resorting to blood or starvation. After hundreds of years spent watching the demons in the darkness, the church brought in light. It took hundreds of years; today, the woman on the bed would be surrounded by more than a mere man.

There would be a priest, and his assistants, all of them armed with their faith and the blessing of the bishop. There would be a psychiatrist overseeing the proceedings. There would even be a medical doctor, who would ensure that the sessions went forward safely. There would be more assistants praying, watching the process, and noting what was going on while everyone grew exhausted, and while the energy in the room was pulled out by a force no one could ever hope (or dare) to measure.

And in recent years, there were people recording and documenting the event. They were not there to sell the recordings to Hollywood, nor were they there to write a story that would keep young readers up for nights on end.

They were there, on orders, for the most extreme cases. Armed with recording devices and machines that could pick up heat signatures and computers that could pull it all into a database – they were there. They were there on orders from the Vatican itself.

There were small cases that dragged on for years, and big cases that took mere hours to resolve. But the extreme cases were the ones that had to be recorded, and watched, and monitored, and transcribed.

Those cases began with something small: a spell cast by someone close to the victim or the victim themselves, or an encounter with the supernatural that opened doors without the victim's knowledge, or a willing opening of spiritual doors that led evil in. And then human curiosity turned into human suffering; but there was a mystery to the suffering, and it had to be documented.

There had long been guidelines on how to recognize the takeover – a true takeover, without misinterpreting what would be a genuine mental disorder, hence the psychiatrist, or a genuine bodily disorder, hence the doctor. But for some reason, and in recent years, there were changes in how the woman on the bed behaved.

Her voice would change; or sometimes, it remained normal. Her body would change; or sometimes, it remained the same. Her knowledge of languages would be great; sometimes, she simply whimpered like a lost baby. There were changes in what were ruled to be genuine cases. But they were all extreme – and in recording them, perhaps a new generation of scientists could formulate new guidelines for the next generation of exorcists to work with.

Because there were too many cases, now. Old, young, male, female, rich, poor, Christian, not. Too many cases judged to be extreme, genuine, and requiring help. Too many cases that seemed to be born of the world that swirled in chaos and rage around them.

And there were too few exorcists willing to wage battle.

Chapter 2

It was 2016, during the spring that followed a prolonged, icy, biting winter; at a time when the seconds ticked into minutes, and minutes seemed to grow into bedraggled peasants that yapped at the sky and dragged behind them the days that once had been.

The world seemed old, or made ancient, by the year before. There had been elections across the world, in places where people longed for a change to which they could give no name. And those changes came like wolves: loud, rising rampant, baring fangs, calling forth choruses of hatred and mockery at anyone who dared question why such beasts had been allowed to see the light of day.

But so came the beasts, and the changes, and they who welcomed the changes were called enlightened. They had moved forward from evil ways, corruptions, secrets; and those who countered them were labeled with names cursed and unnamable.

The rage built upon rage, change upon change, anger upon anger.

Case upon case upon new case.

The woman on the bed, that spring of 2016, showed little of the anger that swirled in the world without - but she seemed to be filled with solid, fuming, smoking, ancient rage.

She usually squirmed, even raised her head like a giant snake, whenever certain words were read out to her. Sometimes, she needed no bonds to keep her from hurting herself. Today, however, she had scratched the skin of her back raw; she had nearly clawed out the eyes of her own brother.

That same brother was in the emergency room, hours away in another state, where the doctors could treat him as he lay deep in dreamless sleep. She had hit him with something, everyone thought. Had the woman been fully conscious, she would have told them the entire story.

He had put her tray of food on the table next to her bed. She had awakened. He had smiled. She hated his smile. She sat up, grabbed at his face to rip his lips apart. She missed. He tried to flee. She pushed him.

More precisely, she threw him. Her arms had grown longer, her fingers had grown claws, her new claws had clamped down on his shoulders and thrown him across the room.

He landed on the opposite wall, breaking the mortar, chipping the paint. He bled from wounds in his back and from the spaces between his fractured skull.

And then her eyes went black, and she remembered nothing. If his brain survived the impact, then perhaps he could tell the story in slurs and drones. But today, the only witnesses to the confrontation were the broken walls and shattered glass on the floor.

The band of doctors rushed into the room. Two of them took the boy out into the hallway, and later, sat with him in the ambulance that drove him miles across state lines. The other stayed behind and examined the girl.

Blood pressure normal. Pulse normal. Nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing to show that she had the strength of six grown men and could easily send the doctor to the hospital, on her brother's heels.

And then she spoke from the depths of the earth, in a hundred voices, in a chorus that made the doctor rush downstairs to get the priests.

When the priests arrived, the morning's uneaten breakfast was spread across the floor and on smears upon the walls. There was no pattern to the stains, only a stench that reeked of feces and vomit. The priests crossed themselves, eyes to the ground, fingers clutching rosaries, prayers unending even as the girl rumbled and grumbled with groans and sneers.

Behind the priests came the girl's father, white and pale and trembling against one wall as he watched his daughter lying on the bed. Next to him was the mother, standing as well, her head held high, her lip quavering as she tried to hold her strength against the tide of a broken heart. One child was in a hospital bed, perhaps brain-dead; another was in her bedroom, her soul dead to the world.

The priests moved into position. Two stood at the foot of the bed. One each went to either side of the girl, ready to pin her down should she decide to spring up and behead all the people before her.

Outside, the psychiatrist and medical doctor met, discussing the case, waiting to be called in. They were both old, but strong, perhaps even used to the scene before them.

And downstairs, remotely monitoring the room, were two brothers, listening and watching their computers closely as the cameras in the room recorded the priests entering. On another computer played a sea of black. The confrontation with the brother, the food splashed across the room, even the doctor's examination had never been recorded. For some reason, the cameras had failed.

The brothers spoke above a stage whisper to each other.

"I'm going to try to get it back," one said, typing at the rate of what appeared to be a thousand words a minute. He was looking at lines and lines of code, representing the recording that had been lost, "I can find whatever it is that's missing. We did it before."

The other brother held a headset to one ear, and, with the other hand, drank from a giant mug of coffee. He kept one eye on the monitor showing the goings on in the room upstairs.

"Don't stress yourself out, Bradley," he seemed to remind his brother, "It might be there. It might turn up all of a sudden. Remember what happened the last time."

“When it suddenly showed up and disappeared?” Bradley retorted, glancing quickly at the footage on the other monitor before returning to his work, “I know. I just don’t want to wait too long.”

The other brother paused for a while, as though trying to show his patience, “That’s not what I meant,” he nearly clamped a breath down on every word, his attention fully trained on his brother now, “Don’t stress yourself out. You can’t let it happen again.”

“Oh,” was all that Bradley could say. His fingers hesitated over the keyboard. He looked at his brother quickly; and, with a nod, turned to the footage. He would have fought his brother and argued at any other time. That time was certainly not today.

“I just,” Bradley began, as though testing the waters before plunging into what might be a quiet debate between him and his brother, “I was thinking of the boy – the brother - in hospital. We need this evidence to tell us exactly what happened, for the doctors and for our files.”

"Maybe the doctors already have an idea, given the cracks in the wall," the other replied, as he wore the headset, “Recover video later. Listen in now.”

Bradley grabbed his own headset, adjusted the volume on his computer, and typed into the computer monitoring the events upstairs. The brothers were in the living room, next to the kitchen; for some reason, the smell of freshly baked muffins wafted in.

“Oh, Landon,” Bradley sang, almost laughed, even, as he sniffed the air, “Guess who’s back!”

Landon glared at his brother, “Not something I’d joke about.”

“At least it isn’t shit this time,” Bradley almost giggled, “I like how they change their smells. Sometimes it’s crap, at other times it’s like home.”

“A home where you smell the muffins and get fed snakes is what,” Landon retorted, shaking his head, “Don’t mind them. Don’t mind the smells. Just keep praying.”

Bradley might have joked about it a hundred times, but he still resorted to prayer as he watched the footage on the screen, as he adjusted and readjusted the volume on his headset, and as he checked all his recording devices. He switched the monitor to the heat sensor, just to check the rooms around them. The bedroom where the girl lay was cold – but something was seeping in, something warm, hovering over everyone who watched her.

In the hallway, and in the living room, the air was crisp and trembling – even with the artificial smell of freshly baked muffins, the air was cold and blue on the screen. Bradley sighed.

“In a house with no oven, you’d think they’d be smarter,” he said out loud – and immediately regretted the joke as something heavy fell off the wall next to Landon.

“Good job,” Landon snorted, “Keep quiet.”

“Yes, Father Matteo,” Bradley said in a high-pitched voice.

"Keep praying."

"Yes, Uncle Jorge."

The brothers glared at each other, and, deciding not to resort to another argument, watched the screen again.

The head priest opened the book he had brought with him, making the sign of the Cross as he did so. Everyone in the room followed; everyone downstairs followed as well.

From somewhere within the house, something sighed, as though exasperated with the goings on; even the smell of freshly baked muffins had disappeared, to be replaced by a biting cold that stung the nostrils, and that made it hard for the brothers to breathe.

“Let’s not get too panicky,” Bradley felt his heart pump up into his throat. His breath was escaping in thick, almost opaque white clouds.

“Pray,” Landon whispered, fingers trembling as he typed lines of text into his computer. From somewhere in the house, there was a growl. It seemed to come from the walls, as though there were a creature prowling hidden staircases – as though it had a thousand mouths to swallow the sunlight.

“Get out,” something said, low, almost inaudible, from nowhere and everywhere at once.

Bradley prayed quickly, bringing up window after window of recordings. He checked all his files as he watched the priest begin to read from the Roman Ritual. Bradley had felt calmed by the mere presence of the book; some parts of it he knew by heart, and he could hear them in his head as the priest began the exorcism.

“Get out,” came the same growl, louder this time.

Landon prayed, breath clouding his countenance, voice rasping with the dry, biting cold. On the monitor, he could see the parents fall to their knees by the bed, the father prostrate, the mother bowing her head once held high. Their daughter was still staring at the ceiling, her dark hair spread out over the pillow, her mouth open, purple even on the grainy feed.

Bradley hummed to himself. It was a low hum of wonder. Landon turned to him.

“That’s strange,” was all that Bradley could say.

“Understatement of the century,” Landon forgot to pray all of a sudden. He took a quick look at the thermometer on the wall, just as the cold reached its lowest and stabbed the house with a frozen blade of what felt like ice. The thermometer burst, sending mercury slithering down.

“Exploding things aside,” Bradley kept his voice steady, but with visible effort, as the dry air scratched against his throat, “She’s warm. And she has darker hair and a scar on her arm.”

“Not sure how that’s relevant,” Landon trembled.

Bradley had a file folder next to him. He rubbed his hands together, then opened the folder, leafed through the pages quickly, and compared photos from one page to the next. There were photos of the girl in jeans, in a dress, in a long skirt, in a short skirt. Her arms appeared flawless. Her hair had streaks of blonde in them; none of those streaks showed on the monitor now.

“She’s never had a scar, but that scar looks old,” Bradley held up a photo. It must have been taken mere weeks before, after the girl went to senior prom. She was in a strapless dress, and her arms ran through with clear, fake-tanned skin. Bradley pointed to the screen, right where – and true enough – there seemed to be a scar running all the way from the girl’s fingertips to her shoulder.

“Probably a trick of the light,” Landon looked from the photo to the girl. He hummed quickly as she moved, and as the scar moved with her, “Right. So – that was strange.”

“Is strange,” Bradley added, “Looks like something with fangs ripped right through. Shark, bear, not sure what.”

Landon leaned forward to look at the monitor closely. His nose nearly touched the point where the mother had collapsed to the floor, head buried in her hands, body shaking. The psychiatrist had entered the room then, and led her and the father away. There could be no distress in the room; only hope, Landon knew. Only hope.

“Shit,” Landon nudged his brother, forgetting the cold all of a sudden, “She’s got another scar.”

Landon pointed at the girl’s right leg, where an old, keloid scar seemed to run from her toes all the way under her shorts. She moved slightly, slowly, as though gearing up for a grand thrashing beneath the words of the Roman Ritual.

Landon and Bradley could hear her parents run down the hallway, and then down the stairs, and then through the kitchen, and out the door.

“Should’ve stayed, dear parents,” Bradley sang again, as he leafed through more pages, “Would’ve wanted to ask you if she’s ever gotten scars.”

“Memories of her soul, maybe,” Landon said, with hardly any drama, and as though Bradley and he had been saying the words all their lives, “Or she’s under attack.”

“They’d bleed if she’s under attack,” Bradley closed the folder, “All the file says is that she’s always been sickly, always been in the hospital, but everything leveled out at age three.”

“Most kids get sick,” Landon said absently, eyes still on the monitor, “Do the records say anything specific?”

Bradley’s gaze went from the monitor, to the folder, and back again, “Nothing. Fever, maybe flu, disappearing in days. Lots of crying. No official diagnosis.”

Landon shrugged. They turned up the volume and listened in on the proceedings, even as they knew how it generally went.

The priest was sprinkling holy water over the girl. She squirmed, showing off her scars again. Even the priest seemed bewildered for a moment: he stared at her body, then looked quickly at the Roman Ritual.

“Oh Father!” Landon and Bradley chorused.

“Not a good move!” Bradley covered his eyes with one hand.

As though prompted by his dismay, the voice of the demon came, clear but grating over the headsets.

“Do you like her body, human?” the screech was but a refrain of a thousand other voices, and it dug deep into the recording, registering at both high and low frequencies, “I can show you more. All you need to do is stop. She’ll be very very nice, just like her mother was.”

“Oh shit,” Landon took his turn to cover his eyes, “I don’t even want to look!”

“I thought he got training?” Bradley was fighting not to scream, as though he were watching professional footballers all making commonsense messes on the pitch, “What the hell is going on? I’m calling Fr. Anthony now!”

The priest’s voice had been low and gentle, but it rose higher, and stronger, through the growls from the girl on the bed, and beyond the growls that continued to come through the walls.

“In the name of Christ, I order you to tell me your name!” was all that Bradley caught, as he checked the recordings and the heat signatures in the room.

“I can do anything you like,” the demon’s voice had become isolated, even velvety, soothing, “Maybe you can tell me your name? Let’s have some fun together. No one will know.”

The priests by her side continued to pray, heads bowed, but legs tensed, at the ready.

“Would you young men like a piece of this, too?” the voice was even smoother now, running through the room like warm, melted butter, “Her body is young and flexible and everything you will ever want but never have – unless you surrender now. It’s so simple.”

There was no response, and only a deeper bow of the heads of the priests.

“In the name of Christ, I order you to tell me your name!” the priest persisted. And, when he seemed to calm down, “Let us pray together, In the name of the Father -”

“They can watch if they like,” the demon seemed to grin the words out. The girl looked directly at the camera, where it was perched on the farthest corner of the room, high up in the wall, “You can record this, show it off, sell it. I won’t mind. I really like it, you know, you boys watching.”

“The Lord hath said -”

“I don’t care what he hath said,” the demon mimicked, eyes never leaving the camera, “Someone watching me likes watching these things, I think. What say you, human? Shall we give him what he wants?”

Landon and Bradley looked at each other sharply. What came next was more impulse than it was double checking.

“I do not download porn,” Bradley held both hands up.

“The last time I saw porn was in a magazine and I haven’t even looked at any since way back then,” Landon followed his brother’s example.

“Shit,” Bradley covered his eyes again, “He got us. Keep praying.”

The girl pouted at them, then turned to the priest again, “I like playing these games,” her voice was now girlish, lower, smoother, “Play with me?”

The boys did not even dare talk. They simply prayed, as the girl grinned up at the camera, as the wall trembled with hisses, and as the priest spoke clearly in the background, reading from the Ritual.

Bradley stared at the girl, even when she looked away, even when her cackles and screams started thundering through the house in the middle of a Latin prayer.

“You weak human and you stupid human and all you sinful humans – what makes you think you can cast me out on your own?” the demon demanded.

“Don’t answer that,” Landon said between his teeth.

“The scar is growing,” Bradley added.

“Pray, dammit,” Landon retorted.

The boys went silent once again, with Bradley watching the heat signatures disappear across the room, save a blot of red and yellow that hovered close to the priest. Landon checked the sounds that came through. There were low frequency sounds that no one could hear, but that were registering, nevertheless. He saved the audio files, just in case.

“Drink it!” the demon screamed.

The priest continued to read from the ritual, eyes fully trained on the book now, even as the girl continued to writhe and bare her legs. At one point, she even spread her legs wide open, prompting the priest’s assistants to hold her down. She nearly broke free of them, nearly bit off the arm of one of the priests as her jaws opened wide, unhinging bone from bone.

“Drink it all in, the way he made her!” the demon screamed again.

One priest’s rosary flew across the room, breaking into individual beads.

The leading priest did not relent. He asked for the demon’s name again, prompting the same voice to answer back with a scream, a string of obscenities, and finally, a burst of both cold and the smell of rotten eggs into the house.

“Oh boy,” Landon said, as he prayed beneath his breath.

“Drink it?” Bradley spoke up.

“Just pray,” Landon insisted, checking the recordings again.

“No, I’m not kidding,” Bradley retorted, watching the girl closely, as her legs and arms were held down, “This means something. And don’t say it means that I should pray more. I already know that.”

Landon simply stared, as though he’d had the same argument with his brother before. Then, with lips still moving in prayer, he turned to the monitor again.

The demon was now speaking in another language – or several, with one voice speaking above the other, and yet another speaking above the rasping, crackling refrain. The boys used to joke that it was like listening to a UN Convention, where all the delegates were fighting to be the first at the podium, and nobody followed the speaking protocols. Today, there was no joke to be made, as the priests held the girl down, and as the wounds glistened in the sunlight.

“I really wish we’d had assistants who weren’t priests,” Landon said aloud, “I don’t understand why the bishop allowed this.”

“It’s called Boston, where everyone is suspicious and where no one wants to talk about possession,” Bradley answered, opening the girl’s file again, “My dear brother, I’m not kidding. Of all the curses, why ‘drink it’?”

“Bradley -“

“Was she bullied? Was she raped? Was there something that made this thing say ‘drink it’? Everything means something.”

Landon was about to reply, when the girl began to scream again, then try to rip open her blouse with her own teeth. Her jaws could not be put back, and there were not enough people in the room to assist.

“This kid’s going to grind her jaw bones apart,” Landon closed his eyes, “I don’t want to know what her operations will be after all this.”

Bradley removed his headset, stood up, and rechecked all the recordings, nodding as he went.

“Where are you going?” Landon vainly tried to control the high pitch his voice was making.

“There’s something about that word,” Bradley answered, deadpan, his hand on his brother’s shoulder, “I think her parents know something about it.”

“Oh, for God's sake, sit down,” Landon tried to pull Bradley back into his chair, but his brother had already run out of the boundaries created by their computers and recorders. He was sprinting down the hallway, and making for the back garden, Landon heard. Landon stood up, sat down, stared at the recordings, looked at the temperature readings, looked at the broken thermometer on the wall, and then enclosed his palms in prayer as he sat down once again.

Bradley had his own reasons – and Bradley had his own abilities.

Chapter 3

Bradley was already at the door leading out to the garden when he heard the louder hissing and growling from the walls. He listened closely, thinking he could make out the words; the temptation was strong, to analyze the audio on the spot, to hear what was not being said in the room upstairs. But something in his head told him to keep on walking, to ignore the voices, to subdue the temptation to overreach the bounds of duty and reason.

He opened the door, stepped out into the world, breathed deep, and watched the girl's parents.

It would have been a wonderful spring day in Boston: the world above the house was blue and white and clear, the gardens were shedding the last traces of winter and sporting their greens and purples, and the grass beneath Bradley's feet crackled as he walked. Before him stood the girl's parents, arguing.

He made out a few words, chief among them: "I told you so."

"I'm sorry to interrupt," Bradley began, as quietly and firmly as he could, "But I need to ask you a few questions before I go back inside."

Bradley got a closer look at the girl's mother. He had been present at all the family interviews, and she had never looked as bedraggled and desperate as she did now. As for the father, he remained calm, placid, even, as though he had been scolded and could do nothing but listen.

There was something in his eyes, however, that Bradley had never seen before. He could not call it a secret – more so knowledge of a secret; and fear that once it leaked out, everything would fall apart. To Bradley, the secret would allow everything to finally make sense.

"Again, I am very sorry," Bradley restarted, after the mother's sobs faded away, "I need to ask you a few more questions that were not covered in the interview."

The father looked back at him, eyes narrowed, gaze fiery. It was the mother who spoke.

"We will speak to no one but the priest," she trembled. Bradley could see her vacillation; he knew she wanted to talk, but her husband kept her from doing so. Her blonde head sparkled in the sunlight, caught the color of the sky; she bowed her eyes to the ground.

"I know that I don't have the authority that Fr. Callahan does, but your daughter is suffering upstairs. She's been suffering for weeks now. Fr. Callahan can only do so much," Bradley caught his voice speeding up at the end. As though on command, the girl's scream pierced through the garden: it was but the tinniest of her screeches, but it escaped the bedroom windows, rustled imaginary winds through the trees, rattled the house, brought the mother to tears once again.

Bradley took his chance. He heard a prayer in his head, somehow urging him to keep talking.

“You said she was a sickly baby and that she was in and out of hospitals, but you never knew what she was sick with,” Bradley kept an eye on the husband, who, despite his wife’s sobs, kept himself at a rather cold distance from her, “I need to know: did she hurt herself, or cut herself? Maybe in her arms or her legs?”

“No,” the parents chorused, the father hardened, the mother still sobbing.

“Did she ever hurt herself when she was a baby?” Bradley persisted, trying to make out the mother’s voice beneath her tears, “We’re looking at a sharp instrument, maybe a really sharp knife or pick -”

"No," this time, only the mother replied.

"Does she have any enemies, maybe classmates, someone she met online?" Bradley prayed that he was not too probing, but the previous year's events, and the anger that seemed to explode everywhere, did damage to everything it touched. He could leave no stone unturned, "Did she ever mention any arguments she might have had on Facebook, anyone harassing her on Instagram -"

“Look, son,” the father interposed, glare now even icier, one hand gesturing, “I don’t know how you do it in England, but we don’t ask questions like that around here.”

“Sir,” Bradley watched the father’s hand closely, “I just need to know -”

The father uttered something between a curse and a growl. Strangely, the mother had stopped sobbing, and was now watching Bradley closely.

“Sir - ma’am,” Bradley swallowed hard, “Your daughter is-”

“Her daughter is suffering, I know!” The father nearly screamed, but lowered his voice, eyes darting everywhere as though he expected his neighbors to catch him, “I’ve known for a year now, and we don’t want any more trouble. We just want this to be over. So get back in there and do your job-”

“Her?” was all that Bradley said.

The father paled. Over his eyes glazed memory, and upon it, resentment – and upon it all, anger. He seemed ready to fly at Bradley, but his wife grasped his arm in time, held him back, and spoke above the knot in her throat.

“She is suffering,” the mother spoke every word, eyes dark upon Bradley, hair glistening in the sun, “Make it stop. Do your job.”

There had been a buzz in the air, like cold white noise that no one knew was there until it was gone. The buzz had disappeared, as had the screams from upstairs. Bradley stepped back, listened closely as doors in the house opened and closed, and as footfalls echoed from the rooms.

“We’re done for now,” he felt his own voice deaden, “Fr. Callahan will be out in a while. I suggest you talk to him. And please make a clean confession.”

Bradley hated giving advice, and not because it wasn’t good; he hated giving advice because people would laugh at him, as though he’d asked them to strip naked. Confession truly was stripping naked. Very few people had the courage to do it. Even fewer people had the courage to make a very good one. An honest one. The confession to end all confessions.

The back door creaked open behind him.

Bradley turned around, but just in time to see the mother brighten, as though she were ready to follow what he had asked her to do.

Fr. Callahan was standing on the steps that led to the back door. The soft lines of his face were traced with streaks of both sweat and tears, and all the creases created by his work were sharper, darker in the spring light. At first glance, his green eyes seemed empty; but a closer look showed how he examined the world in all its detail, as though his world of shadows were so often shrouding the universe, that he had to commit all things sun-swathed to memory.

“Sir, Madame,” he had a bit of a Boston accent, a hint of an Irish brogue, both burbling beneath exhaustion, “Your daughter has been through another episode, and it is worse than anything she has ever had.”

The priest’s words were slow, plodding through the suddenly oppressive garden. Bradley nodded at him, then made to return to the house, indicating slightly, and with only his eyes, that the priest had a new task that would perhaps set the old, ongoing one to rights.

Fr. Callahan read the boy immediately, “I need to talk to you now, Sir, Madame,” and, lower, as Bradley passed him, “Stay inside and don’t let anyone come out.”

Bradley obeyed, one hand closing the back door behind him, the other finding support on one wall. He let out the breath he had been holding since he had been in the gardens. The air in the house was lighter than it had been minutes earlier; there were no smells now, no muffins or refuse or rotten eggs. There were, however, mumbling from upstairs, and the clickety-clack of a keyboard being used to within an inch of its life.

“Is that you, Bradley?” came Landon’s voice, through Bradley’s muddled brain, “Need you here. We have a problem.”

Bradley shook his head briskly, as though to push out all thoughts of the girl’s parents and what seemed to be a fiercely guarded, even shameful secret. He didn’t bother putting on a smile; he returned to his brother’s side, sprinting, his heart calming down.

“Sorry,” he sat on his chair again, tried to put his headset on, and then stopped.

Landon had not even looked at him, and Bradley could not help following his gaze.

Landon was staring at the monitors. The psychiatrist and doctor were upstairs, talking by the girl's bedside. The psychiatrist was taking the girl's pulse, and was starting to measure her blood pressure.

The doctor was slowly holding the girl's face, and trying to reset her jaw. He was holding her head steady: even on the monitor, the brothers could see a crimson rivulet coursing down her neck. The jaw had probably fractured, and one sharp, broken piece had probably sliced her cheek open. The cloth the doctor held to her face was slowly darkening with blood.

"We can't let her stay," Landon said at last, "She needs to go to the hospital now."

Bradley swore under his breath, "How do we explain this?"

"We'll let them decide," Landon typed something into his computer, pulling up the files from that morning's session, "But that's not the problem. Look at this."

Landon opened a file, bringing up footage of the last few minutes, which Bradley had missed. Bradley watched as the girl thrashed, her shouts matching what he had heard her scream, the scars on her legs appearing and disappearing.

But what struck Bradley was the time register on the video, marked out by large white letters on the bottom right corner. It suddenly read, "April 9, 1995" before shifting back to their current date.

"Play it again," Bradley's voice scraped out of his dry throat.

Landon obeyed. The video remained the same, the date changing, and then flickering back to normal.

"One more time," Bradley spoke.

"You're welcome," Landon replied.

And there the date was, changing with an almost audible crunch.

Bradley opened the girl's folder again, and looked for her birthdate. September 29, 1995.

"I looked," Landon interrupted Bradley's intake of air, "It's over five months before her birthday. Maybe it's a glitch, or maybe we're looking at a trick -"

"No," Bradley cut him off, closing the folder, "It makes sense."

Landon closed his open mouth, "Right," he closed all the open files on his computer, "Talk to me."

Bradley followed his brother's example, but kept his computer running with all the live feeds up, and all the temperature measurements still running. He took a quick look at the screen, then at the file folders before him, before he turned to Landon.

"I tried to talk to them," Bradley gestured with his head to the gardens, "They weren't exactly cooperative, as expected. But her dad said something. He called her 'her daughter'."

Landon hummed, "Not 'my daughter'?"

"Nope."

"Maybe he's mad at the situation." Landon suggested.

"Or maybe she's not his child," Bradley retorted broadly, stopping only when Landon's raised eyebrows had finally settled down, "No parent would ever say that, not even in anger, not even in panic. He said it like he'd always said it before."

Landon looked from his brother, to the wall, where beads of mercury continued to slowly drip down from the shattered thermometer. They sat quietly for a moment, listening to the footfalls of the priests upstairs. There was the sound of glass hitting glass; the monitor footage showed the priests sweeping the mess off the floor, with the doctor and psychiatrist still discussing something over the girl's calm body.

"Let's pretend you're married and you find out your wife's pregnant," Bradley watched the footage, eyes glazing over, "Let's pretend you've found out that it's not yours. What do you do?"

Landon's brow furrowed, as though he were struggling with a dozen possible answers, "Right now, I'd say I'd forgive her and let her have the baby – but that's only because we've just finished another session and I don't want to sin ever again. But," and here, Landon raised a hand, as though anticipating that Bradley would interrupt him, "If I were just having my dinner, and the missus just says it over the potatoes, 'Dear, I'm having a baby but you're not the dad'.... Well, I'd have to pick between strangling her and hunting down the real dad and beating the shit out of him."

Bradley's eyes widened.

"You asked," Landon glared back.

"Fine," Bradley let out one long breath, "All right – what about the baby?"

"She's gotta have it," Landon answered quickly.

"But what if he," Bradley's head gestured to the garden, "What if he didn't want it?"

Landon swallowed hard, "Are you saying he told her to have an abortion?"

“I’m saying he told her to have one, and she had one, but it failed,” Bradley spoke every word in a low whisper, as though afraid that the people upstairs would hear, “What if he just decided to accept the baby, as-is?”

“Hm.”

“It explains the sicknesses until age three, and the wounds. Her soul remembers it. She just doesn’t know.”

The footfalls upstairs had stopped. The brothers turned to the monitor, watched the priests pray over the girl, watched the doctor prop the girl’s cheek with a new piece of cloth, watched the psychiatrist try to awaken the girl with words that they could not hear.

“There are botched abortions all over the world,” Landon finally said, “You don’t see the grown adults getting possessed.”

“Then maybe something happened,” Bradley said, almost automatically, “Maybe there was just a lot of anger around the house and that called them to her. Or maybe there was a lot of hatred and she just sort of absorbed it. Or maybe someone cursed her and she’s just manifesting now. Or -”

Bradley’s sharp inhale made Landon jump in his seat, look at his brother, then follow his brother’s gaze. Right before them, no more than a few feet away, was the girl herself. She was standing in her nightclothes. Her hair lay in moist masses over her shoulders. But her jaw was fixed, and there was not a drop of blood on her body.

Her eyes were fully trained on Bradley.

“All of the above,” she spoke. Her voice was clear, her eyes alert.

But as the brothers blinked, so did she disappear.

They scrambled to check the footage. The live feed, which they had kept on for hours, had not been recorded. And all attempts to try to rewind or find footage from the last two minutes simply resulted in the computer crashing and then restarting. Landon typed line after line of code, trying to bring back the images, and succeeding only in sweating from head to foot. Bradley kept on restarting his own computer, trying to get any backup file.

Half an hour later, the brothers gave up.

The monitor continued to show the group upstairs praying over the girl’s body. She had not moved at all.

“That couldn’t be her,” Bradley finally broke the silence that had covered him and his brother through their file-searching ordeal, “It could have been the demon.”

Landon closed his laptop gently, “Or she could be asking for help,” he watched the monitor footage again, “Or she could be trying to help us – that is, if you’re right about all this.”

Bradley was about to insist that he was right, when the back door opened, and the priest walked into the room. He looked even more drained now, even gray, as he took the chair nearest the enclosure created by the recording equipment, pulled it closer to the brothers, and sat down slowly.

As he looked up, so did the brothers see how nearly colorless his skin was, as though his body had shrunk upon itself, and his skin had eaten away the muscles underneath. His hair, once brilliantly white, seemed to deaden. He had aged in both appearance and words, and he could hardly meet the boys' eyes.

Behind him came the parents. The father’s face was flat, as though he were fighting not to weep, or to lash out at his guests.

The mother, on the other hand, seemed to be at peace. She was not smiling, nor was she weeping; but her shoulders seemed higher, her age harder to guess. Even her voice had gained some roundness.

“We need to get the team,” she nodded to Landon, “Please call everyone downstairs.”

“The doctor and one priest should stay with her,” Fr. Callahan added, "She needs to rest."

Landon nodded once, took a radio from a bag behind him, and called one of the priests in the room upstairs. He watched on the monitor as the priest looked up at him, waiting for instructions.

The girl was awake. In between the mad dash for files and the priest’s entrance with her parents, her jaw had been reset and she was no longer bleeding. She was even nodding at the psychiatrist.

“Please call her down,” the mother spoke, voice rough with tears, "She needs to know."

The rest of the room turned to her, then to the head priest. He breathed once, looked at the father for approval, and waited. When there was only a tremble of the latter’s lips, he nodded his assent.

“We need everyone down here please,” Landon spoke into the radio, “Everyone. Now.”

Chapter 4

It took a while for everyone to reassemble in the dining room. The priest-assistants had to finish clearing the girl's bedroom, the doctor and psychiatrist had to check in with their offices, and Fr. Callahan had to pray in the garden. The father and mother were asking their daughter questions, ever so many questions that she finally broke through with her own inquiry about her brother.

And when her mother finally told her what had happened, the girl broke down in loud, shameless tears.

Bradley and Landon simply sat and reviewed their files, saving them in separate folders, and writing down where the files were. They never spoke to each other, not even when both of them were tempted to tell the head priest about the girl's specter, not even when the father walked over to their side and told them that there would be coffee and a meeting in five minutes.

At that, they both stood up and made for the dinner table. They sat themselves opposite the father and mother, who had placed the girl between them. On one end of the table were the priests; on the other end, the doctor and psychiatrist. On the table were plates of cookies, but no one seemed ready to eat.

Fr. Callahan finally arrived and began the meeting with a review of what had happened that morning. He pointed to each person in the room in turn, starting with the psychiatrist, who said that the girl had no signs of a disorder; then the doctor, who corroborated the psychiatrist's findings, adding that he had reset her jaw, and he had truly seen a large hole in her cheeks, but it had disappeared as they were called downstairs; then the priests, who added their own part in the story, from the prayers, to the cleanup, to how they had seen the cloth soaked with the girl's blood, but were also amazed at how she seemed uninjured; and then at last to Bradley and Landon, who talked about the missing recordings but left out the girl's sudden appearance and disappearance. Doing so, besides, would have required them to reveal what they had been talking about.

The review was routine, and no one fidgeted or asked anyone to talk faster. Even the girl was quiet; she simply cried into her mother's shoulder, hiding her face in her hands.

"Thank you, everyone," Fr. Callahan pronounced, taking a seat at the head of the table, next to the psychiatrist, "After we pray, we will talk about something consequential to this case. Please stay, do not leave the room, and do not interrupt unless you mean to correct something that was wrongly understood. We now open with our first prayer."

The father bowed his head. The mother continued to hold her daughter. The daughter whimpered, collapsed onto her mother's lap, and continued her sobbing there, out of sight of the rest of the table. The priest said nothing more, and simply opened his bible to one of the psalms, which he read out with a voice that both pierced into ears and bounced against what appeared to be walls of thickened air.

“What will follow is important to the case,” Fr. Callahan began, blinking his eyes tightly shut, then opening them wide, deepening the creases in his cheeks, “It can be distressing – but it can be liberating as well to all the people involved.”

The father reached up to wipe a tear from his own eyes. The move did not go unnoticed: the girl stopped sobbing, gasped, and sat up.

“Daddy?” She asked him softly, “What’s going on?”

The father did not even turn to her. The girl paled, beneath her mother’s embrace, and under the gazes of the rest of the table.

The priest took a long, deep breath, “This is something that concerns you,” he spoke slowly, as though fighting to control the sobs that seemed to squeeze his throat, “I now need to ask your parents: would you like to tell her story, or would you rather that I tell it as I heard it from you?”

“What?” was the girl’s faint question, “What is he talking about?”

The mother wasted no more time. She gave the girl a quick kiss to the brow, took her daughter’s hand, and nodded at the priest, almost all too briskly.

“She needs to know,” and, with her energy suddenly shrinking, as though she realized that they were not alone, “Please, tell her. I don’t think I can talk anymore.”

The priest recognized the mother’s hesitation, and his next words were stronger, “Everyone needs to hear this because we need to know what to pray for. Our doctor needs to know what physical illness he will need to focus on in the coming years. Our psychiatrist needs to know the next steps in therapy. We all need to pray if we want this all to end soon,” and, with a quick sweep of his hand around the table, “What you are all about to hear will not and should not leave this room. Do you all understand me?”

The priests folded their hands before them. The doctor and psychiatrist nodded once, leaning forward. Landon and Bradley stole glances at each other, and watched the father closely. The man seemed to be praying, or muttering something to himself, his eyes still to his fingers, his hands closed into fists where they rested on the table.

Fr. Callahan made the Sign of the Cross, and then looked directly at the girl, “Your story begins long before you were born.”

Chapter 5

The story took about an hour to narrate, punctuated as it was by pauses from the priest, as he allowed the girl to digest every chapter; apology after apology from the mother, as she embraced her child; and even a staunch, “But I still love you,” from the father, spoken so low, it was nearly buried beneath the rest of the priests’ prayers.

The prayers were hardly a disturbance. The brothers were used to them: they were meant to calm the room, to ask for understanding, to beg for guidance. The psychiatrist and the doctor squinted their eyes at Fr. Callahan as the prayers went on, as though the low hums were distracting them from the story at hand.

Only Bradley seemed composed through the proceedings; he even nudged his brother once or twice, as though to remind the other that he was being vindicated.

The story was told in its most simple terms.

The mother had been unhappy after the birth of her first child, the brother who was now in the hospital. She had been depressed, but her husband had always been at work, and he had paid her little mind. He had been off on business trips then because, he said, he needed the extra money for their new baby.

And that was when the new neighbor moved in.

He was an ordinary man who loved gardening, walking around the neighborhood, and talking to random strangers on the street. There had been a neighborhood where everyone knew everyone else anyway, and he fit in. His wife had just left him for another man. He had moved in to start a new life, as the head of an online startup that hoped to populate the web with good visual content. He took photos. He was nice.

The husband winced at some points of the story, but he did not interrupt.

The neighbor was alone, and he would sometimes say hello to the woman who lived next door, she with the baby and a husband who was always out. And she pitied him: here he was, pouring all his energy into the startup, exhausting all his creativity on photography, and with no one to listen to his ideas. And there she was, all alone, with enough stress to make her cry while her baby bawled, with no one in the world to pay her any attention.

They talked a lot. They shared ideas. He took photos of her garden, her kitchen, her baby. She critiqued his shots.

He took photos of her. They were fun at first, of her as mother to a child, in the garden, in the kitchen, at the dining table. And then the poses grew more sensual, sexual, even perverse. The mother never said how or why, never described the perversity to the rest of the table; but Fr. Callahan's acridity gave away the nature of what she and the neighbor had done.

And so began the affair.

She never told her husband about it, and he never sensed that something was amiss in those times he went home. But whenever he was gone, the neighbor would visit his wife; or she would visit the neighbor, on the pretext of borrowing gardening tools; or they would meet in a motel outside town, with the baby tagging along, asleep in a bassinet.

The woman who had felt so alone, the man who had felt so rejected – they had both found refuge in each other's presence, a listening ear where there once had been none, arms where there had once been cold.

The mother kept apologizing in a low, trembling voice, but no one was paying her any mind.

They lived the lie for about two months, after a harsh winter, and then a mild spring.

Then, the woman found out she was pregnant.

She knew the neighbors would notice sooner or later. She knew her husband would see the signs when he came home. They had not slept together since Christmas, when he had last been with her for longer than two weeks. Her baby was no more than two months old.

Then there was the shame to be dealt with from everyone who knew her. Her parents. Her newborn son. Her husband's parents. And so many other people...

She visited her father confessor. She hadn't seen him since Christmas mass, when he had last blessed her family. She had hardly gone to church since she was married, and she never knew why.

He told her to keep the baby and to pray that her husband would understand. And he told her to break it off with the neighbor.

She hated his advice. She remembered why she didn't like church at all. It was stifling, and silly, and a routine that she never understood. Even confession was useless when she kept on committing the same sins over and over again – and especially when the man on the other side of the screen couldn't understand how difficult it was to deal with the world's temptations.

And all this time, she never told her neighbor anything. Somehow, deep within, she felt that (knew that) he would not react in any logical, much less merciful way.

She was right. He found out when he saw the look on her face after she struggled to find the words to tell him. And he told her to go to an abortion clinic because he didn't need a child now. He was too busy, she was married, and besides, didn't they agree that what they had wouldn't last anyway? Why mark the whole affair with a human being?

The daughter's tears dried completely at the words. She gasped, flinched as her mother tried to embrace her, and brought her knees to her chin. And there she sat, listening, a ball of dazed silence.

The mother walked out on the argument then, on that spring day. She didn't want to go through with the abortion. But she was afraid of everyone, and she couldn't face her husband in two weeks, when he came home from a long trip. She knew he didn't cheat on her. He was much too emotionally unavailable for that, much too preoccupied with work, and able to handle the stress. But this would kill him.

So, she struggled for a few weeks with the decision. And she didn't push through with it.

She told the neighbor no, she wouldn't. The baby would live.

He stormed out of his house, drove across town, went somewhere. She was too angry with him to care.

One afternoon, the neighbor came calling.

He looked repentant. Or crazy. Or sad. Or angry. Or afraid. She couldn't tell. He asked for her forgiveness, brought her vitamin shakes he made himself, he said, for the baby. He said he would support her no matter what happened. He said he would take care of his child, their child, their baby. He asked her to eat something because she was so thin, and he didn't want her to ever feel alone.

He told her to drink the vitamin shakes. He had made them himself.

She suddenly felt happy again. Whole again. Loved again. She followed his orders because she trusted him and wanted him to stay. And she was so full of love and emotions and inspiration inside.

It was the last thing she remembered. His smiling face. His hand on her cheek. The baby crying in the crib.

And then there was blood, bubbling inside her, spilling out, forming a puddle on the floor between her legs. His smile fading. The baby now bawling. The spring afternoon suddenly going black.

She woke up in the hospital days later. Her husband was at her side.

She had never seen him angrier – never seen him sadder. But one look at him and she knew that beneath his relief that she was alive, he already knew her secret.

She didn't remember what the doctor said was in the shakes. Whatever it was, it had caused her to bleed, and for her to nearly lose the baby. Her little boy had cried long and hard enough to get the attention of another neighbor, who had called 911.

When the cops had arrived at her house, they found her lying on the kitchen floor, in a pool of blood, unconscious.

They contacted her husband, and he flew in immediately. He flew when the words, “But the baby’s ok”, drifted through the phone lines. On the way home, he realized that he hadn’t slept with his wife since Christmas, and she would have known that she was four months pregnant. She would have phoned him. She would have told him something. And then he saw her in the hospital with a stomach barely registering a two-month-old child.

And then he knew.

And he walked for hours under the sharp April rain. Walked aimlessly, thinking of what she had done, what it seemed she had tried to do.

He said he was ready to kill someone, but something held him back.

They had an infant son, now with grandparents, her parents. The father had walked to his in-laws’ house, held his little boy, ignored his in-laws’ pleas for him to change out of his soaking, rain-drenched clothes, and fought every urge to tell them that there was something amiss. Why he never ratted her out, he didn’t know. But at that moment, he knew he loved her too much, and that they would endure the storm.

But the anger. Oh God, the anger.

Anger threatened love but did not replace it. The father swore it then, and he swore it now, at the dinner table, before his family, before his guests.

The air of the house seemed to lift.

At that point, the girl wriggled herself out of her mother’s arms, and threw her arms around the man who had served as her father. She wept, whispered that she didn’t know. And he told her he loved her still. It was a low voice that said it, but it calmed the girl, made her keep her arms around him, made her cling to him and sob.

And so – the priest went on – the father went back to the hospital. He waited by his wife’s bedside. When she awakened, they argued, but mildly. She told him everything. He listened. He understood that he had a part in it, too. She acknowledged her selfishness. He admitted that, to some extent, his work had been a form of selflessness that had become vanity. They had their first real conversation in months.

Then it was a decade of couple’s counseling after. They moved out and fled to Boston, where they knew nobody, had no relatives. They got their son into a new school. They started a new life. They put up their own company.

The mother had the baby before they left town. It was a rough first few years. Their savings went to hospital visits where no diagnosis could be made. Their money went to doctors who could

only prescribe something for their baby's fever, and do no more. They paid for hours at their daughter's – their – bedside, watching as she twisted her tiny body, in the throes of a nightmare that no one could measure.

And somehow, in those hours spent caring for a sickly infant that was truly not his own, the father learned to love her.

Then suddenly, it all stopped. The illnesses disappeared, the fevers leveled out, and their baby girl grew up to be healthy and happy. The family went back to church, the parents took care of their own company, their children went to school, and their family grew closer. Her brother didn't know their secret, and he loved his sister with no qualms. Maybe the occasional hair-pulling incident, the rare scraped knee from blundering chases around the yard – but nothing big or damaging. He protected her.

It was he who had first reported that something was wrong.

His room was across the hall from his sister's, and he sometimes heard her talking to someone in the early hours of the morning. He thought it was a boy, calling on the phone, too afraid to talk to their dad. He didn't think of confronting her. She had her own mind, always did anyway, and could make her own decisions.

That was until one morning, when he heard her leave her room, close the door – and crash herself down the stairs.

After a night at the hospital to tend to her wounds, after a night watching her twist herself into new nightmares, after her parents found themselves back where they were sixteen years before – everything went downhill. Their daughter had her lucid moments; but in between, she would growl to herself, call her brother and parents names, and leer at her mother as though she were ready to spill her secret.

But it was impossible. She didn't know. She couldn't know.

They called in the psychiatrist, their friend from church, who was seated at the table with them. The psychiatrist had examined her, found nothing wrong, and decided to call in a doctor when she started bleeding from her ears. The doctor, the same one seated at the table, had found nothing wrong with her either. But the nightmares would not stop. The attempts to throw herself out of windows and from the tops of stairs would not stop. Her grades, once so high, dropped horribly because she couldn't concentrate, had no sleep, couldn't remember anything and needed someone to tell her everything she said or did a few hours after the fact.

The parents were sure that people at school were talking. But they couldn't let the worries bother them any longer – not when their daughter was already talking in languages even they could not understand.

Their parish priest had once visited them and heard her. He swore she had said, and in Aramaic, "Leave us now".

It was he who called the local bishop, who then referred Fr. Callahan. The bishop contacted the cardinal, who called the Vatican and filed the report. The Vatican itself sent the two brothers to document the case. As a reminder: the Vatican took all cases of possession seriously, and the grave cases had to be documented. Those who worked with the Vatican as documentors were well trained, and could recognize the signs of genuine possession themselves.

The priest chanced to look at Bradley as he said this. Bradley tried not to blink, and pressed his lips closer. The temptation was greater, it seemed, to tell the priest everything that had transpired that afternoon, when the girl was suddenly before them in all her gray glory, before she suddenly disappeared, taking all their files and footage with her.

But that wasn't the end of the story.

The girl would perhaps want to know what happened to her biological father, the priest said.

The girl visibly fought not to nod too enthusiastically, as though fearing that she would offend the man she now held and called "dad".

When she was born, the priest continued, her parents tried to reach out to him. They needed anything he could give by way of medical history at least, just in case doctors would ask later. They called him, sent him an email, sent someone to check on him. He ignored the call and email, slammed the door in their representative's face, and sent a note or response back with the exact same words every time.

I have no child.

The girl's eyes filled with tears. They slid slowly down her cheeks, marking her skin anew with dark tracks.

They were about to send a letter back, to persuade him to help out – this was around the time that the girl was in the hospital with a high fever that had no visible, discernible cause – but they saw him on the evening news first.

Man Burns Self in Home, the headline read, carrying a grainy mugshot of him taken a few days before, when he had been arrested for killing his neighbor's dog with a shotgun.

He was deeply disturbed, the anchor had said. He had been undergoing therapy for some time, and his psychiatrist said – in an unaided interview – that he was seeing things and talking about things that were not there. He had also said that he would burn down everything and everyone because that was what his boss Beelzebub had ordered.

The air in the room grew prickly, stung, played on people's skin. Bradley fought to swallow the dry lump in his throat.

The news didn't make it to another night. Nobody really cared about raving, dead lunatics talking about mythical creatures. The parents didn't think too much of it, either. It was

distressing, true; but it was better for their daughter to have a good pair of parents, a righteous pair of parents, a stable pair of parents. Had she known her true father, their daughter would be a mess.

They thought nothing of it, until the nightmares began.

Their daughter was very young, maybe six or seven, when she first ran into their room in the middle of the night, telling them that a scary man was trying to take her away. It happened several times over the next few years, until she was in junior high. She would run into their room, afraid of a scary man. She would sleep on their bed. She would leave at dawn. She would not remember anything, much less bring it up the next day.

The last time it happened, she said that the scary man was burning. She threw herself down the stairs the following night.

And when things went from bad to worse, all they could think of was how to keep the secret from getting out.

“Why didn’t you just tell me?” Suddenly came from the mass of hair and tears, “Maybe I wouldn’t be like this if you actually just said something!”

Bradley was about to open his mouth, but it was too late. The daughter was hysterical, her parents were getting defensive, and the psychiatrist and doctor were trying to intervene. The priests had stopped their praying and were staring at the scene. Even Landon wasn’t moving.

Fr. Callahan alone had marked Bradley’s movements. They met eyes across the noise, and any unease Bradley had with the man was gone. He saw weak eyes, the creases of age, the gray skin of someone who knew how to read people.

The priest gave him a single nod. Bradley answered with a nod back, then motioned to the family.

“We need to adjourn for today,” Fr. Callahan pronounced, silencing the rest of the table, “The team and I need to discuss the next step forward. Let us pray.”

The prayers rang throughout the room, with lilt, with breaths that buzzed with the start of every “thee”, with the end of every “beseech”, with urgency and calm and love.

Nothing, however, stilled the girl. She was sobbing quietly at first, even as she joined the prayers in a halting, tear-choked voice. Soon, she was weeping, wailing low, words directed to the space between her palms, head buried in the shoulder of the man she had called her father for eighteen years.

And when the Holy Water had been sprinkled upon the last Sign of the Cross, she sprang up, stormed out, and ran to the nearest bathroom to lock herself in.

The psychiatrist and doctor were on her heels at once, followed by her parents, leaving the priests and two exhausted brothers at the table.

They listened to the conversation in the hallway, eyes to their fingers or the tablecloth whenever the girl shouted out something laden with more curses than sense, eyes rolling whenever the mother shushed her with, "Please stop! The neighbors might hear you, and they won't stop talking!"

"You should have thought about that before you got yourself knocked up!" Was the last shout, with a tinge of a roar, an undercurrent of rage in a thousand other whispers left unheard. It sent the father out to the kitchen, where he rattled his way through a variety of knives and tools, presumably in a bid to find the right tool to break down the bathroom door.

Bradley groaned into his palm. He had witnessed the same scene many times before, in a variety of sessions that involved lies about the past that suddenly came to light. There were the tiny lies of promises of love sugar-coated by actual curses, the medium-sized lies of alcohol and trysts that happened once and were regretted a thousand times over, the large lies of hidden lives and deceit and no repentance. They were lies, nonetheless, and the forces of Hell ruled over them all. Nothing was ever harmless or venial where wars were concerned.

Bradley's groan was more a testament to his need for sleep than fresh irritation at the situation at hand.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, when the two priests looked at him mid-prayer, "Hate to say it, but she's right."

"And that doesn't really help us now," Landon half sang.

"Just saying," Bradley chanted back.

Landon waited as the girl's shouts filled the house with vitriol and curses yet again, "She'll come around in a few," he said, one hand on his brother's head, as though in reprimanding comfort, "As for you, you need sleep."

Bradley shrugged, as the girl's vocabulary of swear words dried out in a flood of sobs, and as the sound of an unlocking bathroom door filled the house with a resounding click. The brothers could hear nothing now, save the girl's muffled sobs, the psychiatrist's low words, the ping of a thermometer as the doctor took her temperature.

"I'm not sick, Dr. Brown," the girl moaned.

"You know what it's for," Dr. Brown, the psychiatrist, retorted, in the patient tone of a professor, "Sit down and we'll finish checking your vitals, and then you can go to bed, all right?"

"My bedroom's a mess."

“You can sleep on another bed for now.”

“No bed is safe. The shadow man will always be there.”

There was a pause, almost a second too long, as the parents sobbed quietly in the hallway, and as the priests paused in their prayers.

“He will be back for as long as we don’t keep up the fight,” Dr. Brown said at last, voice still soothing, tone as level as before, “So I need you to help us fight, ok? We’ll help you, but you need to fight.”

“Ok,” was the low reply, behind sputtered tears.

“And most important of all,” the psychiatrist continued, “You have to want to fight. Can I get that promise from you?”

“Ok.”

“Ok?”

“I promise.”

“Do you want to talk tonight, or will we talk tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow, please.”

“All right,” Dr. Brown seemed to pronounce the final verdict on the girl’s fate with those two words. He was both firm and soothing, a combination that made the priests bow their heads to their prayers again, and that made Bradley breathe deeply, after what felt like centuries of no exhaling.

And with that, the house itself seemed to let go of years of fists clenched around secrets, of eyes closed against the past. Where there were once dark corners there now seemed to be light. Where there was once a wintry, biting frost, there was now a cool breeze. Even the sound of the telephone ringing in the hallway jarred no one, when it once caused the whole house to jump in fright.

The father picked it up, his greeting low, his words getting louder as he answered the call.

“Yes, this is his father,” came out first, jittery, halting; then, in a less trembling voice, “Yes, yes, thank you – this is most wonderful – it’s good, very good news. I can be there tonight. Yes, I’ll stay with him.”

The table heard the father take his car keys from their peg on the wall, and then announce, to all and no one in particular: “He’s ok. They fixed everything. He’ll be fine. Nothing was broken. He just lost a lot of blood, and he’s sleeping, but he’ll need someone beside him tonight.”

And with that, all they saw was his figure speeding out of the house; all they heard was his car rumbling out of the driveway. No one dared stop him, not even his wife, who was still sobbing in the hallway, or his daughter, who had been silent long after the psychiatrist had promised that she could sleep.

“We can wrap up here,” Fr. Callahan suddenly spoke up, turning the brothers’ heads toward him, “Thank you, both of you. We’ll probably need you for the next session. Wait for our call.”

The boys nodded. Bradley had to fight to keep his eyes open. “I’m sorry I have to send you away early,” the priest gestured, rather awkwardly, at Bradley, as though afraid to refer to the boy as part of his explanation, “But I need you both at a hundred percent – and I don’t want to put you in danger, young man. Not again.”

Anyone else would have taken offense at the apparent attack on their ability to keep up the fight. Bradley, however, simply nodded, waited for Landon to stand up, and then followed. The boys did not take formal leave of the family. They simply lifted their bags, spoke low to the priests in goodbye, and left. There was no need for elaborate, protracted farewells at the end of each session.

“Unless this is Argentina,” Landon had once quipped, when an older, South American priest wondered whether they had ever considered staying for a while and talking to the family.

Landon and Bradley had both been a major part of forty or so cases in the last ten years. There were no real definitions, no absolute framework by which they could judge each victim, nor any standards that dictated how exactly each session would proceed and under whose supervision and leadership. Sometimes the session would go on for a mere hour, which turned into a single hour each day, every day, for a year. At other times, the session would take place over the span of forty-eight hours, with no letup, no pause.

The boys were there to document everything, from the house temperature to the temperature of the victim, from the heat signatures generated by those who were participating to the visible manifestations of those who came and went invisible, from the words spoken loud to those whispered too high for any human ear to hear. And, when all was done, they would send the files to the Vatican, which would hand them over to priests refashioning the curriculum of the training program that formed the newly revived Ministry of Exorcism.

The recordings were difficult to take at face value, however, and they needed someone to analyze them as a whole rather than in individual parts – a task that their Uncle Jorge had promised them would be done, if only they could find priests both willing and able to take on what would be a grisly, frightening task.

“He’s been promising that since he was an archbishop,” Bradley once whined to another priest, who was also his uncle’s best friend, “But nothing’s happened even now that he’s a cardinal!”

“It is not an ordinary task, my son” was the priest’s usual answer, “Taking on the mantle of exorcist is an act of humility and debasement, an acknowledgement of powerlessness and reliance on the powers of God alone. It is a battle of power that infects everything it touches. You cannot expect one man alone to do this.”

“But Uncle Jorge said the research could help more people, Fr. Anthony,” Bradley had once persisted, in a singsong whine that any five-year old might have made, “There has to be more urgency.”

“At the risk of carelessly injuring one of our own?” Fr. Anthony would often finish, “Some have tried, all have given up. We have no other choice but to wait for an analyst.”

The same Fr. Anthony had once traveled through the U.S. (and even Europe) with Landon and Bradley, as the principal exorcist for the most extreme, ongoing cases that the Vatican needed documentation for. He might have been decades old, but he never seemed to tire, whether he was ministering to a case or training young priests who were either too frightened or too excited to open the Roman Ritual, whether he was on the road or behind his desk as the chair of the Vatican's Office of Exorcism Research.

Bradley and Landon - the Sheffield brothers - were one among many other teams around the world, but the Vatican had already named them the most sought after of all the documentors. They were thorough, warm, compassionate, and yes, inquisitive. Landon appeared to be the more observant of the two, and he could sometimes predict when things would occur, or point out something that happened to disrupt what he saw as a regularity.

Bradley, for his part, knew what to expect out of personal experience.

Chapter 6

Bradley had been no more than ten years old then. He was simply a little boy on vacation with his parents, brother, and uncle in Argentina.

His father was captain of one of the luxury cruise liners that plied their way between London and Buenos Aires. His mother was a former singer on one of those ships who had caught the eye of the quiet captain, married him, and bore him two boys. They were hardly ever together as a family; but come vacation, the boys would speed their way out of the schoolroom and travel the world with their parents.

Bradley was as carefree as any child could be within the limits of his own awareness of his place. He would run through the ship's lower decks with his brother, but walk like a young gentleman when he was amongst guests. He would run his own races in the streets of Rio de Janeiro or Kingston or Miami, but sit still and eat his dinner like a young lord when his father and mother brought him and his brother along to the lavish parties of the city's elite. He would be quiet and listen at mass, hands folded, back straight, especially when his uncle was officiating, but he threw caution to the winds when he played at that Buenos Aires park on that spring afternoon.

There was little he remembered of the circumstances that led to the experience, or of the people that allowed it to happen. He would, on occasion, catch glimpses of a slaving hound, its fur singed by a mange that spread black heat over its body; or an old woman, with wings of bone and leather hidden beneath her linen gown, her hair a bright silver that peeked beneath a careworn cap; and a spirit of ice that froze his insides, gripped his joints, kept him in place, as though he had been chosen since the beginning of time.

What Bradley remembered, and with vividness, were the waking dreams. He could not describe them then, and hence could remember events, scenes, flashes, rather than words, conversations, emotions. He only knew that something else was in control, and that something else had edged him out in a battle he never even remembered fighting. It made him say unspeakable things to his mother, made him growl at his father or lunge at his brother from across the dinner table after the latter had more than a generous helping of that evening's steak.

Oh, but what had truly incensed the spirit was his uncle, who was already the bishop of Buenos Aires, and who seemed to know how to best awaken the anger that seethed and frothed in Bradley. It took but the Sign of the Cross, the holding of a consecrated host, and even a prayer that his uncle had not even said out loud. And then there would be rage creeping in his insides, and his veins would press upwards against his skin, and his nerves would fire all at the same time and he would see both the ceiling and the floor at once, and then his spirit would let go of a rope it did not even remember holding, and then a toy ship was tossing alone on a roiling, boiling sea – and there was Bradley, all alone.

And there was Bradley, in a whole other universe, in a world between sleep and death.

Sometimes he could hear his parents weeping, or his brother screaming, or his doctor saying that nothing was wrong, and they could find nothing amiss. And then Bradley would call out to the heavens in his world of storms and waves, and he would call out to all, call out to no one.

“I’m here! Let me out!”

There was little else he knew how to say, for some reason. Bradley did well at school, and often got into trouble for talking too much; but now, he could say so little, save the five words. He spent time in that prison of water, not knowing whether he had been in there for mere hours or centuries. Time had lost meaning when all he wanted to do was –

He did not remember wanting to do anything, and not until he heard several voices crying out at once.

“You have to fight, Bradley,” was the clearest of them. He recognized it as his uncle’s, from the singsong tone of the man’s Spanish, and from the comfort it brought in that dark, starless sea.

To scream, he knew; but to fight, he knew not how. He thought he needed to call in the other ships that he had passed on the way. He felt small beneath some of them, as their metal hulls screeched past his toy boat; and he felt that some of them had been abandoned, tossed forever in the waters, waiting for a harbor –

A harbor.

And that was how he finally knew. He had to fight before sailing out, for to sail alone meant death if his boat had been fashioned for mere display. He had to find his safe harbor, dock his little peep of a boat, and remake it with the help of God Made Man and His Mother, through his guardian angel. And he had to want to do it, no matter how the stormy sea sometimes gave him comfort, no matter how he wanted to be away as master of his own tiny boat.

And so, Bradley docked and rebuilt, with steel that arose from nowhere, rivets brought into existence by the words of his angel, and glass that seemed to spring forth naturally whenever he chanced to build a window. Deck upon deck came to life, in those hours or days or months he spent at that harbor, somewhere between the world of the living and the land of the dead.

Around him lurked monsters and beasts, and in his head rang their invitations for him to rest, to give up the fight, to live in total surrender because no single ship was worth all his toil and effort. He learned to shut out their voices; his guardian angel grew ever more aggressive and began raising fists against their foes. Fights would break out often, and the almost endless night would thrum and clang with the voices of the damned; but Bradley kept on.

And one day, there the ship was, glorious and standing against the cries of souls and beasts, fashioned through prayers from above and within, and built by the tiny hands of Bradley’s soul. There it stood, slicing into the darkness of sky and sea to exhale a morning that splashed its glory onto the waters.

Bradley sailed.

His spirit no longer fled or weakened; it recognized the heat and silver blood of a celestial battle.

His ship met a small armada of boats fashioned from masts of skin and decks of bone. He felt alone, for a flicker of a moment or for an eternity, he knew not. But he knew that the battle had to take place, for to delay it would be to push him deeper into the seas, far away from the soothing voice of his uncle, the safe harbor where the Son of Man and His Mother waited, the angel that now stood beside him and urged him forward. To delay would be a willing surrender, and forward he plunged.

It was here that his memories faltered. On some days, he remembered ships crying out in a blast of bone and metal shards. On other days, he remembered sitting with his uncle, confessing his sins, or attending mass despite the invisible rope that gripped him by the neck and attempted to throw him bodily from the church. And on the rarest of days, the sea and the church became one, as he fought the bloodied ships with a growing host of angels and floated in the bridges between worlds.

The battle raged for both centuries and endless hours.

There was a single ship in that armada, he remembered, that looked as though it had been fashioned entirely from linen and nails. It overflowed with spite and hatred and empty rebellion. It drew out the evening, slashed across brightness, illuminated everything with dark metallic light. Bradley knew he had to destroy it, for it was the center of the army, its core of energy, its master and commander.

Every time he tried to sail toward it, the other ships would come forward, block his path, and send forth a black cloud of glass and dust. And each time, Bradley would despair, but only for a moment.

From everywhere around him, he would hear voices, shouts, his uncle demanding that one of the screaming, screeching beings give its name, the black smoke calling back mockery and ravenous rage in languages Bradley could not understand. Against them ran a rain of chants and prayers, which sometimes drew back the darkness and brought forth its own fingers of sharp, soothing light.

Then he would no longer despair, the young captain Bradley, and he would fight on.

And one day, after breaths of battle or centuries of war, Bradley came up against the ship of nails. He could feel nothing but the anger stitched into its hull, see nothing but metallic darkness bleeding from its decaying innards. He felt his angel envelope him in its massive wings, heard voices thundering in command from the heavens, and sensed a single whisper that seemed to echo an order from a Creator who had never left Bradley's side.

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, I demand that you tell me your name!”

The ship cried out in pain, and through the darkness pierced points of light. The anguish was indistinguishable from the screams of the waves dashing against the ships, but Bradley could hear a clear, ringing name that he would never ever speak aloud. The mere name would call the demon back and reopen the doors. It would bring forth the battle once again, and the stormy sea, and the armada of darkness that swallowed the world of eternal time.

Bradley knew that this was its weakest point, and thereupon dashed his ship against the nails. He knew not how many times he fought on that watery battlefield, or what his prayers were as his ship rammed against an enemy built with fear and lies. He only knew that he wanted it all to end.

When he next breathed, he was in his room, in his mother's arms, and vomiting black nails that disappeared into dark dust the moment they hit the floor.

He had been possessed for two weeks, his uncle said, by a minor demon that had been sent to him as part of a curse. He had met someone who wanted him damned, but who had not counted on the strength of the boy's faith. The demon itself had its own army of followers, but they were weak in the face of prayers, fleeing at the merest mention of the names of the Saints. Bradley had been strong and had fought bravely, and the expulsion appeared complete.

The episode, for all its quiet desperation, had never been forgotten. The entire family returned to church: Bradley's father resigned, choosing a desk job on land instead so that he could be with the boys; Bradley's mother grew ever closer to her sons, and spent more time mending the cracks in her relationship with her husband, which the exorcism had uncovered; and the two boys grew up knowing that the battle had just begun.

There would be more attacks, each fiercer, more determined than the one before; there would be more demons, each more vainglorious than its predecessor, each wanting to break down the walls the family had built.

Their uncle never left them, whether physically or spiritually: even when the man waged his own understated uprising against Argentina's military regime, even when he was given the title of cardinal later on. Even when he ministered to whole of Buenos Aires, he never stopped talking to the boys.

There was, perhaps, a wish for at least one of the brothers to join the priesthood, but it appeared that they had other plans which, though contrary to hopes, did not deviate too greatly from expectations. Bradley studied film and society at university; Landon, for his part, chose psychology, then sociology, before settling on Latin languages, which he truly loved, he said, after hearing his uncle hold the Mass in Latin. Bradley worked with London film studios that specialized in documentaries on the supernatural, and Landon worked with the European Union office to write and translate speeches.

Their jobs eventually became part-time ventures, however, when they both realized that their childhood had reached out to into their careers in ways they had never imagined.

Chapter 7

Landon had always been close to his uncle the cardinal, and he confided in the man, long after Bradley had been liberated, and long after Landon had chosen a career in languages inspired by his Uncle Jorge. The man stood by them for years, as Bradley recovered, as the boys wrote to him about their adventures at school, as their uncle sometimes consulted with them on the exorcism cases he was handling, and as the young men became orphans just as their careers began.

Their parents died in a car crash in London: the boys were off documenting the aftermath of a deadly hurricane in the US for the EU central government, the rest of the world was calculating its next steps as a flood of storms hit land and killed thousands in quick succession, and the church was reexamining cases of priests and bishops who had erred on so many different sides of morality. Their uncle flew in from Argentina to help them with the funeral arrangements, to comfort the boys.

In that same month, the boys saw beyond their grief, and even beyond their careers. They saw their past, a world burbling with chaos, a sea of humanity boiling over with anger and desperation.

“Anger is a gateway,” their uncle said one afternoon, weeks after the boys had laid their parents to rest, “That gateway is open wide today, and has been so for decades.”

There was always a pause whenever their uncle spoke about his tasks. He would shift between heavily accented English and the lilting, laughing Spanish of the Buenos Aires streets. That same song, so deeply embedded in the sentences he once seemed to sing, now mellowed beneath the gold of the coming sunset.

“There are more cases on the rise,” his dismay was almost icy, “We cannot simply sit and wait for someone to fund our proposal.”

Landon asked about the research constantly, in those months following his parents' funeral. Bradley, with his own experience, sensed that these cases were much like his, if not worse. Like his brother, the boy could not contain his curiosity.

“What does the Vatican say?” they would often inquire.

When their uncle first answered the question, he was at their house, washing pots and pans after he had finished making them breakfast. He continued his response as the boys and he went out for a walk in Hyde Park, down avenues of trees bright green with summer and sparkling with dew. He did not stop speaking even when they had seated themselves at lunch, with baskets of fish and chips, with the boys eating slowly as they listened to their uncle talk about the work he had done in the last few decades, how that work could not bear fruit amongst the many ills of the church, and how that work continued to grow as those same ills came to light.

That church lived in a world that gradually revealed in the velvet darkness of temptation and the defeat of the noble soul – their uncle called it an illumination by shadows.

When the dusk came too harshly, when there were shouts in the streets for justice for this or that boy slain in the back alleys of London, when there was too much anger riding on the waves of beer and ale in the pubs, when there was news of somewhere, someplace on earth that drew out a disbelieving laugh from the most serious of people – when the world grew heavier, their uncle would call it an illumination by darkness.

“We think it guides us,” he would wrap up his fish and chips carefully, and seal the drink he had barely even sipped from, “We think it enlightens us, but it is pure darkness. It is anger. It is neither righteous nor wise, nor seeking understanding. It simply divides and revels in the division.”

Their uncle would sit in silence, as the boys finished their meal, as the world went on its merry way outside. Sometimes there would be laughter from the side streets, or the sound of a child screeching for its mother, or the drone of a motorbike as it navigated the London alleys with sharp angles and turns. And then, their uncle’s voice would break through the low clamor.

“The only way you can drive this out is by light,” his hands rested on the wrapped-up pieces of fish and chips, as though protecting them, “But what happens when that light is so feeble? When those that try to keep the light are laughed at and ignored?”

“I don’t want to crush a good proposal, uncle,” Landon cut in, one afternoon, after almost identical conversations marked the boys’ evenings, “But the course does sound expensive. The Vatican might feel forced to pay for everything, and to keep on paying, if the lessons, as you said, are too complicated to be taught in just a month.”

“I know, young man,” the priest replied, sighing, “The Vatican has enough problems trying to figure out who has paid what to whom. The last I heard, they were not willing to pay money to go to war with invisible enemies that were figures of speech and most likely products of the imagination of people who over-interpreted biblical texts.”

“Well, that’s taking it too far,” Landon muttered, following his uncle’s example and wrapping up his own dinner in its parchment.

Their Uncle Jorge had never lost his sense of humor, despite the gravitas his tone took that early evening, “They have money, but they have bills to pay. Surely you cannot imagine the whole of the Vatican run by steam and firewood.”

Landon opened his mouth, drew his breath, almost made an interruption on what he thought the Vatican was truly running.

“And yes, there are cases – and there are many,” his uncle cut him off, sentences overtaken by Spanish words once again, “The Vatican pays its lawyers – I hope it is to see that justice is done, and that priests are not simply sent off elsewhere to spread more evil.”

The boys would be quiet when these moments came, when their brief dinners were suddenly peppered with long conversations and bouts of pregnant silence. The boys were still finding their bearings without their parents, but their uncle did stand in quite well as a guide, on those evenings in London, for that first month without their gentle father and quiet mother, in those four weeks that their uncle would take them out, talk to them, tell them stories.

At the end of their dinner, they would always stand up, make for their apartment, walk slowly as the evening drank its way to life around them. In the beginning, the boys would stand to the side and watch their uncle Jorge give the leftovers of his dinner to a beggar on a street corner. The giving took a good quarter of an hour, as their uncle would chat up the man in his broken English (or in complete, singing Spanish, if the beggar happened to be an unfortunate immigrant), and convince the beggar to return to his family, or seek help from a professional institution, or find a job in one of the nearby pubs.

The boys never knew if the beggars with whom their uncle spoke ever followed the man's advice, but they never saw the beggars again, save one who once stopped them in Covent Garden and thanked their uncle for his wisdom. He was wearing a dishwasher's uniform, and was a hundred degrees cleaner and happier than when they saw him last.

One night, Landon followed his uncle's example, and gave his own dinner away. And on that same night, despite all their efforts at covering the noise with questions and conversation, their uncle's phone would not stop ringing.

The boys knew it was his Argentinian diocese calling. The diocese called at the same time every day, on their uncle's bidding, to report about the parishes, the communities, the priests who often had all the heart but less systematic approaches to their tasks. The boys had heard the conversations so often, they already knew which priest had which problems in which part of the Buenos Aires slums.

The calls, however, would stop after several rings, as the owner knew that their Uncle Jorge was tending to more pressing matters. This evening, the ringing was incessant, almost annoying. The beggar even stared at Uncle Jorge's pants pocket, as though he, too, knew that the call had gone from simple updating to outright urgency.

They had not heard the news yet, but the single phone call had been enough to send their uncle packing to return to Argentina, and then on to Rome.

It was the day that Pope John Paul II had died.

Everything afterward was a whirlwind of work. Their uncle had helped elect the new Pope, a man who had long been his friend, and who knew of the work that Jorge did in assembling a new course on exorcism. Jorge returned to Argentina right after the elections, there to continue his work as cardinal of Buenos Aires; he did, however, stop in London once again to introduce his nephews to his best friend, the American priest.

Fr. Anthony was an exorcist with decades of experience, with enough smiles to light the world, but enough nightmares to last several lifetimes. Fr. Anthony and Uncle Jorge had been working on the exorcism course together for decades, and had grown to be the best of friends in the process. After all the years of pitching the course and refining it, after hours spent brainstorming on its content, the Vatican finally decided that it was ready for implementation.

The whirlwind of Uncle Jorge's life, and by some transference, the boys', turned into a storm of work. Hundreds of priests flocked to the Vatican, to enroll in the month-long course, to practice what they learned in an Italian town for another month, and then to share their experiences and insights for another month as they served as mentors to another batch of priests. The course was as demanding as it was in demand; the waiting list swelled to the tens of thousands as the course was opened to all religious in hundreds of languages.

What the course taught the Vatican, however, was that it was almost too late in coming. The same thousands of priests did not come as blank slates: they had already experienced the unnamable darkness, they had their own stories, they had already struggled with the unseen forces that cast their own light by shadow. The influx of priests showed how woefully backward the course was, and how there were new cases that no longer fit the old patterns so readily identifiable in decades past.

"I think the devil is doing his own research and teaching his own course," Fr. Anthony once joked over dinner with the boys and Jorge, the latter of whom promptly asked the Sheffield brothers to help him gather feedback whenever they had spare time, so that he could modify the course and update it. The boys dropped everything and took to the task.

The task, if it could be defined in the ways of the world, was not simply about handing out survey forms and analyzing the responses; it soon meant traveling the world with Fr. Anthony, following up with the priests, listening to their stories, even recording a few sessions.

The course was fully booked for the next decade, and it was still being modified every year based on the accounts which the old priest and the boys collected. They joined Fr. Anthony in a trip through Europe, where superstition and cults battled daily with Christianity. There were conference calls with teams in South America, where the demons took on forms to which Landon's multilingual education could strangely give no name. There were documents from Africa, where the memories of violence and war dragged the blackness in their wake. And, in a few years, there was a long journey across the United States, where people loved to be alone, to purportedly find themselves, only to discover that there were shadows waiting to devour them.

The boys had been ready to move on, but the Vatican kept them in the U.S., where the cases kept piling up; or, more precisely, as in the case of the girl from Boston, where the cases were suddenly emerging, like termites crawling out of a slowly burning house.

There was one last destination: the Philippines, the last bastion of Catholicism in the Far East, and where the cases had long been on the rise. Fr. Anthony called it the best place for an internship for anyone wanting to take a PhD in Possession Studies.

“Why not Italy, though?” Bradley once asked, “It’s just as superstitious, just as dark. Why not a place God calls home?”

The conversation had taken a turn for debate as the boys traveled across the border between Washington, D.C. and Maryland, months before they arrived in Boston and found themselves face to face with the demon of secrets.

Fr. Anthony was in the front passenger seat then, with his blue eyes on the road, and his gaze sometimes wandering to the billboards that dotted the highway. The presidential elections were coming, on the heels of mudslinging and anger, much the same as any other year – this time, however, there was an indefinable something hanging in the air, swelling with rage, resentment, entitlement, if Fr. Anthony were to be asked.

There was entitlement to one’s home, one’s country, one’s borders, with resentment bordering on hatred. The boys once remarked how the toxicity seemed to pour out of crowds, into streets, deep into the nation’s temper.

Fr. Anthony would simply nod, shrug, or, on that afternoon on the highway, sigh.

“Nobody knows why,” Fr. Anthony spoke, in the same voice that the boys remembered on the phone, when their uncle had entrusted them to the old priest, “There are many places on earth that God calls home. The enemy always comes to homes most loved. Perhaps that is why.”

The boys had been in the back seat then, with their laptops and notebooks, cameras and monitors in tow. They sat in a sea of technology, listening to tales of nightmares and darkness, and yet there was no irony or opposition, only truth in Fr. Anthony’s tale.

The car was silent for a while, as the campaign posters kept coming, grew increasingly vile, with vitriol that seemed to spit farther out, with venom written in the most simple lines.

Your leaders don’t care for you, but I do.

Your government is inept when it’s run by a party that doesn’t know how to lead, but I come from a family of leaders, so I know how to change everything for the better.

Your lives are wasted in a country overtaken by terrorists and immigrants.

Bradley felt as though he were being held under water. He opened his window, bringing in the scent of leaves and rain, along with a biting wind into the car.

“Of course, you know that Fr. Matteo is from there and goes home regularly,” Fr. Anthony resumed his tale, eyes now on the countryside, as the billboards gave way to farmlands, “I have another friend there, just like your uncle – a cardinal, ministering to a flock that prays one day and collects talismans the next. It is a crowd that is happy but angry, beneath it all. Their elections are coming up, too. But I heard that the Philippines is just like this. Angry. Raging. Resentful.”

Bradley closed his eyes, let the wind wash over him, as though to push the imaginary ocean away from his face.

“Imagine a place of happiness, smiles – boiling over,” Fr. Anthony’s voice trailed away, and then rose again, in relief, “Aloysio! There it is – that’s his name. I nearly forgot it. But of course – named after Aloysius Gonzaga, a Jesuit saint.”

Bradley had looked over at his brother then, and found the boy listening to Fr. Anthony while trying to get a signal on his phone. He was about to look up the life of Gonzaga, Bradley knew, but there would be no internet, no signal out in the country.

“We Jesuits have always been the principal exorcists there,” Fr. Anthony’s voice had risen once again, above the hum of the car’s engine and the whistle of the country air, “But the Filipino Jesuits - they’ve been the principal exorcists for centuries. They have libraries filled with transcripts and statistics about exorcism in the Philippines, even some in the region, back when they had to minister to all the other countries. They have records going back decades. Some of them have been digitized, as you young ones call it; but no one wants to study them. No one is willing to take on the task. No one is willing to read through them and analyze them.”

“Woah,” Landon had interjected, half amazed, half inquiring, "Imagine that."

Bradley knew that the boy was itching to get his hands on the transcripts, and knew the depth of his brother’s thirst for the years and years of knowledge stowed away. He knew how his brother wanted to try his hand at analyzing, even if Landon tended to be shorter on his temper whenever research was concerned. There was always a spark of wonder in Landon, Bradley knew; but it tended to burn bright and fast, so that the boy left off his work sooner than anyone expected.

Analysis of transcripts, let alone transcripts of exorcism, were nowhere in Bradley’s realm of interests. He would willingly record, listen, sense; but to put structure on the task – on a task, by the way, written into memory by detail-oriented Jesuit priests – was something he found limiting, especially when he knew the reality that lived beneath the session. There were unnamed hours in between waking and dying, a sea that threatened to choke him, a Limbo where thousands of voices spoke, where no one had any control.

He understood however, in that very moment, the value of the Philippine trip, if it would ever come: there were records that could push the course forward, and a chance for research in a country where the cases were still ongoing.

It was the last frontier for the team – and it would forever tantalize them, as the news broke of the current Pope’s resignation.

Chapter 8

The boys had been on their way to another session then, when the Cardinals were suddenly convened, when the voting process took mere days – and when their uncle went from Cardinal to Pope.

The man reportedly took on his work with unerring, unusual normalcy: he walked around Rome to pay his bills, called up his family in Argentina, gave instructions to all the priests with whom he had maintained hours of telephone time in years past; and, one night, awakened the boys on their long drive from a session in the backwoods of Pennsylvania.

The drive had been silent since the team had left the last exorcism. The session had been quiet, with the victim simply sitting calmly, looking straight at the cameras, blinking at regular intervals like a curious cat. The only problem was that the camera was mounted on the ceiling directly behind him, and everyone could hear the cartilage in his spine crack as his head turned, twisted, and remained in place for hours.

The air in that house had been heavy with darkness. Even the surrounding farm had been oppressive, dank, swarming with invisible wolves and bats. The whole team breathed as it finally exited the back roads and fled, three vans in all, for the highway. The air lightened even further when the new pope called.

Landon had picked up the call, and had been halfway through his congratulations, when he started laughing.

“He says he misses fish and chips with us,” Landon relayed the news to his brother, who had been napping then.

“Tell him we can bring him some when we’re done over here,” Bradley said, loud enough for the phone to pick up his voice, “Hello, uncle! Congratulations on getting the big job!”

Their uncle gave something between a disbelieving laugh and a sharp retort in the Spanish of the Buenos Aires streets.

“Give my regards and congratulations to Jorge as well, Landon,” was the steady sentence from the front seat, where Fr. Anthony was, “Tell him we’re on our way to New York, but we await his orders and can be moved out at any time.”

“Fr. Anthony says we should fly out to the Philippines,” was all that Landon had said, so that the old priest shook his head, and their uncle the Pope laughed loud enough for his voice to carry through the phone’s mouthpiece, “But uncle – seriously – congratulations. We’ll help you in whatever way we can.”

There was a pause, punctuated by a low, “And here comes Jorge,” from Fr. Anthony.

“Well, I am afraid I shall have to take your offer seriously, Landon,” was the slow, soothing sentence from their uncle the Pope, “I shall need my good friend Fr. Anthony here for his expertise in the ministry, so you will need to be on your own for a while.”

There was no time for Bradley to finish his groan, or for Landon to bargain and tell his uncle to grant them a trip to a Southeast Asian beach first. Fr. Anthony immediately assigned one of the priests in their team as lead exorcist for the New York case, which appeared to be minor anyway, and which would probably be wrapped up in less than a fortnight – enough time for the boys to get ready to fly out to Rome for their uncle’s installation.

As always, their experience with previous exorcisms did not predict what would happen in New York. What was meant to be a trip of a few days turned into a few weeks, and the brothers missed their uncle’s inauguration, and all the fanfare that followed it. He was the first pope in many things, and was unique in so many ways, but the man took no notice of the festivities, had little attention for the many heads of state whose public statements littered the airwaves. He was deep in work at the Vatican, where the exorcism course was only one among thousands of issues that had to be dealt with.

And after New York was another New York case, and then another New York case, and two years of New York cases before the boys made their way to Boston.

In that time, the Philippines became an even more distant dream. The country's elections were threatening to bring forth far more than poisoned words; they pushed a quasi-dictator to the forefront, whose past was as muddied as his tongue. He cursed and cussed, railed and roared at other leaders, at those who opposed him, at non-existent issues. He fell silent when duty demanded his voice. He stepped away when work required him to be at the frontlines.

And his followers were proud, overbearing, unafraid to sneer and jeer and wreak havoc. They laughed at the opposition, wrote direct-to-the-point death threats online, labeled the murdered as deserving of their deaths because they had supposedly committed crimes - all literally scribbled on torn cardboard box lids, in angry black ink, in scrawls that described the death as lingering and violent under hands that gingerly wiped away the trails of blood.

No, the brothers could not go to a country where you could be picked off by a homemade pistol in a back alley. No, the brothers could not go to a country where the anger bristled and burbled and blew and grew. Not even if the cases were rising, not even if the priests were pleading for help because even they were being targeted, cursed, shot down.

The brothers were in the US, after all, where the soon-to-be leader seemed to be no different. He was overblown in his speeches, seemed to enjoy fomenting hate and division, advocated for causes that contradicted each other.

And so, the same kind of leader seemed to reign across a world of blind resentment, darkened illumination.

The cases continued to rise.

So, the boys remained in the States, tending to the cases, sending the files, double checking transcripts. And they dreamed about the beach, but their uncle told them not to dream too much.

Fr. Anthony, for his part, although busy, still reached out to the boys, and counseled them on their cases. That was where his call found them, in Boston, on the evening that they had taken leave of the family of secrets, as they drove back to their hotel in silence. Landon picked up the call in the car, and put the priest on speaker.

“I take it that you were preoccupied all day,” Fr. Anthony said, above the ringing of church bells across Rome, “You weren’t picking up my calls, but I trust that the session went well?”

Bradley checked his phone, then reached into his jacket pocket to get Landon’s phone as well. There were no missed calls at all.

They could hear Fr. Anthony sigh, “Let me guess...”

“No calls whatsoever, Father,” Bradley exchanged glances with his brother, “Looks like the demon played with my stuff, too.”

“Well - let’s not give it too much credit,” Fr. Anthony chuckled, voice deep, mischievous even, if the boys didn’t know the old priest any better. They sensed that he was simply irritated and holding his temper down, in the same way that he checked his impatience when cases grew increasingly difficult, or when he simply narrowed his eyes at the boys when they forgot to save important recordings or handed over transcripts that should have been sent much earlier to the Vatican.

The old priest allowed the church bells to finish their tolling, then spoke once again.

“His Holiness and I have been discussing the course these last few days,” he said, slowly, the sound of turning pages interrupting him, “And he does agree that there doesn’t seem to be a pattern to anything at all. My colleagues here also agree that we need more groundwork to revise the course.”

Bradley and Landon exchanged glances, and both mouthed, with comical disbelief, “His Holiness?”

"And His Holiness has asked the Papal Nunciature in Manila for help, for security, for both of you."

Bradley gasped, holding a smile down.

“So yes, to cut to the chase, you can both go to the Philippines in a month or so for some immersion before we start with the research project,” Fr. Anthony struggled to finish the statement, as the boys were already cheering halfway through it, “His Holiness will ask you to leave once the Boston case is completely settled, but he does not expect it to be immediate.”

“It does look immediate, Fr. Anthony,” Landon turned on a street, and drove the car up the hotel driveway, “We’ve got a lot to report on this one, but it looks done, at least from tonight’s session.”

“We got the full story from the parents. Abridged version: They kept secrets from her,” Bradley rejoined, “Something in the mother's past.”

“Secrets and resentment, and some mending,” Landon mused, finding a parking slot, “We’ll tell you more when we meet with you and Uncle His Holiness.”

The boys could not help snickering as Landon parked their car.

“Well I’m glad that you both have never changed and have not been contaminated by the darkness of the Boston case,” Fr. Anthony retorted pointedly, so that the boys laughed even harder, “If you can give me the less abridged story in under a minute, then I can perhaps explain to your Uncle His Holiness why his Black Book keeps on disappearing.”

The boys sobered immediately.

Their Uncle Jorge kept a notebook bound in black leather, which had been a gift from his Jesuit superior in his first year at the seminary, and which he had used to keep records of all the exorcisms to which he had ministered. He had been either assistant or principal exorcist at over a hundred cases, and he took brief notes of the highlights, from what the demons’ names were, to how they responded to his prayers, to the objects that the victims coughed up. Bradley’s case was one among the many; the boy never asked to look at his case notes, and would ignore his uncle’s entries on his possession whenever he chanced to pick up the notebook and browse through it.

Their uncle always carried the notebook around, even if it was quite heavy, and even if he had no pending cases to work on.

“One never knows when one needs to examine one’s work”, he would remind the boys.

The same reminder became, “One never knows one’s knowledge until its only record is lost,” whenever the book suddenly disappeared, only to turn up in the most unlikely places days, even weeks later. The notebook would be perched on a tree branch so that it had to be prodded down by a fruit picker, or it would be in a pile of rubbish that would nearly have sent it to the Buenos Aires landfill, or – and this was Bradley’s personal favorite – it would be folded in among Landon’s dress shirts.

The book always disappeared when major cases came to what some exorcists loosely referred to as the break point: the hours when the most powerful demon in a legion was on the verge of defeat, so that it resorted to petty means to play on its tormentors’ patience. Some priests reported losing their pens, if they were writers; shoes, if they were pastors; or even important computer files, if they were doing any kind of administrative work. Uncle Jorge would lose his book.

Everything would come to rights after a few prayers, or after a few days of patient waiting. But always, always, there was a hiding game; and always, always the exorcist was reminded to be patient, to guard his temper, to ensure that he did not find himself ensnared by the wiles of the Evil Ones. Their uncle was a veteran of sorts when it came to waiting patiently, as he knew that at one point, there the book would be again, ready for reading, re-reading, and analysis. Never for transcription, and transfer to digital files though; that, too, seemed to cause it to disappear, and for an even longer time.

On that late evening, in their car, and on the verge of summer, the boys felt the excitement of a coming trip that was years in the making, but they also felt that they had miles to go before the Boston case would finally be closed. As they did with all their prospective break points, they had no expectations: they either broke through after plodding through tunnels in the darkness, or simply drew back at the sudden brightness of change and light. For some reason, there was no in-between.

“Well, I wish you both luck and blessings,” the old priest chuckled at the other end of the line, as the silence had gone on for a trifle longer than usual, “We’ve been looking at the recordings you just sent, and they really are quite – frightening is the fallback, interesting is the less charitable word.”

The boys turned to each other sharply.

“We sent in recordings?” Bradley exclaimed, “I thought they were all erased when – you know...”

“Sad to say, I don’t know,” Fr. Anthony put in before Landon could answer, “But I received several files on the Vatican server, all of them with timestamps from your morning. The victim – the girl – child,” and here, Fr. Anthony paused, mumbling. The boys could hear the clack of a keyboard and low instructions from another priest, whom they assumed was working as Fr. Anthony’s assistant.

Bradley crossed his arms about his chest; Landon’s hands gripped the wheel, and his brother could see his knuckles in the darkness.

“We have files from when her brother was thrown against the wall,” Fr. Anthony spoke, ever so calmly, so that the air in the car froze, “And we will need to flag and file this just in case the police ask for it. Dare I ask for the abridged version of the victim's story now?”

“We probably won’t need the flag,” Landon's voice came in a croak and crackle as the temperature dropped further, “The brother’s all right – the doctors called, and the dad’s with him.”

The priest-assistant began talking over the end of Bradley’s sentence, so that the clicking and murmuring filled the car with static.

“Sorry, I just have to continue this because our priests here have to go to another meeting,” Fr. Anthony spoke in a level, one would say exasperated, voice, “We have files for the latest exorcism? Right? The session that ended with the girl alone with the priests and doctors?”

“We also need to talk to the exorcist about his - reaction to the victim,” the brothers heard another priest talking, “How much training has he had?”

“Four years?” They could hear, farther away, as though the phone were in the middle of a long table in a cave.

“Too short,” another priest said.

“This is my fault,” Fr. Anthony put in, “I assumed it would be a quick session, and I was wrong. I shouldn’t have relied on Fr. Callahan too soon.”

The boys knew genuine humility when they heard it; Fr. Anthony was not one to grovel or beg for the sake of saving his skin. The other priest must have sensed it was well, as he said something along the lines of retraining and pushing for curricular revisions.

“So we have four files,” Fr. Anthony resumed, addressing the brothers again, “We have the one right before the exorcism, the exorcism itself, then another file of the exorcism that suddenly starts around ten minutes after the end of the last one, and then closing prayers.”

Landon mouthed his amazement, “That must have been when Spooky Girl came knocking,” he could not help saying.

“That requires a bit more explanation than we have time for,” Fr. Anthony spoke above the rustle of paper and moving folders, “We’ll have time for conversation soon. Just write everything down. You were saying something earlier, Landon?”

Landon cleared his throat. The air in the car had not yet warmed, “I said the brother’s all right.”

“Good!” Fr. Anthony exclaimed, “What a miracle! Wonderful! How did you find out?”

“The hospital called the house and said that the brother was conscious, and they needed someone to watch over him.”

The pause went on for too long. “What?”

“Yes,” Bradley kept talking, ignoring Landon’s low curse, “So the dad went to take care of him _”

“What?” This time, Fr. Anthony’s voice thundered across the car, “The parents are split up?”

And this time, the boys chorused in curses.

“Where are you now?” Fr. Anthony almost growled, “Who’s with them? I don’t care about the story. Go back right now! Call me when you get there but go back - right now!”

Landon took but seconds to restart the car and back out of the hotel driveway. He was praying above the sound of the engine, the rub of tire against asphalt, Bradley’s low curse as he kept trying to switch his mobile phone on.

“Use my phone,” Landon said, as he entered the highway.

Bradley reached into the back to get Landon’s backpack, hands precise, stance calculated. The same thing had happened a few times before, in varying forms, with varied consequences. There were the parents on the Nebraska farm who attempted their own exorcism on their son as soon as the team had left, only to be hurled out their bedroom window. There, too, were the parents in the Iowa farm who nearly took out their shotguns as the exorcism team knocked on their doors, as those same alarmed boys and priests disrupted the family’s first night of good sleep in years. There was no telling what this latest episode would bring.

“I should have paid more attention,” Landon interrupted his praying as he changed lanes, “I should have slept better last night, is what.”

“It’s ok,” Bradley opened pocket after pocket in his brother’s backpack, in search of the phone, “It could be something, or it could be nothing. Or maybe -”

Bradley’s deep, almost exhausted intake of breath nearly made Landon step on the brakes.

“It’s something,” Bradley murmured, as he pulled something dark from between the folds of his brother’s clothes.

It was their uncle’s black book.

Chapter 9

The air darkened and pushed down on the glass windows of the car as soon as the boys reentered the neighborhood. Even the engine had enough: it died as soon as the boys were within sight of the front door, with a sigh that sounded as though a thousand souls had exhaled exasperation.

Bradley found that he was holding thin air. The book had disappeared again.

Thankfully, the priests' van was still in the driveway. There was no one in it, no one roaming the streets, no dogs or cats stalking the sidewalks or scampering in the garden. It was as though all of nature had rejected the house, as though all light were being eaten by the faint glow from the dining room.

The boys jumped out of the car, just in time to hear the girl screaming, just in time to hear another voice talking over hers with acid that seemed to melt into shadows.

“He left you!” was the growl, “He left you to go to your brother because you are not his true child!”

Another scream came from the girl, this time rattling the windowpanes. The houses were large and sprawling in this neighborhood, but most of the fences were loose, if not altogether ceremonial. The boys wondered why no one had heard the noise, or had attempted to approach the house. Truth be told, they were glad that no one was listening in.

Bradley switched on his recorder and opened the front door. Behind him, Landon held up two cameras, eyes toggling between the footage and heat sensors.

The boys found the priests and the doctor praying in the living room across the hall, and the girl seated on a chair in the dining room. Her hair was damp, a dull yellow that made her now gray skin even more ashen. Her eyes were closed, her mouth was open, and from it poured both a scream and the growling, acrid voice.

“He left you all,” came out, part roar, part hiss, “He cares only for the one person that was truly faithful, truly his flesh and blood.”

Behind the girl, the mother sobbed into her palm, tears mingling with rosary beads.

Landon switched to wireless internet on his cameras. He held his breath, muttering, “Streaming,” as the yellow and white icon on the upper left corner signaled that he had made contact with the Vatican.

He looked quickly to his right and found Bradley there, holding a thumb up. It was the signal that the audio recorder was streaming too. Landon could hear conversations over the stream; the voices were muffled, but he guessed that Fr. Anthony and a team of priests were listening, observing, taking notes, and backing up their files. They were probably scrutinizing the head exorcist as well.

“When did it start?” Landon whispered to the nearest priest, who was holding his rosary beads to his chest.

“Fifteen, twenty minutes ago,” The priest answered.

“What happened?”

The priest thought a while, then breathed, letting out both a sigh and a shrug, “She was sitting at the table, and she asked for her father,” the priest paused, as the prayers heightened across the hallways, in an effort to drown out the screams coming from the girl, “I think her mother told her that her dad went to the hospital. Then she tackled her mother. We all had to pull them apart.”

The boys took their places next to the rest of the priests and watched the session from a distance, recorders up, eyes alert. They dared not come closer, not even when the girl seemed to calm down, or when the air seemed to lighten.

The break itself was anything but a single, focused point. It was an island surrounded by ferocious waves, they remembered their uncle saying: it would be hours, even days, before the exorcist and the victim could make it to shore. In the meantime, they would be tossed to and fro on a rough sea that tested both patience and stamina. They would be closer to the end, then far away, then closer once again, almost all at the same time.

They needed to keep at it, to sail, to ram against the ship of nails, if Bradley were to be asked.

“Where’s Dr. Brown?” Landon whispered to the priest again, as the exorcist’s voice suddenly emerged from what felt like a wall of silence.

“He left right after you did,” the priest answered, “We tried calling him. Couldn’t get a hold of him.”

Landon and Bradley looked sharply at each other above their devices. Bradley had gone pale; the last time a doctor or psychiatrist had left the session at the wrong time, they couldn’t get out of bed for days. It was as though something kept them in their room, something that knew how to blend arthritis, the flu, and muscle fatigue, all with the right strength to discourage, but not kill. All consultations after the attack would almost always come from the man’s bedside, through a crackling phone line that kept going dead. Only after Fr. Anthony came to bless the man’s house could the doctor or psychiatrist get up and go to work again – as though nothing at all had happened.

“Where does he live?” Bradley said, as the prayers resumed, and as the priests bowed to their rosaries.

“Not sure,” the doctor whispered, after a long string of prayers from the exorcist, followed by a long scream from the girl, “I know he works at the psych ward in General, but I really don’t know anything else. His file’s in the box.”

The doctor gestured with his head to the couches behind them, where the team had parked its requisite folders and boxes. The boxes had extra changes of clothes, theological books, and backup storage and equipment. It was dangerous to simply lug the boxes around, but there was no central space to put them. The team usually kept the boxes in a van, or in a hotel room, or at the local convent or seminary. For some reason, everything that had never been done before – or for that matter, everything that was outside protocol, on hindsight – kept coming to light in those scream-filled minutes of the exorcism, as Bradley looked closer at everything they had done.

He felt careless, even useless, as though he had reneged on a promise he did not even remember making.

“That’s right, little boy,” pierced out of the session, past the priest’s prayers, across the grinding chill of the house, “So many little things! So many little details! Look at them and you’ll find that you are all so lost!”

Landon glared at his brother and gave a sharp shake of his head. It was his signal that Bradley should pray. Bradley truly was, but half-heartedly, and by his own quick admission and apology. The psychiatrist’s files were tempting him to stop and look, all under the pretense that his aim was to help someone who was potentially in trouble.

“He’s probably home reading Playboy right now!” Came the screech, then the giggle, from what was now a silky, smarmy voice within the girl, “Or he’s watching, which is even better! I can show you what he’s doing, and we can all help him out if you like.”

This time, Fr. Callahan was not distracted. He closed his eyes, raised the crucifix up, and brought it down gently to hover over the girl’s head.

“Begone, tempter of souls,” he spoke, solemn, firm, almost effortless as he pushed the girlish voice out of the way, loud as he spoke through clouds of frost that issued from his mouth, “In the name of our most holy Lord Jesus Christ, whose blood saved us from eternal damnation, whose sacrifice saved us from the ravages of sin, whose death on the Cross opened the Gates of Heaven and brought forth the promise of life Eternal.”

The girl snickered, whimpered, then growled like a cornered dog. Around her rose frost, in thin clouds. Landon looked at his brother, and saw Bradley mumbling a prayer, but no less observant of, even amazed at what was going on.

“In the name of the Holy Ghost, who breathed the Word made flesh into the pure vessel that was the Virgin Mary, the Queen of Heaven,” the prayer continued, and paused, as the emphasis on the Virgin Mary made the girl struggle against her holds, and growl resentment against what seemed to be a growing wall of prayer, “In the name of our God, who created the Heavens and the Earth, and all that is above it, and all that is under it, and all that live in it. In the name of the Most Holy Trinity, I command you to tell me your name!”

Knowing the name of a demon subjugated it to the exorcist, as the vessel for higher powers. It would sometimes take days to extract a demon’s name, and even more days to weaken the being

further so that it revealed all the names of the demons with which it resided. Sometimes, the names came in an instant, and the demons left, which was common for minor cases for which the demonic horde had given up its lowest ranked creatures.

That evening, nearing the break, the boys sensed that a name was about to come, but they tried not to hope too much.

“My name?” came from the girl, as a laugh and a lament, “No one in this house could dare say I would give that tonight!”

The boys cast out their hopelessness immediately and began to pray.

The house shook, trembled for instant, as though an army of bats had enveloped it and tried to tear it from its foundations. One of the priests bowed even deeper to his rosary. The doctor stepped forward, took the girl's pulse, listened to her heart, signaled to the team that all was normal; he trembled visibly as he stepped away and prayed.

The mother, who had hitherto been in the corner, wrapped up in her own fears, and sobbing, now fell to her knees on the floor. Her right hand was on her breast, and she was shaking her head through a storm of tears, as though she were making a confession for the very first time.

And then, amidst the shaking, the smoke, the whispers in the walls, there was a voice.

It came low, deep, almost too faint for human ears to hear, as though its speaker had been forced to talk after being chained in the deepest of dungeons, in the darkest of nights. Everyone heard it, and heard the house breathe.

It was a name. It had no cadence of goodness, no heartbeat that identified it as a name that belonged to sweetness, to an innocent soul. No one dared repeat the name.

Only the exorcist dared, and it came through his voice as he began the long prayer that acknowledged the name and the power that knowing the name brought.

The boys listened, heard Fr. Callahan as he kept the mantle of exorcist without wielding it like a robe of silver. They heard his prayers loud and clear, and heard the questions pour forth in a voice that was guided, not imperious; gentle, not groveling.

He commanded the demon, and used its name.

“In the Name of the Most Holy Trinity, you will tell me why you entered the body of this innocent child of God,” was the order, almost chanted, with the monotony of a father praying over his ailing son.

The girl's head was bowed, and her body curved into a hunch that brought what seemed to be abnormally long arms all the way down to her legs. One of the priests crossed the living room

and came to her side, ready to catch her should the demon try to fold her in half. Landon winced; it had nearly happened years before, but the folding was in the exact opposite direction.

“Her father invited me,” ground out of the silence, from the depths of the girl’s hair, “He wanted someone he could trust to watch over what was his. He said he had every right to her body, so my job was to kill her.”

The house shuddered. In the living room, the priests continued to pray, and the boys continued to document the scene, streaming it live for their colleagues at the Vatican. No one spoke a word, not even miles away in Rome, where Landon knew the priests were praying as they listened.

“In the name of the Most Holy Trinity, I command you to tell me every single detail of how you entered her body,” the priest went on, his hands now fully on the girl’s head, the crucifix resting against her hair.

“He asked for help in making a potion that he could take to her mother,” and here, the girl shook, tried to twist herself into paroxysms of disgust, as though the last word enraged the demon, “And he made it himself.”

“Who did he ask help from?”

“Only me.”

“Do not lie.”

The leer seemed to creep past the strands of the girl’s hair. “He asked for me, so I came,” the demon chuckled low, “I brought friends.”

The chuckle uncrumpled itself into a laugh, ringing past the wall of air that seemed to envelope the girl, creeping on spindly legs to the other side of the hall, where the priests were watching and praying.

The exorcist went on, voice never breaking, “How many of your kind did you bring?”

The girl attempted to look up, but kept her head bowed to the floor. Something snapped in her neck as she struggled; the doctor sprang to her side immediately and pushed the girl back into place.

“I brought seven,” the demon giggled, “And they brought their own friends, and those friends brought their own friends, and we all had quite a party together.”

The laugh simmered into a giggle, then a hiss, as though the demon were being raked over coals. Fr. Callahan had put the crucifix square upon the girl’s head again.

“How many were you before we came?” The priest asked, with no compassion.

“Three thousand,” the demon answered, so that the mother gasped, sobbed, then quieted herself immediately with a tighter grasp of her rosary.

“How did those demons leave?”

“You must be speaking of those stupid weaklings- “

“I command you in the name of God the Father Almighty, the creator of earth, of all things on earth, of all things under the earth – tell me how each demon left.”

The demon groaned as the words fell, one by one, matched by a spray of Holy Water from the priest’s bottle.

“They all left in legions when you all began to – do – this,” the demon could barely form the words. The girl’s saliva dripped as the demon hesitated, forming a black puddle on the floor, “They kept leaving because of her. That woman kept driving us out!”

“What woman?”

“That woman! That woman we so despise, that one we so hate!”

“Say her name.”

“We hate her. We hate how she crushes and how she burns and how she -”

“Say her name.”

“We hate how she was made greater, greater than all of us, greater than we the beautiful and the mighty and the highest! We hate how he made this mere human, this mere creature, this speck of dust... he made her his Queen!”

“In the name of God the Father Almighty, he alone who creates and is Father of all creation, I command you to say her name.”

“That. Virgin. Mary!”

The girl screamed, growled, bayed as though she had been whipped and branded. And from her mouth issued black smoke, as though something were being burned in her bones.

Fr. Callahan kept the crucifix upon her head, even when the girl looked up and showed only the whites of her eyes.

Again, the doctor was at her side. Pulse was normal, he signaled. She was breathing normally. There was nothing out of the ordinary in this child who was as gray as concrete in the summer sun, whose skin began to smell of rotten eggs, whose eyes showed the palest of whites. And

again, he stepped away, trembled, prayed, avoided the growing puddle of dark saliva on the floor as he went.

“How many are you now?” the exorcist asked, voice never losing strength.

“We used to be many!” The being mumbled, over and over, in a shrill whisper.

“How many are you now?”

“Used to be...”

“In the name of our God the Most High, who reigns over all the angels, I command you to tell me how many you are now.”

“There were once so many...”

“I invoke the intercession of the most Blessed Queen of Heaven -”

“Make it stop!” The girl’s voice came through a chorus of wolfish howls and batlike screams, “Stop hurting me!”

The doctor and mother stepped forward, only to be held back by the priest.

"It burns!" The girl screeched, sobbed, wept loud and clear through the shadows that hovered in shrouds of cobwebbed smoke, "Make them stop!! Make him stop!"

The priest closed his eyes tighter, as though doing so would block out the girl’s pleas. She continued to weep, to whinny - and finally to wail with a lilting, lolling whine that unfurled into a response.

“I am all alone.”

The house sighed yet another time, commiserating.

The priest’s voice remained calm, droning, but the boys recognized it for its undertone of prayer. The breakpoint was close, and yet still so far. Bradley took a long breath as he held the recorder up, as though he were about to be pushed beneath rippling, roiling waves.

“In the name of our Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ,” Fr. Callahan went on, ignoring the fresh sneer, and the still growing puddle of black saliva at the girl’s feet, “You will reveal when you will leave this body, this creation of Heaven, this vessel that should never be defiled.”

The creature replied with a snort, then a hiss that seemed to issue from the very depths of the girl’s skin. She looked up at the priest, ashen cheeks sprouting veins that ran like rivers of tar, eyes darkened, lips purple and drawn back against yellow teeth. She appeared nothing like her true self to anyone with a weaker soul. The boys knew that the priest could see the humanity

beneath the beast, the victim to be helped beyond the veil of evil that groaned and grunted like a cornered dog.

Landon mumbled a prayer as the creature said something in Latin, or Aramaic, or ancient Greek. The priests looked at each other, then at him; no one understood what had been said. Judging from the low conversations over the stream, no one watching remotely from the Vatican had understood it either.

The exorcist continued to pray, this time reciting the Litany of the Saints. He paused, allowing the rest of the house to reply, allowing the responses to wash over the now trembling girl.

“Partirò.”

“I will leave,” Landon and another priest chorused.

The single word kept coming, slow, resentful. Then –

“Partirò tra cinque ore, all'alba.”

“I will leave within five hours, at dawn,” a priest whispered over the Vatican feed.

Bradley breathed, but never stopped his prayers.

They had reached breakpoint.

Chapter 10

The breakpoint was never the end of a session; it was the weakest that the demon would ever be in its interactions with humanity; and it was the opportunity for prayers to attack with the greatest power. Sometimes, there would be a final clash, as the demon would try to negotiate and fight its way out of the promise to leave. In other cases, the possession would begin again if anyone – including the victim – lost the merest amount of hope and reopened the gates. But in most cases, the clash was imminent, and it almost always led to a final expulsion.

The hours before dawn, after the breakpoint, were long and fanged with screams. The demon would leave, it said; the girl would vomit it out, at first light. Its exit dragged through even more prayers, and screeches, and bats and wolves and dogs that all seemed to be baying and howling in the walls.

Landon and Bradley watched the proceedings with eyes trained to recognize the signs of expulsion; but beyond the classificatory schemes that they could almost naturally derive from observation, they could see and sense nothing further. They knew when to disconnect their streaming link, and when to change the batteries on their recorders. They knew what prayers would work, what the demons laughed at, what the demons could mouth back in a hundred languages both living and dead. But to know how the world of the soul linked with the world of the invisible – they needed a direction, and they would not find it here.

When the sky lost its stars, and when the first breath of sunrise broke through the trees and crept across the living room walls, the girl moaned low, bent forward and fell to her fours on the floor. There, she retched a rain of black tar, thick, almost choking her, mingling with her sobs.

And it was over.

She wept, as she came to, and as her mother rushed forward and embraced her. The puddle of black tar disappeared as quickly as it had come.

The doctor examined her, his own hands shaking with both fear and exhaustion, his body bent and slouched from hours of constantly checking on his patient.

She seemed to be his true patient, this girl, as she lost her pallor, regained her blush ever so slowly, breathed, blinked. She was human again.

The exorcist continued to pray, this time whispering, never removing the crucifix from the girl's head. He waited for her to lean against her mother, to calm, to melt into the woman's arms. He waited until the doctor stepped away before he addressed her.

“Child,” he laid the crucifix against her forehead as she looked at him, “I know that you are tired, and I know that all you want to do is rest, but I need you to do something for me.”

The girl nodded, swallowing tears.

“I need you to repeat some words after me, loud and clear. Can you do that for me?”

She nodded again, face pale but slowly gaining color in the rosy dawn light.

“We will pray together,” the priest began, “Repeat these words: I love you, Jesus.”

The girl smiled, and her voice cracked as she spoke, “I love you, Jesus.”

“I offer my life and heart to you.”

“I offer my life and heart to you.”

“In complete surrender.”

“In complete surrender.”

The words were whole and full, and every word rang like gentle clanging bells in the growing light. When she finished praying, Fr. Callahan laid his hands over her and her mother; the priest who had watched over her and prepared to restrain her now relaxed, and he moved to the kitchen, where the phone was, to call the child’s father; another priest picked up his mobile phone and stepped out to call the psychiatrist; and the third priest called their bishop. Landon and Bradley, for their part, made for the backyard to shut off their streaming channel and talk to Fr. Anthony.

It had been almost six hours of recording and prayer. The boys could hear the clatter of silverware in Fr. Anthony’s office in Rome, almost smelled what they guessed were hearty plates of newly cooked pasta. Bradley sat on a lawn chair as Landon paced the yard, neither of them paying attention to their rumbling stomachs, neither of them admitting that they cared more about falling into bed and never getting up again than they did about going to another session.

“It’s a relief, to say the least,” the boys heard one of the priests say, “They need to rest.”

One of the priests answered something in Italian. Bradley looked at his brother for a translation; the latter shook his head, mouthing, “Subjunctive.” It was one of the language moods that Landon had given up learning when he was in college. He knew the basics, but lost any translation abilities when the language went far too fast at a time when he was far too tired.

“Boys, I think we’ve had enough for a day – or a lifetime, if your silence is any indication,” they heard Fr. Anthony say, above the sound of equipment beeping and whirring. The boys knew that the priests were using their laptops and updating files; neither of them cared to reply to Fr. Anthony.

“It’s been a long few years,” Fr. Anthony went on, voice smooth and soothing, “And – we were talking about this, his Holiness and I, this afternoon. We know how difficult the job is and how we have to move forward. I suggest you both take a long break – a month, maybe?”

The priest paused, as discussions rang in the background. Had they been given the order at any other time, the brothers would have given each other high fives and run back to the hotel for a shower and a celebratory dinner. At that moment, however, after months of travel across the country, of nights spent in the company of priests and evil, they could think of almost nothing, feel almost nothing. The drain and emptiness were common after every session, but this time, they suddenly felt as though they had had enough.

“Take a break,” they awakened out of their ruminations as the sound of Fr. Anthony’s voice broke once again through the morning, “Rest and get your energy back. I don’t want either of you to be exploited. No one should be a weak link anywhere.”

“What about the Philippines?” Landon spoke up, more curious than excited.

Fr. Anthony sighed, “We’re trying to get a research team assembled,” he began, voice dropping, more exhausted, “But most of the priests there are busy. And the exorcists are busier, if you can believe it.”

"I meant as a vacation," Landon took the liberty of correcting the priest.

Fr. Anthony was quiet for a while. Whether he was offended by Landon's suggestion, or ruminating on how to get the boys to their vacation of choice, the brothers did not know, much less care. They could sense only a lingering, biting emptiness, deep within an inner somewhere that words and well-wishing could not reach.

"We can arrange that," they heard another priest speak up.

"They need to rest for now," Fr. Anthony insisted, "Let's worry about their bigger vacation as soon as they get right and proper sleep."

The brothers could say nothing to the suggestion. They jumped slightly as the sound of a ringing telephone broke through the static of the phone call. It was old and shrill, and matched by a loud, “Pronto?” from the priest that picked it up.

“I’ll call you as soon as we hear anything,” Fr. Anthony went on, “But the Vatican will take care of your meals and apartment rental. Same spot in D.C. Drive yourselves there and rest.”

“Can we just shuttle funds from the apartment and get a plane ticket to the Philippines? I can rest better on the beach.” Bradley let out something between a whine and a snort, prompting Landon to laugh, sit beside him, and nudge his brother to keep quiet.

Fr. Anthony laughed, low, as a conversation in rapid Italian filled the background, "Your uncle was not exaggerating when he said that you would pester me like drunken gadflies," and, as the noise around him faded, "I’ll see what I can do, but no promises."

Landon nudged Bradley one more time, as the latter began to chant, “Beach! Beach! Beach!” under his breath.

“We’ll do our best,” Landon answered, “We just need to close up shop here.”

“And drive to D.C. after a night’s rest,” Fr. Anthony added for him, “Both of you go home and sleep.”

“Mai tais by the beach!” Bradley was slowly recovering his wisecracking self.

“I’d avoid drinking tonight,” Fr. Anthony’s voice was flat, devoid of any amusement. Bradley decided not to add anything more.

Landon was about to say something, when the back door of the house opened. One of the priests nodded to the brothers, his face grave, his tone terse.

“We need you both,” was all the boys heard as the door closed.

“Talk to me tomorrow,” Fr. Anthony said, firmly, as though shutting down any possible negotiation on when and where the brothers’ vacation would be, “Get yourselves to D.C. and call me when you get to the apartment. We’ll ask the group at Georgetown to get the place ready.”

The boys thanked him in chorus and returned to the house. What they found seemed to brighten the still gray world without: the father had returned, and was embracing his wife and daughter at the dinner table as he sobbed; Fr. Callahan and the doctor were standing by, waiting for the family to calm down so that they could give instructions on what to do next; and all the priests were sitting at the dining table, heads to their rosaries, silent. The brothers could not understand where the seriousness was coming from.

The exorcist motioned for the brothers to take their seats.

“I’ve already turned the family over to their parish priest,” he began, voice cracking, as though the last few hours had drawn all the strength out of him, “It’s your turn now.”

The boys sat down, but looked at each other, brows furrowed.

“It’s all right,” Landon said, “We’ll wait until Dr. Brown comes in.”

“I’m afraid Dr. Brown can’t join us,” the doctor answered almost too abruptly, “He had a heart attack last night on the way home.”

It was not unheard of, for anyone on the team to get sick, fall into a long illness, or come face to face with their mortality. Bradley would get a fever and be coughing for days whenever he became the target. Landon would get migraines that felt as though his skull were being splintered into a million pieces. The priests would vomit, the doctors would get swollen joints and be unable to walk, and the psychiatrists would sleep for days in a strange, silent coma. These were not so much retaliatory attacks as they were the lasting effects of the war between good and evil. Any war would draw out energy and cripple anyone in its wake; their war took out immune systems and, for those who had little experience and no sense of dread or hope, the will to live. A

psychiatrist from one of their Midwest sessions, for example, was on the verge of cutting his wrists open had one of the priests not recognized the signs of a coming suicide attempt and barged into the man's room.

The heart attack, however, was perhaps the greatest, most extreme blow of all. Dr. Brown was in his early 50s, a husband and father, a respected and gentle therapist, and a researcher at the nearby university. He had coordinated with exorcists in the past; he had a whole group assembled for therapy for victims, and he knew how to talk to them with the air of a soft-spoken grandparent who had not a whit of judgement. There was no reason for him to be targeted, but there it was, and there they were, a team short of one member.

"We called his assistant," Fr. Callahan added, voice cracking above the sobs that came from the family, "He has all the files and he's updated, but we'll have to find another psychiatrist to talk to the family. You can go ahead."

The boys were still reeling from the expulsion and deliverance, and the news about Dr. Brown. They both had to take long breaths, as the exorcist asked the family to listen, and as the girl looked straight at the brothers. They barely recognized her from the week before, the sixteen-year-old whose jaw had been forced open, whose back had nearly folded upon itself, whose hair had been coated with ash and sweat and blood. She seemed at peace now, less beast, more and more human.

She was like the few others who were lucky to have been delivered, and so unlike the many that were still waiting in the dark worlds between worlds.

She looked back at the brothers, and found two young men, nearing their thirties, with golden hair that sparkled in the morning light. They would have picked up girls easily: their accents were softly British, with the tone of boys educated in private schools who knew how to roam the high streets with their silks and soft Egyptian cotton. Their faces were almost alike, both angular with just a touch of boyish softness where their jawlines met their chins. They both had clear bluish-greenish eyes, the kind that would soften when they were gentle, or harden into ice when they spoke from the depths of rage.

Bradley went first.

"Thank you very much for allowing us to work with you and your family," his mouth curved up into the slightest of smiles, at the girl, then at each parent, "Thank you for allowing us to record the sessions. When we first met you, my brother and I promised that we would only record and send your recordings to the Vatican, and that none of the recordings would be used for any purpose other than this project. We will keep that promise."

"The recordings are stored in the Vatican libraries and can be accessed only by the chief exorcists," Landon continued for his brother, when Bradley's voice seemed to shake, "They will monitor you and talk to your bishop from time to time, but they will never get in touch with you unless you give them written permission to do so. They will, however, advise your bishop and local exorcist on how to deal with any resurgences, if they ever occur."

The girl began to cry once again, and hid her face in her father's shoulder.

"I know you're frightened," Bradley spoke up, voice gaining roundness, in the same way that it did when he and Landon gave their final word to parents at the end of the deliverance session. He would always hold down the shaking in his tone, as though forcibly keeping back memories of the black sea, the sails made of flesh and nails, the waves that swallowed the stars. Then, he would bring in the strength of reassurance, the gentleness of experience, even a touch of his growing faith.

"I know you're frightened," he repeated, as the girl finally looked at him, eyes blurred with tears, "I know that you've just gotten out of the darkness, and you don't ever want to go back. I know what it's like. I've been there myself. I've gotten out, and I've stayed out."

The girl's mouth opened in amazement.

"That's why I'm a part of this project," Bradley went on, locking eyes with her, "This is a project of the Vatican, and it's been going on for years now. The Vatican is studying exorcisms, infestation, obsession - and possession."

Bradley had no time to explain the terms, but he knew, from the interviews with the family, that they had experienced all three phenomena. The daughter had been oppressed by thoughts of suicide, by nightmares that haunted her every hour. The house had been infested with invisible rats and bats. The daughter had been possessed by thousands of demons that had been driven out but hours before.

"They need to study all this," Bradley went on, "Because they haven't paid it enough attention, the way that we sometimes don't like reading about dead writers or wars that are long over. The church thought it was old and outdated, and something that they could study on their free time. But they were wrong."

The girl swallowed down a sob, as her eyes gained clarity, and as her nod became one of agreement rather than mere acknowledgment.

"The church recognized that it needed to bring back exorcism as a ministry," Bradley went on, voice now firm, eyes taking on the warm light of the morning, "But to do so, it needed to learn what exactly it was fighting. So, the Vatican started a course on exorcism, to teach priests how to spot the signs, who to work with, how to take care of people, how to deal with everything you've dealt with. But they saw that they still needed to learn more because everything they taught always seemed to be incomplete."

"We've been traveling across your country, and in some countries for years now," Landon added, so that the girl turned to him, "We've learned so much, and we want to thank you, and your parents for helping us, and for helping the church. But there are still so many cases left, and we keep finding out new things, and how our old assumptions don't seem to hold anymore. The Vatican will store your files and they will keep studying your case, and they will keep offering

the course as they keep learning, and they will keep adding to their classes because even if there have been cases for centuries, we're looking at them closely only now."

"You're a part of this project – you and your family," Bradley's smile was warmer, and he felt the air in the room push out the remaining frost from the session, "And you have a lot of work ahead of you. You have to listen to your parish priest, and you always have to check in with your local church just in case you move. I know it's a lot of work, but it's something I do too, and I find that it keeps me – it makes me feel safe."

Landon cleared his throat.

"That, and a lot of prayers," Bradley added at once, as the priests at the table looked at him, waiting.

Fr. Callahan nodded once, solemn, as Bradley withdrew into his chair.

"Let's talk about the sacraments," the priest began, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a brown notebook. Bradley could not help letting out a sigh, as he remembered the black book from the night before.

The boys remained quiet, as the exorcist gave his instructions, as the parents and the girl listened with low sobs, and as one of the priests stepped out to answer his phone. The girl's hair was matted with tears, but it no longer had the ash and grey that coated it in the weeks the brothers had filmed her. Her cheeks were losing their pallor, her lips were no longer dull with purple blood, and her skin lost the iridescent sheen that seemed to mark her as a bastard beast of dragon and snake. When she spoke, her voice was rounded and strong, as though she had never screamed for hours, as though she had never mouthed obscenities and curses with a groan that belonged to creatures as old as the earth itself.

And she was obedient, listening, humbled. The sessions sometimes created monsters out of those who disobeyed the invitation to return to their faith: some fell back on their old habits, or learned new ones that were almost as wicked, and returned to the worlds illuminated by darkness. The boys always took it upon themselves to remind the delivered that they were lucky, one of the very few, in a mass of thousands who sometimes waited for decades. Very rarely were victims so immediately obedient and willing to listen; even Bradley was working on his humility, and his brother loved to tease him, if only to lighten the load of their task.

The need for obedience was something that every single person on the team shared, from the exorcist who waited for his bishop's approval for the sessions to proceed, to the priests who waited for the lead exorcist's orders, to the brothers who moved where the Vatican told them to. Their uncle hesitated to call it "submission"; rather, he named it "loving childlikeness," the way a child would listen to his parents and wait for their guidance.

The priest who had stepped outside entered once more, and took a seat next to Landon.

“I think you both need to talk to Dr. Brown,” he spoke, very low, as the exorcist answered questions from the girl’s parents, “He wants to see you.”

Chapter 11

The brothers left as soon as the exorcist signaled that he would hear the family's confessions. It was standard for the boys to stay and have their own confessions heard, a ritual that served to shut the doors, as it were, on their own fears and sins, or anything that the demon might have brought to light.

"I can tell the Georgetown team to get you a priest to hear your confession tonight, if that's not too late," Fr. Callahan told Landon, as the family talked amongst themselves.

Landon could not help listening to the father's story, as the latter spoke about what he had gone through as he crossed state lines. He had been pursued by a flock of black, cawing, snarling birds, which seemed to follow him all the way to the hospital. When he arrived, he was told that no one had called him; but yes, his son was awake, so would he like to call his wife? He had wanted to, except he could not find his phone; and when he used the hospital phone, had spent a good half hour listening to static, unending rings, and an answering machine that (wrongly) kept on claiming that it was full. When he stepped out to attempt to drive back home, he could not see a foot in front of him, and heard only birds and bats roaring from the shadows.

He and his son had spent the early morning hours praying. He had driven back into a calm Boston, into a city alight with the dawn, into a house that felt the lightest, the happiest in years.

Landon stopped at the front door, mid-stride. He kept his eyes on the family, marking the girl's golden hair, her soft nose that seemed to belong to neither of her parents, the gentleness that seemed to issue so readily from her father.

"Is it really over?" He found himself asking aloud.

The exorcist did not follow Landon's gaze. He simply stood next to the boy, on the house's front stoop, occasionally making way for the priests who went in and out of the house, bearing boxes and books. Landon seemed to stand in a whole other world, as though the deliverance were too soon, if not unexpected.

"Nothing is ever really over," Fr. Callahan replied, "Your brother can attest to that."

Landon watched Bradley, who was preoccupied with checking all the contents of their bags. The boy had an inventory in one hand and a pen in the other, and he was counting recorders, tapes, cameras, and notebooks, all with the air of someone who had never seen evil. Landon could sense the little details, however, that pedestrian eyes would miss: the momentary, faraway look when the boy had to rest, the slight slump in one shoulder, the frequent taps on the clipboard his fingers made when he tried to reconcile the numbers of recorders with the inventory of supplies. No one would think of checking in on a boy who seemed so happy doing what he did. No one would think that this young man had rushed his growing up, from a little boy playing in the park, to a soul that had endured pain too deep to be described in human words.

"Go ahead. We can handle this," the exorcist spoke up, "Dr. Brown needs you."

Landon dragged his feet to the car, felt his own shoulders sag, felt his hands grow heavy, as though his entire body were protesting against leaving the priests, as though his own soul were chaining his legs with holds of metal that could be mined in worlds that only the angels could see.

And then he remembered the power that the monsters of darkness wielded, with their weapons whose damage lasted decades, and their wars that knew neither time nor space. Landon straightened his back at the mere prospect of being enslaved to these so-called angels.

He opened the car doors and sat in the driver's seat, just as Fr. Callahan nodded to him from the front door, as Bradley finished with his inventory, and as one of the priests finished with another conversation on his phone and waved to the brothers to wait for him.

"Fr. Anthony just called from Rome. He said you weren't picking up?" The priest's tone was both alarmed and exasperated, "He told me to tell you that the apartments at Georgetown are ready. He just needs you to call him when you get there."

The boys checked their phones immediately. There were no registered calls or text messages, only signs of fully charged batteries and strong cellular signals to mock them. Of course, there would be games until the very end; no self-respecting demon would be caught empty handed when it came to accounting on who did the most mischief.

The brothers thanked the priest, then drove to the hospital. They usually left right after a deliverance, and were on call for the next few days just in case they needed to document anything or relay messages to Fr. Anthony's office in Rome.

This deliverance was different: it had been the most draining finish, the closest to sunrise, the farthest from sleep, the least eventful, but the most damaging.

They were silent on the drive to the hospital. Landon maneuvered through the near-empty Boston streets, one hand on the wheel, the other rubbing his eyes if only to keep sleep at bay. Bradley closed his eyes, but sleep was too far off; at length, he took to staring out the window, quiet, as the traffic thickened, as the world came to life in the footsteps and coffee cups of the city, as the crowds and conversations and chirruping grew all around them.

After every deliverance came the light, the prayers promised. The promises were not too easy to believe, however, when the deliverance came after weeks of draining waiting, or when the deliverance came too easily, so that one had to doubt its truth. The promises were even harder to believe on mornings like this, when the entire world seemed to be going its merry way so normally, so oblivious to the dangers that lurked in corners brightened with the darkness of human frailty.

The brothers doubted the promise of light when they finally saw the psychiatrist. Dr. Brown, the once gentle professor who looked as though he had been born a grandfather, the once soothing man who appeared as though he knew only the good and the beautiful - Dr. Brown was gray,

tired, almost sallow. He lay in bed with a smile that nevertheless sparkled, his wife's hand in his, his other hand holding a notebook open.

When the boys came, he greeted them with a low voice that sounded as though it had been scraped over pebbles. He probably had never been so sick, so weakened in his life; his body knew nothing about warding off attacks that came from places that scholars like him had been taught to dismiss as mere imagination.

"I heard the good news," the gentleness nevertheless worked its way through Dr. Brown's yellowed countenance, "How is she?"

Bradley sat on the nearest stool. Mrs. Brown smiled at him, with warmth that reminded him of his own mother, God rest her soul. There was anger, however, in the tiny twitch of her lip. What woman, indeed, would not be enraged by an injury to her husband, born out of the man's love for his field and his compassion for those who suffered?

"She's recovering," Landon began, standing at the foot of the bed, "She had a good deliverance at dawn. It was a rough night."

"I'd say," the psychiatrist mused, with a low laugh that gurgled in his throat.

"Not that we're discounting what you went through," Bradley added immediately, so that Mrs. Brown's smile warmed, "The priests are talking to her now. They'll take the whole morning, from the looks of it."

"No surprises there," Dr. Brown said, a little less cordial than usual, "That's why I needed to talk to you boys. I don't want the theological explanation. I need your experience. And my wife loves British accents, so you're here for good reason."

Mrs. Brown laughed, pressed his hand, then turned away for a moment to wipe her cheek.

Landon and Bradley glanced at each other, not quite sure what to make of the man's words. Most psychiatrists had simply walked away after a case, or had chatted about the weather, or had joked about how movies never captured the terror that they went through. Then again, none of the psychiatrists had been hit this hard prior to a deliverance.

Dr. Brown did not wait for the boys to tell him to keep talking. His voice crackled into the silence.

"We've been on this case for weeks now," he pushed his notebook toward Landon, which the latter took, "And I've had the chance to observe the girl. I've never had to deal with a case like hers. She's worse than the rest, but her story - it's not as bad. She didn't cast spells, call on Satan, order demons around, usual suspects. None of this was in her control. She was the victim. Took in everything. Absorbed everything."

"Perhaps that's why she suffered the most," Bradley spoke up, tempted to tell Dr. Brown about the Italian cases he had to study, where curses abounded, "She had no idea what she fought against, so she couldn't match strength with strength."

"Maybe," the psychiatrist's old scholarly tone returned, still crackling beneath the gravel and stones in his voice, "But you also have to remember that this is a devout Catholic family. I know they kept their secret, but she knows prayers, the sacraments, the possibility of possession, even if the idea has been filtered through horror films. She could have matched, as you said, strength with strength. I've never seen it before. And that is why I asked you here: have you seen it before? This helplessness, this despair?"

Bradley had seen it in himself, but he had also grown up with hardly any religion in his house; his family had gone to mass and performed the rituals the way that they had been taught, but there was no conversation on matters of faith in their household. They would talk of school, he remembered, and ships, and games; Sunday was mass, and the week was real life. Everything changed after his exorcism, but it had likewise taken years to undo the pitfalls of what was close to a decade of lukewarm faith.

"I can't say," Bradley spoke up, after the memories played in his head, "We've seen lots of cases. I still can't see the pattern."

"And that is what makes me uneasy," Dr. Brown pointed at the notebook in Landon's hands, "I've taken notes of our conversations, and our interviews with her. I can't see a pattern either, but I know there should be one. There has to be one. I've even thrown statistics at the text, and still no luck!"

"Oh please, no!" Bradley raised both palms, "No maths!"

"Lucky for you, statistics is not math," Mrs. Brown finally spoke up, "I'm a statistician."

Bradley could only manage a grin. He hated research in general. He could read for hours, collect data, even proofread. The whole research process was something reserved for someone far more patient than he. Far more adept, Landon would sometimes tease him.

"I've tried, if you must know," Mrs. Brown continued, "All those little notations are mine. I tried everything in the book, but I see nothing big, nothing pronounced, nothing glaring. Just anger and resentment; but who knows who's really talking, and when?"

Landon went through the pages of Dr. Brown's notebook, and found checks, tallies, and letter codes, written next to words that had been highlighted, underlined, or labeled with question marks. The girl had mentioned, and quite often, that she wished she had a real family, a true father and true mother, and a good night's sleep. And then she spoke about her nightmares, of being in a kitchen, on the floor, with something dark and shadowy standing over her with a bottle that burned black.

Landon knew that Dr. Brown had not confided in his wife about the girl's confession, and he would never do so. But Mrs. Brown's questions were timeless and applicable to any case. What was the girl's mental state when she was interviewed? What was her emotional state? And who was really talking?

"I don't know how else to analyze that data," Dr. Brown said, sighing, "William tried, my grad students tried. I've even taken it to the linguists. You remember Graystone, dear?"

"Edgar?" His wife asked, although not as warmly, "Of course. He'd do well not to look down on statistics."

Bradley could not help chuckling. It was the old qualitative vs. quantitative debate playing out. He had heard as much when he was at university, but the analysis didn't interest him. If anything, he felt lost when research was discussed, even annoyed when the conversation became about the nuances of methods rather than the implications of findings. He looked over at Landon and found his brother still riffling through pages blackened by hastily written notes.

"The linguists have given up," the psychiatrist gestured toward the notebook, "and my statistician has quit. Lucky that you're both part of a bigger research project. Unlimited funding? Lots of analysts?"

"Not quite - no one wants to try either," Bradley put in, when Landon seemed too engrossed in the notebook to even look up from it, "We're off to the Philippines next. Maybe we'll get someone there."

"Let's hope that you do," Dr. Brown's smile was mild, "When I first got into this, I thought, and honestly, that we would just see a whole lot of people in hysterics, or anxiety attacks gone haywire, or manic depression, D.I.D. - I didn't think this would happen, and not on this scale."

"The Philippines is beautiful," Mrs. Brown spoke up, hand still grasping her husband's, "I was there years ago for a conference. I went back for a vacation, too. Churches on every corner, and a long history of Catholicism. You'd think they'd be the last place for something like this."

"Actually," Landon finally entered the conversation, but without looking up from the notebook, "We've found that it's precisely those places that are the best targets for possession. The religion isn't a shield; it's an invitation."

"Or more precisely," Bradley had to add, as he felt dark, chilly water threaten to swallow him whole, "It's places of folk religiosity - where people pick and choose beliefs to fit into their faith. But that's just one factor - it doesn't apply to the US, so we still haven't found a pattern."

Dr. Brown sighed, suddenly appearing even grayer, more tired than before. He looked up at his wife, who looked down at him and gave his hand a press between hers. They shared a look that appeared to be a mix of resignation and encouragement; a look that, framed by a backdrop of wires and monitors, seemed all the more poignant.

"I think I'll rest for a long while after this," Dr. Brown said, softly, as his wife smoothed the hair free from his forehead, "Take the notebook with you, boys. I don't know how it can help your project, but it certainly won't help me. Go on; take it."

Landon closed the notebook at once, as though dreading any kind of dealings with anything that could one day be a plaything for demons. He was already handing it back to the psychiatrist, when the door opened.

"It's William!" Mrs. Brown said, "Oh the poor boy must be hungry!"

"And he is, like any good post doc," the voice from the door might have been joking, but it felt weary, at least according to the two brothers by the bed.

They had met a lot of Dr. Brown's students, but this one was the most often mentioned and never met with. William was the one in charge of reviewing transcripts and being the objective voice of reason far removed from the possession proceedings. Judging from how much work was often handed to him, and judging from how he had also given up on analyzing the transcripts, it was no surprise that he sounded so worn out, tired, pulled free from all happiness.

"Sorry to interrupt," William finally entered with bags in each hand. He placed one on the room's dresser, and gave another to Mrs. Brown, who had come forward to help him, "Special delivery of fresh fruit and yogurt for our patient, and fish and chips for Mrs. Brown and company."

The brothers looked at each other quickly, forgetting the last few weeks, and hearing only the call of food. They didn't remember eating dinner or breakfast, as was usual with all their cases. No one had any appetite for any kind of food during the sessions, and often after; demons took all manner of human enjoyment with them when they played with human souls.

Today, however, seemed an exception: the mere mention of fish and chips was enough for the boys to forget that they had not had an ounce of sleep in over a day, and had been witness to a battle that had ended with sunrise and tears.

"On any other day, I would have said chuck the yogurt," Dr. Brown spoke up from his bed and reached out with one hand, "But today, I need good food and rest, or I won't be around long enough to tell the grandkids how their grandpa once went to war with demons."

William smiled and handed the man a banana, then an open cup of yogurt and a spoon, all of which Dr. Brown took with an air of exasperation.

"You're a good boy, William Lambskeep," Dr. Brown raised the cup to his post doc, as though in a toast, "I'll miss you."

The brothers finally had the chance to examine the post doc, as Dr. Brown ate the banana, and as Mrs. Brown and William unpacked the fish and chips together and handed them out. He was as tall as the brothers, but he seemed darker, both in mien and in skin: his eyes had the slant of Asia, but his angular cheekbones and chiseled jaw betrayed some other lineage, some other race.

He was imposing, on first glance, as though challenging anyone to ask why he didn't like smiling often.

While the brothers were golden blonde, with bright bluish-green eyes against pink skin, William was dark haired, tanned, but seemingly pale. His face was longer, his eyes quieter but scrutinizing; and his smile, when it did come, lacked in spirit. He was broad in the shoulders, and moved with determination, as though he planned his steps hours in advance. Even the act of handing a cone of fish and chips to Landon, then Bradley, seemed formal.

"They had the deliverance with zero sleep just a few hours ago," Mrs. Brown told him, as she sat next to her husband and munched on some fish, "These boys deserve a big lunch buffet, but I suppose fish and chips will have to do."

"And they do very well, thank you," Bradley said, with a nod to William, then Mrs. Brown, "We didn't expect this. Let us pay you -"

Mrs. Brown brushed him away with a hand holding fries, "It was my husband's idea," she ate her fries, then took Dr. Brown's banana peel, "Would you like just a little taste, dear?"

Dr. Brown laughed, low, "No appetite. Enjoy it. It's our thank you," he looked at Bradley, then in wonderment at Landon, who had taken interest in the notebook again and was reading it while eating his share of the fish and chips, "You made me part of this, and I am thankful, wires and tubes and all."

Bradley could not help sighing. Anyone who had been through Dr. Brown's battles, from the work to the analysis, the sessions to the actual heart attack, would be depressed and in despair. He had the strength to still thank the boys for involving him in an endeavor that had nearly cost him his life.

"I don't know what else to say, but 'Thank you,'" Landon looked up from the notebook, "No demon can stand up to your kind of joy."

Bradley opened his mouth, about to say something along the lines of, "Let's hope we never get the opportunity to test that," but he was interrupted by an arm extended in his direction.

It was William, "We haven't been formally introduced," the hand, Bradley felt, was firm, almost too strong, as though William held things in his fists all the time, "William Lamskeep, Boston College."

"Bradley Sheffield," was the boy's response, so that he forgot to tell Landon not to joke too easily about encounters with demons, "My brother Landon, both from England, both on tour."

"Just like the Beatles," Dr. Brown smiled from the bed as Landon and William shook hands, "They're part of the Vatican group that called you, William."

Bradley continued to wonder at the newly-instated formality, which, though affectionate, seemed so unlike the Dr. Brown of but minutes before, or even of the other psychiatrists the brothers had encountered. Most psychiatrists in other states, even countries, were scholars by day, boisterous dads at night, who treated their equally boisterous students to mugs of beer or glasses of wine. William seemed to be the doting grandchild to a still strong grandfather, who was handling him as though he were a porcelain doll that could easily be shattered by the merest wrongly-placed word.

"The Vatican has been very kind, and quiet," William never stopped with the grave tone. Bradley listened closely, noted the gold cross on a faded chain hanging from the boy's neck. William seemed to sense that he was being watched; he took to collecting trash around the room as he spoke, even as Mrs. Brown gestured that he should sit, "I've sent them all our files, and they haven't said anything, so I hope everything's good."

"They might be really busy," Landon did not look up from the notebook, "Our last exorcism was not quite as clear cut as this."

The last one was in rural New York, miles from any city to which the team could run for help. The victim was a college boy, who liked experimenting with love spells on any woman who took his fancy, and who had to suffer the "blowback" (as one priest, a former soldier, nicknamed it) of two spells: one to quiet down a girl he had dumped, another to bewitch the new girl he had set his eyes on. He had been in and out of a trance, and had been difficult to pin down, quite literally. He scaled walls and ceilings, hissed at anyone who tried to catch him, slithered on the ground when he chanced to find himself on the earth, and vomited chicken bones, as though he had ingested them like a hungry giant snake. There had been no complete deliverance; the family had simply given up and taken to blaming the girls for being "too forward" and "too encouraging".

The exorcism sessions, however, had been intense, and even more so than their Boston case. Bradley worked for weeks to annotate the videos, marking where certain transformations happened. Landon worked, likewise, at translating the transcripts, which came in a variety of Latin languages all built on dreams and hopes by an even wider variety of demons. Landon had to keep consulting online books for translating subjunctive moods in different languages, which, he once bellowed, irritated him enough to steer clear of any kind of research related to transcripts - and any kind of translations related to subjunctive mood, for that matter.

"Better to move on from that one," Landon continued, nodding to Dr. Brown in thanks for the notebook, "The Vatican's probably still cross checking all my translation mistakes."

William shook his head, "Your work sounds really interesting - I don't know how you can do so many cases, one after the other."

"We pray a lot," Bradley said, finishing the last of his meal.

"And rest a lot," Landon added, "I can tell you more if we keep in touch."

"Then make sure you do that, young man," Dr. Brown put in, so that the room turned to him, "William's wrapping up work with me as soon as he publishes all his research. You could use his psychology brain. Lord knows how much more of it he has than I do."

William paled somewhat despite the compliment, and the gentle remonstrance by Mrs. Brown on how her husband "certainly had lots of living brain cells still firing away!" Bradley marked the change, and sensed that it had much to do with why William was so formal, to the point of almost being stiff and over cautious. The pallor, however, disappeared beneath William's soft smile at his mentor.

"I won't be out of your hair yet, Brownie," he retorted, so that the patient laughed, then coughed in amusement at his nickname, "The five papers won't write themselves."

"Then get to them before you hop off to another green pasture!" was the crisp reply from Dr. Brown, "Five papers, my goodness. Only William Lamskeep can write that much in one year."

William's smile graduated ever-so-slightly into a light chuckle that barely stirred the dry air of the room.

"And please have my notes," Dr. Brown turned to Landon, seemingly accustomed to and unfazed by William's barebones reactions to jests, "Either find use for it or chuck it in a furnace."

"Noted," Landon raised the notebook, "Thank you for this. We'll take good care of it."

"That means never giving it back," Mrs. Brown said, almost fearfully, "We've had enough analysis to last us a lifetime."

Bradley was about to joke how analysis would be too much even for one second of his own lifetime, when another knock came to the door. This time, it was a team of doctors and nurses, all of them bearing clipboards or caddies of laboratory materials. Someone said they smelled food, and it would be dangerous to excite the patient with things that might turn his stomach, or even reverse all the progress they had already made the night before. Someone said the room was too crowded, which prompted Mrs. Brown to quickly give her goodbyes to the boys, and to push them out - as it were - so that the doctors could do another round of tests.

"It's these tests that turn my stomach!" Was the last thing the brothers and William heard, as they closed the door on Dr. Brown, "Take me with you to the beach!"

Bradley laughed as he took a seat in the hospital hallway. He had already sat in the house, in the car, in Dr. Brown's room; but for some reason, sitting down at that moment, in the hospital corridor, allowed him to finally realize that the deliverance had been made, and that he could breathe. He leaned back, felt the fish and chips weigh down on his insides, felt his body threaten to melt into the chair.

He tried to stay awake, but all he could remember was a low conversation between his brother and William, something about how William would send Landon more notes on the case, how

Landon would pass the notes to the Vatican, how the servers sometimes bogged down with all the files, how William's life as a graduate student was all about research and less about teaching, how the work that went into writing research articles was not to everyone's liking, how William had already submitted his papers to different journals, so he could still be on call in case the brothers needed him, and how Landon needed more than a night of sleep to make up for the previous evening's work.

Everything was both clear as day and muddled as a puddle for Bradley: he felt the chair melt softly into air, and then harden under him; heard the faraway call of nurses and doctors, then something scratching and prowling the walls of the hospital; tasted fish and chips, then salt water. And then there was a conversation on Korea, on the language, and the culture, and it seemed that Landon had made awfully long questions, but William answered in tiny syllables that said that he knew next to nothing of his mother's country.

There was a sea, once again, but it was pouring out of the walls, lapping against Bradley's nostrils, threatening to swallow him. And then there was a hallway, and creatures in the roofbeams that liked to scratch the mortar and chitter with glee. They seemed harmless, the cackles and crackles; but something deep within Bradley warned him not to be deceived.

When he came to, Landon was shaking him awake. William had gone, but wished them well, his brother said, as he tried to bring Bradley to his feet.

"And yes, you can sleep in the car," Landon added, with mock exasperation, "Let your poor brother drive, why don't you."

Something nagged at the back of Bradley's head, snagged at the ends of his fragmented thoughts. When he was finally upright, walking, and more than wide awake, he forgot the water and the creatures and the waves and the gnashing of tiny teeth. He simply followed his brother out, into the afternoon sun.

"The Philippines soon, and the beach in a month, little brother," Landon said, voice light and airy, "When all that comes, then you can rest as much as you like."

Bradley shook his head, as though he could still feel the saltwater gush into his ears. He had a feeling that there would no longer be any such thing as rest, not in their mortal lives, not in the last bastion of Catholicism in the Far East. Something in his head echoed a voice, one that spoke in his halfway world of dreams and waking, one that whispered of fragile walls and breaking gates, one that trembled against the forces of beings that knew neither space nor time.

He ignored the echoes, and the dreams, even the taste of salt in his mouth. Yes, there could be rest. He needed it before what he felt would be a bigger battle ahead.

What he did not anticipate was a year of rest, as the battle brewed behind gateways unseen by the human eye, and as the gateways barely held fast in the darkness half a world away.