DAVID DWAN

WELCOME TO DEMON TIME
YOUR NEW FAVORITE SHOW

Demon: 4 God squad: 0

David Dwan

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ONE

The battered and blooded priest hung suspended in the air some three feet from the bare floor boards, gasping for breath. One of his eyes was stuck shut from the dried blood that covered half his face from a wound that he had sustained only seconds after entering the building. The other, half closed and blackened itself was staring longingly down at the tattered bible that lay on the floor, just out of reach.

He stretched out his right arm, the least damaged of the two. His broken fingers at full stretch but the force holding him there moved him back ever so slightly so he just couldn't quite reach. So close, yet so far.

He let out a sob of anguish. If only he could reach the book, he knew that somewhere within its well-thumbed pages was the answer to his present torment. The priest offered up a whispered prayer, but the book moved no closer.

"More prayers?" The thing in the corner of the sparse, foul smelling room said with mild amusement. "Is that really all you have left, Father?"

Even now, the creature's voice turned the priest's bowls to water. That sickening mixture of falsetto, baritone and bass, all in one, over lapping, making each word a torment to the ear.

"Demon," he spat in weak defiance through broken teeth. The bloody spittle splattered the floor boards and hissed like water on a hot plate. He glanced at the bible, half expecting it to burst into flames.

"Demon?" The thing replied. "Yes," it lamented. "But a reluctant one, if that helps?"

It didn't.

The demon snapped its bony fingers theatrically and the priest dropped to the floor, knocking the wind right out of him. He screamed, expecting the floor

boards to be white hot, but they were just cold and damp smelling against his feverish cheek.

Just another of the creature's sick jokes, of which there had been legion tonight. He had endured so many in his time in the house. How long had it been now? Minutes? Hours? Since this nightmare had begun? Whichever, it felt like a lifetime.

The priest cursed himself for taking on this fool's exorcism. He had thought himself ready to banish this abomination back to the pit, to put an end to this whole travesty. His pride before this mighty fall made him want to weep now, but he wouldn't give the thing the satisfaction. It may have broken his body, but it would never break his spirit.

He took a moment to catch his breath, to muster up what little courage he had left. Then slowly, painfully he began to crawl over towards the bible.

It burst into flames and was ash in an instant. He let out a howl of despair despite himself. "God!" He screamed.

"Oh, not in here," the demon taunted wearily, clearly growing bored of priest baiting. "But who knows? If you scream loud enough, your God may hear you."

The priest began to sob now, all thought of composure in front of the creature gone the way of hope.

"I will kill you now, Father." The thing said with a dispassionate finality. Its voice was so close to his ear that the priest turned his head in horror, expecting it to be knelt over him. But it hadn't moved from the corner of the room, where it had squatted this whole time. The smell of urine stung his sinus. He had wet himself in his terror, one final humiliation.

"Oh, God," he sobbed, not in prayer this time but in utter despair.

The door to the room slowly opened, screaming on its hinges as if it hadn't been opened in a thousand years.

"I offered you the door when you first arrived, priest." The demon reminded him. "You refused me then. How about now?"

The priest could see through the open door way, down the long entrance corridor and to the front door. It opened now, revealing the night beyond.

He got to his knees with every sinew in his body screaming in protest, and turned to the demon. That was a mistake that would haunt him to his dying day. He locked eyes with the thing for the briefest of moments, but that was more than enough for the desolation he saw there to scar him for life.

It wasn't the lack of life in them, far from it. Those dusky twin pools of darkness told of centuries of unfathomable wretchedness. Of a dozen lives lived in misery and torment both given and most definitely received.

It shrugged as innocently as such a creature could and when it spoke again, it was with pure malice. "I can't swear I will offer it a third time."

The priest scrambled to his feet and ran screaming from the room and out into the corridor, which seemed to stretch out of sight as he stumbled his way towards the open front door. With every step he expected a killer blow to the back of his head or some new horror dreamt up by the beast to come into view. But there was nothing, feet from the open front doorway he felt the cool night air on his face, and it felt like an angel's kiss. He stumbled on out of the hell house and into the welcoming arms of the night.

And the crowd went wild.

The priest was instantly blinded by half a dozen spotlights, he fell to his knees and did his best to shield his eyes from the harsh light. The sound of a crowd cheering was all around him. In all the confusion of the house and his battle with the creature, the priest had forgotten where he actually was. Then it came back to him. Of course, the TV show.

Demon time.

Shadows running towards him now, some with cameras another with a microphone which was unceremoniously thrust into his face.

"Father, Father," the microphone's owner shouted to be heard above the crowd, which were seated on bleachers high up all around him. The host crouched down next to him, grinning like a loon. "Oh, Father Winthorpe. So close, you nearly lasted ten minutes in there. Looks like you took one hell of a beating. Do you have any words for the fans?"

Only ten minutes? Winthorpe thought through the fog of pain and disorientation, surely it must have been ten hours.

"Paramedics..." Winthorpe just managed to get out before pitching face first into the grass and oblivion, and was thankful for it.

TWO

Michael Davis watched all this play out in glorious HD on a monitor from the production control room, which was housed in a prefabricated office situated behind the main stand which looked down on the house and surrounding arena. Next to him the show's director, Jeff Miller, a stick thin man full of nervous ticks and wild eyed enthusiasm was barking orders into the mic of his headset to the five camera operators they had down there, whilst surveying the bank of monitors in front of him.

Miller was expensive and a little too reliant on amphetamines in Davis' opinion, but he knew he was one of the best live directors out there. Miller looked up at Davis after calling for a close up of the prone priest. "Shall I send in the paramedics, boss? That guy looks pretty beat up to me."

"Sure," Davis said dispassionately.

"Hit it!" Miller said to the production assistant at his right and the night sky exploded in fireworks which heralded the 'Demonettes'. The shows very

own cheerleading troupe (dressed as zombies, of course) who always came out with the paramedics, flanking them five each side, to whip the three hundred strong crowd into even more of a frenzy. The massive PA system blasted out AC/DC's highway to hell as the priest was eventually hauled up onto a hospital gurney and rushed out of the arena and into a waiting ambulance.

"Stick with the paramedics, Johnny," Miller told one of the cameramen. "That's it, great shot, all the way out until they drive away."

Back down in the makeshift arena, Dex Dexter, (God how Davis hated that name) the show's host was leading the crowd in an impromptu Mexican wave. Dexter was the perfect internet game show host. Part Liberace, part sports commentator, all flash. Even before demon time had come alone, Dexter had been a minor You Tube sensation, thanks to his time in Japan hosting an extreme sports show called Kamikaze Krazies, which before it was shut down had boasted at least two on screen deaths, the ratings for that show had been obscene.

A whole scandal had then erupted and Dexter had scurried back to England with his tail between his legs and tens of thousands of pounds in debt. All of which had worked to the good for Davis.

When Davis had found him down on his luck hosting at a comedy club slash strip joint in Soho, he had been able to sign the 'entertainer' for a pittance. Dexter had all but bitten his hand off when he had come to him with the idea for demon time.

Ah, *demon time*. An internet only game show where a real Catholic priest would go head to head with a (supposedly) real demon. Of course Dexter had rolled his eyes in the beginning, everyone did, but they all changed their tune when he took them to meet 'Mister Minx'. (Davis still didn't know where the creature's name had come from, but it somehow seemed to suit the scrawny little fuck.) Yes, Mister Minx was always very convincing.

No one knew how Davis had gotten his hands on an actual demon, and that was the way he liked it. Indeed most thought the whole thing was just a well-executed hoax. A notion Davis was more than fine with as it kept the

authorities from investigating the show and ‘Michael Davis Productions’ too closely.

Davis had made sure the whole show was transportable around mainland Europe, with the location kept an absolute secret until a day or so before broadcast. All those who had paid to watch the show live knew was the date and to have their passports at the ready.

Tonight they were in Brittany, France, but the next time it could be Italy, Spain, anywhere on mainland Europe, maybe even further afield if the show’s success continued to grow.

But in reality the location and the crowd didn’t matter, neither did the cheerleaders or Dex Dexter, sure they gave the whole event a certain spectacle, but it was on the internet where demon time really came alive, and where Michael Davis made the majority of his money.

Pay per view live streaming, the five sweetest words in the English language.

People paid a one off subscription of fifty Euros. For this you got access to an encrypted website where the show was streamed live. Then there was the lottery; for a mere ten Euros, you could guess how long the battle would actually take. From the moment the priest (always a volunteer, usually some Vatican cast off who saw the show as a shot at redemption in the eyes of their masters in Rome) entered the house, to the exact moment they exited. (Usually at great pace, one even through an upstairs window. One hell of a show that.)

It never failed to amuse Davis that no one ever actually bet on the priest winning and casting the demon out (God forbid!)

Down below, Dexter held up a hand to hush the crowd, and then consulted his IPad. It was time for the lottery, those in the crowd and those logged on to the live stream each had the chance to pick the exact time the priest would exit the house, then the lucky punter would win a thousand Euros and a free ticket to the next show. Just another way for Davis to rake in the cash. Money makes money makes money he thought.

Dexter had them in the palm of his hand, he checked the IPad theatrically, checked it again just to ramp up the suspense. It was pin drop quiet in the arena until he finally put them out of their misery. “Ladies and Gentlemen,” Dexter whispered into his mic. “Have your tickets at the ready, and good luck to one and all...”

He spun on his heels and pointed to the large viewing screen which hung above the makeshift arena. “Eight minutes twenty nine seconds!” He shouted, this was met, as always, with the excited hushed chatter of a hundred or so people hastily checking their lottery tickets. Dexter waited, the cameras set up around the arena scanned the crowd, waiting for that ecstatic whoop as one of their number jumped to their feet waving the winning ticket. But there was nothing.

Back in the control room, Miller the director was whispering camera instructions into his head set, cutting the shot from one group of spectators to the next. He turned to look up at Davis who was standing at the largest screen watching the show as it played out. The director put a hand over his mic. “You know Boss,” he said hopefully. “If I had one of those new Lorimar light weight cranes, we could do one hell of a swooping shot right about now.”

“Too expensive, Jeff.” Davis replied without looking around. He could almost hear the wind disappear from Miller’s sails. “I’ll maybe get you one of those cheap ass drones for the next show, maybe.”

“Boss!” It was Tiff, Davis’ assistant. “We’ve got a winner, on the web,” she said waving her IPad. “Someone in Denmark of all places, guessed it bang on.”

“Denmark?” Davis said with no little satisfaction. Demon time was truly getting popular all over the place these days. “Okay, bring it up on the big screen,” he instructed.

“Roger that,” Miller said and hit a button. The winner’s name appeared on the big screen above Dexter and a pre-recorded fanfare blasted out over the PA system.

“Yeeeessss,” Dexter shouted. “And we have a winner, one of our friends on the internet. A Mister Gunnar...” He faltered only slightly at the Dane’s

surname. “Kotilainen? Yes, congratulations to Gunnar and he picks up tonight’s one thousand Euro jackpot. Spend it unwisely Gunnar, spend it unwisely.”

With this, Miller hit the cue for the show’s end musical sequence and barked orders into his head set for the Demonettes to come on once again. Much to the crowd’s frenzied pleasure.

Davis turned away from the screen. Another killer show, he thought, each one better than the last. “I need to see some viewing figures people,” he ordered. “And I think it’s time to break out the Champagne, great job everyone.” He looked across the control room to Baker, a huge barrel chested bear of a man who was the head of the construction crew. “I want everything stripped and on the trucks in two hours Harry, okay?”

Baker gave his usual curt nod and disappeared out the door. Demon time was essentially one big travelling circus. Everything, including the demon house itself was a set. It could be put up and stripped down all in a matter of a couple of hours. Keeping everything on the move kept the broadcasting authorities guessing, and unable to pry too deeply into whether demon time was real or not.

They weren’t exactly breaking any laws, but it didn’t do any harm to keep one step ahead, just in case. If this was on legitimate TV, Davis would have those pencil pushers crawling right up his ass, with their health and safety bullshit and not to mention those pesky union pay scales and working conditions. Thank God for live entertainment and the internet. In cyber space, no one can sue for wrongful dismissal for falling off a fucking ladder, at least not if you kept moving.

THREE

Father Shane Ross watched the lurid end titles of demon time scroll across the screen of his lap top in quite disbelief. Now that he had actually seen it for himself, he wished more than anything that none of it was real, just like the rumours said, all actors and special effects. The priest was just some actor in a costume, his wounds, both mental and physical, an illusion. It would have been so much easier to stomach.

But Ross was in possession of proof that made the priest on the show all too real. On the table next to his computer was a Vatican dossier on Father Dominic Winthorpe, the man he had just seen mentally and physically tortured live on the internet. He reached over and picked up the black and white A4 photo of Winthorpe taken in better times (could there be any worse?).

The priest, who at thirty six was ten years older than Ross himself, was smiling for the camera. The picture had been snapped on the day of Winthorpe's ordination. Some five years ago, the man's face was a study in bliss, much as Ross' must surely have been when he was ordained, a little over a year ago now.

Over the last year or so the dossier noted, Winthorpe had developed something of a drinking problem, following the death of his mother to cancer. The poor man had seen his once vibrant beloved mother destroyed by the disease, reduced from a very healthy twelve stone down to nothing but skin and bone at the end.

It had not only broken his heart, but shattered his faith. Although he had never actually denounced God and the priesthood, he had subconsciously done all he could to sabotage his position, he lost his dioceses. Drinking heavily until finally a fight with a parishioner had seen him dismissed.

Quite simply demon time had been Winthorpe's chance at redemption. It was heart breaking to read, let alone then see the poor man humiliated like that, just when he had found his faith again.

Ross found it hard to believe that the thing that skulked malevolently around that ram shackled shanty of a house might actually be real. But real or not the possibility of the existence of such a potential abomination had reached the attention of the Vatican itself.

And it broke his heart that a fellow priest could have fallen so far from the side of God, until he felt that all he had left was the travesty he had just seen. Then there was the creature. Only ever fleetingly caught by the multiple cameras they must have had dotted around that house. It was as if the cameras, who were only too keen to capture Winthorpe's agonies in glorious close up, suddenly became reticent at the sight of the creature. Fearful perhaps, or was it simply to preserve its true nature and to add fuel to the fire that raged around the things authenticity? Real or fake, it was all part of the appeal of the show apparently.

"Fake," Ross told himself firmly. "Fake." It felt good to say it out loud as if somehow making it true. After all the alternative didn't bear thinking too hard about.

Ross suddenly heard his answerphone click on, he must have been so deep in thought that he hadn't heard the phone ring at all. He jumped up and rushed over to the machine and picked up the receiver just before the beep came.

"Hello?" He said hoarsely the word more a croak than two syllables. He cleared his dry throat and tried again. "Hello?"

"Shane? It's Father Mendez, that you?" Came the voice on the other end with a thick Spanish accent.

"Yes, sorry Father, yes it's me. Didn't hear the phone," he said hurriedly. He knew Mendez was calling from the Vatican and he knew the priest would know why he had been so distracted.

"So, you saw the show then I take it?"

Show? Such a strange word for what he had just seen. "Yes, sir," he replied. "I saw it."

“Bastards,” Despite his position, Mendez had never been one for decorum. “We are trying to trace the location, we’ve narrowed it down to France, but France is a big fu...” He stopped mid curse, perhaps he did have a little decorum after all Ross mused. “Place.” Mendez finished modestly.

“You can’t believe it’s real,” Ross said.

“I hate to say it, Shane, but I do think it’s possible for things like that creature to exist. To be honest I’m in a minority of two or three around here.” Mendez said. “But if this one is real, then we need to find it, Shane. We need to get it back here to the Vatican or better still destroy it and end that accursed show.”

“Okay,” Ross felt a sudden stab of dread. Something was coming.

A week ago, when he had first been asked to review Winthorpe’s case and then watch tonight’s show, he had thought it was in a purely professional capacity. Ross had a degree in psychology and was about to take his PHD, all paid for by the church. So it was only natural to assume the Vatican wanted to combine the two. Their interest in demon time, and how it was recruiting its, for want of a better word, contestants, and Ross’ master’s thesis. Now though...

“Father, do you want my opinion on what’s driving priests to enter the show?”

“No, not exactly,” Mendez replied.

“Or the type of personality that would want to participate in such a show? So, maybe you could find out who might volunteer next?” Ross’ throat was dry again he tried to swallow but only succeeded in making himself cough.

“We know who’s going to volunteer next, Shane.” Mendez told him.

Ross could taste bile at the back of his throat now, his skin felt cold and clammy his hand holding the phone was sweating so much he feared it may slip from his grasp.

“We have a mole, right here in the Vatican,” Mendez said and Ross caught a hint of reticence in his voice which just made him feel worse. “A novice, who was selling names of potentials to the show’s producer. Even

persuading the priest he had targeted to go on the show, to fight the demon! Despicable really, preying on the more vulnerable priests."

"That's terrible, sir." Ross' voice was barely a whisper now and he frantically searched his small flat for a waste paper basket, plant pot, anything close at hand he could throw up in if he lost his battle with the growing nausea threatening to overwhelm him. His eyes went to the bathroom door and silently he calculated how many steps it would take him to get to the toilet without ruining the carpet if he failed to get there in time. He didn't like the odds of making it.

"It is terrible," Mendez went on, his voice sounded to Ross like he was speaking from under water. "Anyway, we caught him..." Mendez stopped and Ross could tell he was trying to find the right words to articulate what he wanted to say next. "We have come up with an idea of how we can use him, to get someone we want onto the show."

Now Ross knew why he had been asked to clear his schedule for the next few weeks. He had thought he was going to be asked to join some kind of taskforce or committee which was looking into the show and the effects on those priests involved. He had even imagined taking a trip to the Vatican as part of the assignment, but in the context of an expert not out in the field. Especially not this kind of field.

What was worse still, what he imagined Mendez had in mind actually made perfect sense. Shane Ross' past was perfect for the show, he fitted the profile down to the last detail. When Ross was in his mid to late teens he had been a chronic drug addict, in and out of rehab and juvenile detention centres since he was fifteen. Then onto the real thing once he was old enough. He had been convicted of theft and GBH when he was seventeen. Eighteen months in Armley Prison, Leeds.

Ross inadvertently traced the old track marks on his right arm with his free left hand. Prison had been his saviour in the end. That was where he had found God, and kicked the drugs. He had thought the Catholic church had been his saviour, the light in those dark times. Dark times he had thought he had out

run forever. But now they were right there on his heels once more, ready to push him head long into God only knew what.

Was he about to replace that old monkey he had so successfully kicked off his back with something far, far worse?

"Father, if I may say a word?" Ross asked softly.

"Of course Shane, anything."

"Shit."

"That's as good a word as any son." Mendez said with no little sympathy. "Grab your passport, Shane. You've quite a journey ahead of you."

FOUR

"Just over twenty thousand, boss." Davis' assistant Tiff had her face pressed dangerously close to the screen of her IPad as she read out the numbers from tonight's show.

"Did you lose your glasses again, Tiff?" Davis loosened his tie and opened up the top button. Now that he was outside, the balmy night air was making him sweat. Although it might also have had something to do with the three glasses of Champagne he had drunk.

"And my contacts," Tiff replied almost proudly. Tiff was invaluable to Davis, at only twenty-two he had at first been reluctant to hire her, straight out of film school that she was. She had started as an unpaid intern (Davis' favourite kind) but had soon made herself so indispensable Davis had been forced to hire her to avoid losing her skills. She was a natural producer, albeit a little too nice, but he would soon train that out of her.

Davis watched Tiff as she scrolled through the figures on her IPad. She was wearing tatty denim jeans and a Killer's tour t-shirt that she never seemed

to take off. Her unruly red hair fell down in front of her face in cascading ringlets. Everyone commented on just how attractive she would be if only she made a little more effort. But Davis liked the fact that she didn't feel the need to use her looks to get a head. Tiff was all business and her scatty nature was all part of her charm. And something of an act he suspected.

She blew her hair from out of her face, not that Davis imagined that would help her see better, without her glasses or contacts she was as blind as a bat. "And we have another seven thousand who have already signed up for the repeat show." She said.

"Next time we should up the cost of the repeats, Twenty Euros seems a little low," Davis told her. Which won a none committal nod from the young woman. Still these were some very healthy numbers. Added to which they had the haul from the lottery tickets and a Five Euro charge for a short edited highlights show.

"Your car's waiting, boss. I'll make sure everyone's packed up and gone." With this Tiff wandered off in the direction of the last few vehicles left. These were mainly the construction team, who had already stripped and packed away the temporary seating platforms, PA and most of the outside Broadcasting unit. In less than an hour's time, it would have been like they had never been here.

Except for the house, of course.

Davis felt a chill at his back and turned to look at the house, now standing all on its own in the middle of the field. It was a strange sight, a ramshackle haunted house out here, like it had been dropped from the sky by the Devil Himself. He moved a little closer and the warm night air began to cool with every step he took towards it. Davis stopped some twenty yards from the structure when he realised he could see his own breath.

The house would sit there until the morning, even after the creature inside had been incapacitated and shipped away to a secret location literally only four people knew of. No one, not even the hardest of the construction crew would

go near the place in the dark. Not when the demon had been so recently in residence and Davis couldn't blame them. The place simply radiated evil.

Like everything else, the house was a set, especially made to strict specifications. It boasted fifteen remote cameras, which Miller and his team could control from the safety of the outside broadcasting studio. Every possible exit had a series of small metal charms nailed to it, strange runic symbols charged by magic Davis had no comprehension of.

The walls of the structure looked like they were made of wood, but were in fact thick steel sheets, dressed to look like old wood. All part of the grand illusion.

The house was, by necessity the most expensive part of this whole circus, it had a specially hired crew who attended the cameras inside and struck the set, once it had been warmed somewhat by the following day's sun. It was getting harder and harder though to find crew members who were willing to attend the place. Those who did brave the deconstruction of the house were considered fucking rock stars in the eyes of the rest of the production.

Forget Dex Dexter, he was just another prop to them. No, the 'demon crew' were the real deal. Even Davis himself was somewhat in awe of them, although the attrition rate was getting to be a problem. No one was ever harmed by the job, no physically, not yet, but if you ever had the misfortune to catch the look into a demon crew member's eyes. It was enough to give you a sleepless couple of nights.

Rummaging absently in his trouser pocket, Davis felt the small tin box he always carried with him. He took it out and turned it over in his hands. Such a small thing, nothing remarkable in its design, just a little bigger than a match box. But the small piece of parchment it housed was the key to the whole show. Davis opened it, but didn't take out the folded piece of paper inside, not yet. Besides, he had read the text it contained so many times, over the months since it came into his possession, that he could recite it by heart, although he never did. That could be suicide.

The ancient words had to be read, exactly as written down to the subtlest of syllables, or for want of a better phrase, all hell could break loose. Well one

of its creations to be more precise. On the paper was an incantation that kept Mister Minx compliant. If the creature was awake, as it was now, the words were like some obscene lullaby, once spoken the creature would crawl obediently into its specially constructed box. And conversely, the exact same incantation would wake it when the box was once again placed in the house ready for the next event.

Minx called the box its coffin, that was how they shipped it from show to show. Again, that task left to two members of the demon crew. They would draw straws for the dubious honour of shipping the monster, for which they got double pay. But anyone unlucky enough to win that little lottery would give the bonus, plus their pay check and no doubt a generous IOU to anyone willing to take on the task. Inevitably though every time they would try this, friends would become strangers until the job was done.

FIVE

Such a strange turn of events, Davis mused. Was it really just over twelve short months ago that he was bankrupt? (Morally as well as financially if he was honest.) Holed up in some seedy London hotel wallowing in his own self-pity, waiting to reap all the pain and misery he had caused throughout his cursed career. Michael Davis, *that* Michael Davis had been little more than a pornographer back then. A peddler of some of the most degrading filth imaginable.

It hadn't always been that way. When he had started his film career, back in the late nineties he had dreamt of being the next David Putnam. But as it turned out he had neither the know-how, contacts, or to be fair the talent to realise that particular dream. The films he had managed to scrape together were low budget affairs, nasty little horror flicks with increasingly violent and sexual themes.

So, gradually as his debts rose and his reputation plummeted, Davis' productions had become little more than torture porn. Some towards the end quite literally so. It still made him shudder when he thought back to the depths he had sunk to make a quid or two.

The lives he had forever tainted because of their involvement in his obscenities. Bright eyed young starlets reduced to the most depraved of barely legal acts that towards the end even he couldn't stomach to watch.

So many damaged lives, so much money owed to some of the lowest most violent scum Europe could offer. It all had a sickening inevitability to it. He deserved his fate, Davis had fully accepted that.

He had been expecting a hitman to come creeping into his room one night, but what he got was in fact the most unlikely key to his salvation. The irony was so thick you could choke on it if you weren't careful. In the end it was Mister Minx who had come to despatch him that night, conjured up by whom Davis didn't know. Not that that really mattered in the end.

He winced inwardly as he remembered that night and how Minx had been taunting him with the drawn out sadistic luxury of a thing with all the time in the world to carry out its mischief. That in the end had been the creature's own down fall.

Davis it turned out had been little more than live bait for the demon. In truth he had little recollection of what had happened when the trap was sprung by that crazy German, Hauser. One second the monster was on his chest promising all kinds of hell to come, the next it was on the floor writhing in pain.

Apparently, the German had been tracking Minx's creator, waiting for him to strike. It was something he did from time to time when he got wind of such an abomination to come. 'Which is more often than you would like to think' he had said.

Then as Davis had sat draining a newly opened bottle of whiskey with the German whilst watching Mister Minx gradually stop fitting and slip into a coma on the floor of that non-descript hotel room. An insane idea began to form in his fear addled mind.

“What are you going to do with it?” He had asked.

“Fuck knows,” the German replied. “I hadn’t expected it to last this long. They have usually exploded or something by now.”

“Can you control it?”

This had won a look of suspicion from Hauser. “I can, why?”

At the time Davis had no clue what he was going to do with the thing, but he knew this was a sign, a demonic gift horse if you would. And he wasn’t going to look it in the mouth (Once was enough for that as it was sitting on his chest promising pain and lots of it.) The plan would come in time he knew that.

It had been the German who had given Davis all the paraphernalia he needed to imprison Minx, at a hefty price of course but the man had nearly bitten his hand of at the offer.

After all like he had said, he didn’t know what the hell he was going to do with the creature as it was, now that it hadn’t just up and died as he had expected it to do. So after half a bottle of cheap booze they had agreed it was a win-win for both of them.

And so thanks to that unlikely visitor and fifty grand of stolen money, Michael Davis got the biggest break of his life. A second chance, not at redemption, Christ no he was too far gone for that. No, a second chance to have it all.

“Life on a knife edge is better than no life at all,” Davis said out loud as he thought about how things were now. His life was still far from easy, there were still those who wanted him dead, or damned, or both and he would certainly never be respected as a broadcaster and entertainer. But as tonight’s figures showed, what he could be was rich. And on the balance of things he would take that above all any day.

He *felt* the front door of the house open before he heard it. And his fingers instantly tightened around the box. With all the lights in the house turned off, it was pitch black inside. Davis instinctively scanned the threshold for the charms, which he could just about make out nailed around the door

frame. He was safe enough, but still he held up the box like a priest might hold up a crucifix in the presence of vampires.

A moment past, then a small bony hand curled its fingers around the door, and then Mister Minx's face appeared out of the darkness, lit only dimly by the security lights dotted around the high chain link fence that surrounded the field. Its black soulless eyes narrowed all the same and the creature retreated slightly from the light so only half its face was now visible behind the half open door. A small mercy Davis was glad of all the same.

"Good show tonight," Davis blurted out and instantly cursed himself.

"Let me go," it sighed.

"Fuck," Davis hissed through gritted teeth. *That voice*. The words cut right through him it felt like physical assault. Whenever the thing spoke to him directly, no matter how softly the words were spoken. He found himself taking a sharp intake of breath like he had been sliced with a razor.

"You have my word," the creature continued. "I won't seek vengeance for all this, this... Humiliation."

"Soon," Davis lied then was cut off by a hideous hocking sound as the demon spat out a mouthful of God only knew what. The dark phlegm instantly evaporated as it crossed the line of charms at the door.

Davis lowered the box, but kept his hand by his side, taking comfort from the power it held over Minx.

"Look what I've become," Mister Minx lamented. "My kind shouldn't last this long. I should have returned to smoke and misery long ago. I am a travesty."

No argument here, Davis thought.

"It's time for you to go to sleep, Minx," he said. "The next show should be in a couple of months or so."

The creature moved to speak again, but seemed to think better of it. It slipped back into the darkness of the house and the door gently shut a moment later.

Davis exhaled in relief. It had been hard not to run off screaming during that little exchange. His head was pounding from the sheer effort and it was only now he realised he was shaking. With cold or fear he didn't know.

"Boss?" It was Tiff. Davis turned away from the house and instantly felt a little better, he could still feel the thing looming over his shoulder, but its hold on him along with that of its sole resident wasn't as nearly as strong when it was out of sight.

"Tiff?" He had to shout, the woman was standing over by the open gate of the security fence which now surrounded the house. Davis saw she had managed to acquire an ill- fitting pair of glasses from somewhere, still he could see her squinting at him from there.

Next to Tiff was a massive security guard who was loitering by the gate ready to lock up. The only structures left now were the small prefab security hut and the fence, and of course the house. Davis' BMW was parked a little further away.

Tiff made a 'well are you coming or not?' gesture because she sure as hell wasn't going to come any closer to the house. Davis walked over to the gate were Tiff was hopping from one foot to the next like she needed the bathroom. "Can we go now boss?" He pleaded.

"Of course," he turned to the security guard. "You speak English?"

"I do," the security guard answered with a strong Russian accent.

"Good, please take Miss Parker over to my car, would you? I just have to lock up for the night."

The security guard gave him a quizzical look and held out his keys to the Producer.

"No," Davis said with a shake of the head. "You can do that after we are gone." He threw a thumb over his shoulder. "I have to lock up that." He said.

"Ugh," Tiff shuddered and took a hold of the security guard's ample arm. "Don't ask big fella, don't ask." With this she led the bemused guard away and over to the car.

Davis was about to open the box and take out the parchment when Tiff's mobile phone went off. She answered it and after a moment nodded gravely.

"Boss?" She called over to him.

"Can't this wait, Tiff?" Davis said testily. He hated using the parchment as each time he did, he always had that nagging doubt that this time he would mispronounce a syllable or two so it wouldn't work and Mister Minx would come screaming out of the house and straight into his guts.

She took a couple of steps towards him and held out her phone like it was radioactive or something. "I think you should take this, Boss." She said frowning.

"Okay," Davis relented and snatched the phone from her.

"It's the Vatican," she told him.

Davis looked at the number, it was their man in the holy city, which only meant one thing, he had a new potential 'volunteer' for demon time. Perhaps the next show wouldn't be quite so far away after all.

Over at the house Mister Minx let out a long gut wrenching howl.

SIX

The story of Father Shane Ross' demise, as it had been laid down in the document he was now looking over, made compelling reading. Although he knew it was fiction, as he read the piece even he found himself slipping into sweaty palmed anxiety. How could he have let himself fall so far from grace after he had thought he had beaten his addictions?

More than once Ross had to remind himself that this was simply just a work of creative writing to sell his downfall to the people over at demon time. Still, whoever in Father Mendez's team had penned it had an unusual talent for

understated, believable drama and it had only taken a little over two weeks to compile.

This was a tale that could have been oh so true had his route in life taken another path. It was all there in stark no nonsense detail, how he had fallen into despair after failing his church funded PHD, (which in fact he had yet to take) his descent back into drug addiction, which led to the inevitable cycle of lies and deceit.

All very tragic, a promising career in phycology gone to waste. He had even, apparently, stolen a two hundred year old Crucifix to feed his habit, nice touch that, Ross thought grimly.

It was all the more disturbing to see the attached official Vatican documentation and police report and how the university had temporarily rewritten his education history. And reading it, Ross couldn't help but wonder if all this went so horribly wrong he might not end up in prison or on the streets all the same, this fake evidence was so compelling.

Of course Father Mendez had reassured the young priest that no matter what happened, the church, and more specifically Mendez himself would not forsake him irrespective of the outcome.

Fine words from a man who Ross had little or no knowledge of, let alone his rather clandestine department over there in the Vatican. Certainly there were rumours amongst the young priests and novices Ross had come into contact with down through the years. But the more he found out about the man the less Father Ross wanted to know.

Ross thumbed through the document once again. No wonder the demon time production team had jumped at the chance to sign on this particular gift horse. He could imagine them salivating at each new revelation the document contained. A drug addicted Priest! Yes Father Shane Ross would make a fine contestant on their internet horror show.

He knew despite its unpleasant subject matter, Ross would have to learn his alternative history inside out. Once he had signed on to the show, which he would do in a little over two weeks, he would have no contact with the outside world, no phone or correspondence whatsoever, until the show was over.

A precaution on the part of the producers which meant Ross would now have to go through this the charade to the bitter end, unless he could somehow let Mendez know the time and location of the show beforehand and then the Spaniard could come charging in with the Vatican cavalry, if such a thing existed, to save the day.

That hope had soon been dashed however when his contact with the show had informed him that he would be put up in a hotel in London and then flown to the location, which could be anywhere in Europe, just a couple of days before the show.

And that he would have a 'Production Assistant' with him from the moment he signed the contract, right up until show time. It seemed they had thought of everything.

SEVEN

A scream, high and shrill like a shark attack victim, half mad with terror, staring down into blood red water and into the black maw of the deathly grey beast coming up from the murk for another bite.

It was the flashback again, that sickeningly vivid memory of the night not so long ago when Michael Davis had seen the face of hell leering over him as he laid helpless on his back waiting to die in some anonymous cheap hotel room. That mouth with row after row of jagged misshapen teeth so close he could feel its breath like rotting meat on his tear soaked cheeks.

The demon had appeared out of nowhere as it always did in the nightmare. A black blur of stinking filth which he had first mistaken for a shadow cast by the tatty lamp shade that clung forlornly to the over-head light fixture in his room. Davis had been dead drunk, as was usual in those dark days. Hoping to find solace at the bottom of a cheap bottle of booze.

But this shadow had a mind of its own as it crawled from the top corner of one wall and slithered down the mildewed wallpaper in direct defiance to the meagre light the shrouded bulb could muster. Davis watched all this through a haze of alcohol as he lay on his musty bed, contemplating his woeful existence.

He had lost everything and everyone he had ever cared about over such a short space of time. His life had turned to shit in a matter of weeks and those whom not so long ago had called him friend (usually when he had the money to buy their devotion) had fled for fear no doubt of drowning in the same shit as he was now.

He spent night after sleepless night, obsessively going over all the lives he had ruined in his lust for fame and fortune. All those fresh faced young starlets he had cajoled and towards the end threatened into performing a quite dizzying array of depraved acts for the camera. What had become of them, he wondered in his misery? He hoped that a least some of them had fared better than their corrupter.

"I'm damned," he slurred to himself in between mouthfuls of liquor.

That was when the shadow, which was now crawling across the floor towards the bed spoke to him. "You've got that right," it had said. The sound of its wretched voice instantly made Davis void his bowels.

He let out a yelp of disgust and got to get to his feet, but the creature, more flesh now than shadow had leapt upon him and knocked him to the threadbare carpet, where it then jumped on his chest. Its talon like fingers closed around his throat, cutting off his windpipe. He saw blooms of light explode before his terrified gaze as it slowly throttled him.

"This," it hissed into his face. "Is going to take a long, long time. And oh how it is going to hurt."

Davis knew he would never fully recover from that traumatic moment, it was carved into some dark subconscious part of his terror frozen mind, where it would surface from time to time, like now, usually just when he had thought he had banished it forever. Over time his body would heal, but he was forever mentally scared by the memory of this impossible creature that had made a

nonsense of the reality he thought he knew. You just don't fully recover from that find of undiluted horror.

He was never fully sure of what happened next. There was that nerve shredding scream, which he had initially thought had been his own, but then the creature was flung off his chest. Davis turned painfully onto his side to see the thing convulsing on the floor next to him, flailing wildly like a downed bat. All the theatrics of its dark shadowy first appearance shed like so much reptilian skin. It was now just that emaciated, spindly limbed creature he would later know as Mister Minx.

Then Davis noticed the figure standing in the open doorway just off to the right of where he was sprawled. In his fear addled state, Davis had first thought one of the other residents had come to see what all the cacophony in the next room was about.

He was an unremarkable looking elderly man, even given the context of this appearance, perhaps in his late sixties, dressed for a winter walk, with a long heavy coat and a somewhat out of place beanie hat.

"You, you see it, right?" Davis asked hoarsely, his throat raw from his surreal attackers grasp. He was desperate for this not to all be in his head, but still half expected the old man in the doorway to look at him like he was a lunatic, fighting with a demon of his own imagination, covered in his own shit.

It was strange but sometimes in the weeks that followed Davis thought that scenario would have been the more preferable one. It would have been bliss just to put that night down to nothing more than some brief psychotic episode and get on with the rest of his life, such as it was at that time.

"You see it, right?" He repeated half hoping for a response in the negative.

Indeed at first the old man did looked at him like he was mad, but put paid to that notion when he came into the room and closed the door behind him, which Davis now saw had been kicked open with no little force. "Of course I see it, you fucking idiot," he said in what sounded like a strong German accent. "It's right there!" He gestured to the still convulsing creature.

Then out of nowhere the sheer absurdity of the last thirty seconds hit Davis like a freight train and before he knew what was happening he began to laugh uncontrollably, which won a raised eyebrow from his unlikely looking saviour. The old man took off his coat and crouched next to the still manically fitting creature.

It seemed impossible in the midst of that unbidden nightmare to fathom how Davis had gone from a gibbering wreck to cutting a deal and buying the creature, but he had. His ego would tell him in his waking hours that he hadn't been as scared as the dream portrayed him and he was happy to accept that lie. Besides the proof was locked away in a warehouse even now as he slept.

Then Mister Minx, his would be assassin suddenly leapt up from the floor and knocked Davis to the floor. This part of the dream was new, a terrifying development to the half-forgotten narrative. The creature grabbed Davis by the throat once more its face was an inch from his.

EIGHT

"Jesus!" Davis sat up in bed and pulled off his sweat soaked pyjama top. He wiped his brow with the sleeve and tossed it across the room. He instinctively checked his crotch as he always did after the nightmare, just to make sure he was clean. Davis managed the slightest of laughs at the insanity of it all but still raised a hand to his throat all the same, no bruising.

Of course not he chastised himself and then swung his legs over the edge of the bed. He wiped the sleep out of his eyes with the balls of his hands and just sat there on the bed to collect his thoughts and regulate his heartbeat that was still hammering ten to the dozen in his chest.

He glanced at the bedside clock; 04:15 it was still the middle of the night and despite how dog tired he felt (he'd only gone to bed at a little after one

thirty). Davis knew he wouldn't get another wink of sleep. Not now that Mister Minx was running around in his subconscious again.

Mister Minx. Davis padded over to the table where his lap top was and slumped down in the chair he hit a key to knock it off its sleep mode. It he couldn't sleep, then why the hell should it? A grainy web cam image flickered into life on the screen. It was a security camera shot of Mister Minx's crate, still safely shut away in an anonymous storage unit, where they kept the bastard in between shows.

Davis studied the image just to make sure the crate's lid was still secure, then he hit a key and the picture switched to the warehouse's security room to show the two security guards stationed there. Davis always insisted on two, just in case Minx managed to get into the head of one, then the other had (unofficial) orders to shoot his unfortunate possessed colleague in the face if needs be.

Not that once he was asleep and shut away, Minx had any chance of escape, but still it made Davis sleep a little better, most nights anyway. And it certainly helped to focus the minds of the guards who drew the short straw that night.

Davis felt every second of his fifty seven years tonight weighing down heavily on his sagging shoulders. He flicked the image back to Minx's crate. The star of the show, he thought bitterly. A brief stab of memory hit him like an ice pick just behind his eyes. Minx, its face an inch from his, breathing filth into his lungs as he gasped under its deceptive weight.

"What the hell am I doing?" He said out loud. Surely it was time to cut his losses he told himself. Escape to somewhere far away and warm. After all he had all but repaid his debts, monetarily at least.

It was a nice fantasy, but deep down Davis knew that the one thing he could never escape was his own nature. He was greedy, plain and simple. It was a vice that had gotten him into the mess his life had been, but conversely it had also got him to where he was today. Still living a gypsy lifestyle, hopping from one hotel to the next, but these days the room rate had gone from the tens to the high hundreds.

Still in the entertainment business, of sorts. After all, who but perhaps the greatest entrepreneur in the world could turn the tool of his near destruction, into his greatest asset?

Still, he had to concede to himself logic dictated that despite all of his new found success of late. The best thing Michael Davis could do to preserve his life and sanity, if not his bank balance, was to go down to the warehouse were Mister Minx's crate was safely stored away and put a bullet into its misbegotten brain whilst it slept.

To end its unnatural existence once and for all. Only then could he truly be free, of his past and those crimes he had committed against the countless innocents that lay hidden there. Either that or blow his own brains out. There were times when either option seemed very appealing.

He did his best to shake off that melancholy notion, and as much to take his mind off the nightmare he opened up a file on his lap top and the next contestant (victim, really) of demon time's dossier came up on screen. It was quite the tale of woe, this Father Ross' decent into addiction and estrangement from the church. And Davis could only imagine what horrors the demon would create out of that history to taunt and torture the poor bastard come show night.

A show night that promised to be the biggest yet. Only twenty four hours after the new date had been announced, sales had already surpassed the previous best figure by some way and they were rising all the time. Davis logged on to the site and his mood lightened yet further as the latest total came up on screen just over seventy thousand subscribers to the show and still a couple of weeks to go, then on top of that you could add the highlight show subscriptions and lotto ticket sales.

The bank on show five already had the potential to set Davis up for life. That of coursed begged the question. Should this be the last show? Should he take the money and run, end Minx's miserable existence?

That would be the sensible thing to do, pay off the last of his debts and start life again anew somewhere warm and demon free.

Davis laughed at the notion and set the laptop back to sleep mode. He rose and went over to the large patio doors at the other end of the hotel suite, he

slid the door open and shivered as the balmy night air hit his naked top half raising goose flesh on his skin. Outside, the beautiful city centre of Geneva slept peacefully on below him.

Yes Michael Davis thought to himself. That would be the sensible thing to do. Which only meant one thing. He would, as always, do the exact opposite.

NINE

So it was settled, the show was scheduled for two weeks' time. Ross was to meet with one of the shows representatives a full three days before, in a hotel yet to be determined. Where he would be briefed about the show, what to expect and to sign the all-important injury wavers.

Demon time was a full contact show, they told him. But he needn't worry, they hadn't lost a contestant yet. But just in case... Besides he would receive ten grand for his participation.

Ross remembered the final image of the vanquished Father Winthorpe as he was wheeled away, babbling incoherently, into a waiting ambulance.

Father Mendez has told him that Winthorpe had turned up in a French hospital the following morning, almost completely comatose from the traumas he had endured. Mendez and his team had taken the fallen priest back to the Vatican as soon as they could and were even now working with him as best they could to bring him back from the very brink of insanity.

For his sake and also so they might glean some clue as to the creature's weakness' or its current whereabouts. But judging by the show Ross had witnessed, he didn't hold out much hope of either.

That left Mendez and his team with a pathetically short time to find something, anything to arm Ross against the creature if it did indeed exist. Or

he feared he too would suffer Winthorpe's fate, live on the internet. An internet that was already buzzing with anticipation at the next edition of demon time.

Time in which Father Shane Ross had never felt so lost, or so alone. Not since those nightmare days of his youth. The irony of it all wasn't lost on the young priest either. The church had been his saviour back then. The light that had led him out of the darkness of addiction. And as thanks he had devoted his life to it and the betterment of his mind, through psychology, so that he could help heal those other lost souls find peace and understanding of that all too familiar mine field called life.

And yet now he faced his greatest and most potentially damaging challenge precisely because he had walked that chosen path of faith and knowledge over the syringe and needle.

He felt like a pawn in the chess game between Father Mendez and the Devil Himself. A game he felt he was sleep walking through, jumping whenever Mendez told him to do so. Go here, sign this, when he was nothing more than a voice on the end of the telephone. Some off stage puppet master pulling the strings and whistling the tune Ross was to dance to.

A dance that had now taken him from his humble flat in Newcastle to half a world away.

Within hours of officially agreeing to be the next contestant on demon time, Mendez had couriered Ross plane tickets to London, where he had then taken a nonstop flight to Mexico City Airport, where he now found himself, standing daze and confused in the impressively modern building by the luggage carousel waiting for his suitcase to come around.

The structure was an impressive architectural achievement which should have felt open and welcoming, but even in this massive construction of glass and steel Ross felt closed in and oppressed.

The whole situation was getting so surreal that Ross hadn't even questioned the reason he was being sent thousands of miles from home just a couple of weeks before his show down with the bizarrely named Mister Minx (although why that particular part was any more bizarre than everything that had

happened to him this month he didn't know). He had just nodded, accepted the tickets and packed his bags.

Mendez had done his best explain this new turn of events.

"I know this is hard on you, Shane," Father Mendez had told him over the phone. He had last spoken to Mendez in Heathrow airport's departure lounge as he waited for his flight to Mexico to be called for boarding. "But I want you to know you are not alone in this. Even though we cannot physically be with you when you enter that house. We can make sure you have all the help we can give you."

"You have some way of fighting this thing?" Ross asked. He still couldn't bring himself to believe such a creature as Mister Minx was even real but Mendez had a tendency to speak like it was common knowledge that it was.

"No," Mendez relented. "Not as such. But we do have the next best thing. We know the whereabouts of the man who we believe captured the creature. And possibly sold it on to Michael Davis."

"In Mexico."

"That's right, Shane. A small town, about a hundred miles south west of Mexico City. Everything's arranged."

Well at least that explained the jet setting, Ross thought as he scanned his fellow travellers waiting in the departure lounge. "And this fella, he can help?" Ross asked.

"It's not that simple, Shane." Mendez answered and Ross detected a sickening tone of defeat in the man's voice. "He, Hauser, that's his name. We've tried to get him on board before. He won't even return our calls. He's not what you would call a man of faith, Shane. It's the exact opposite, I'm afraid. He hates us."

"So why am I here, Father?" Ross asked, he smiled bitterly. There was an old philosophy joke in there somewhere. But why indeed?

Again the dead air, then after an age. "Cards on the table, Shane." Mendez said softly, it was disconcerting to hear one normally so self-assured sound almost lost, almost ashamed. "We had hoped we had something you could use, against the creature." He seemed to be stumbling over his words, which was worrying for a man whom had always seemed so confident of what he was doing and asking Ross to do.

"Had hoped?" Ross asked. He glanced towards the exit, which was only twenty yards or so away. It was as if he had just realised he didn't actually need to be here. There was nothing to stop him just throwing the phone into a nearby bin and walking away from it all.

After all this wasn't war, he didn't have any moral duty to put himself in such harm's way. He suddenly felt the absurdity of the whole endeavour. Mythical internet demons, clandestine phone calls from some shadowy organisation in the Vatican. Plane tickets to Mexico? Who the hell was he? A Catholic James Bond?

"We had thought..." Mendez continued, less than convincingly. "We actually have something, a relic. For want of a better word, a spell, well it's a poem actually to exorcize the creature, to send it back to where it was conjured from. But of course that was before we found out you couldn't take anything in with you. I'm sorry Shane, it all very hard to explain."

Spells? Conjured? Ross could feel what little grasp on reality he had left slipping away as he stood there. He glanced around to see a bench close by and he made his way over to it on unsteady legs. All the while the gapping doors of the departures lounge exit loomed large out of the corner of his eye. He sat down hard.

"Shane, you still there?"

In body maybe, Ross thought bitterly. "Yeah," he croaked. "Just about."

"The truth is, we've really cocked this whole thing up," Mendez confessed. "The poem, our records show if you recite the passage written on it within the vicinity of evil, that evil will be banished back from whence it came. That's the theory anyway, not that we can now get it passed their security."

“You aren’t making any sense, Father. Are you telling me you’re talking about magic?”

“I know this all sounds crazy, but you have to remember we are talking about banishing a demon here.” Mendez reminded him, a little too blasé for Ross’ liking.

“If it’s real,” Ross said almost hopefully but reminded himself the thing must surely be just some special effect.

“You’ve seen the case for yourself, Shane. I believe it is, and at the moment we don’t have anything else to use against it.”

“Whatever happened to faith, Father?” Ross snapped back.

“Sometimes,” Mendez said his voice barely above a whisper. “Faith isn’t enough.”

TEN

Father Ross actually felt his jaw drop open at this. “I want to go home,” he said after a full thirty seconds of catching flies. Despite the air conditioning in the terminal he was sweating so badly now that the phone nearly slipped through his hand, he switched them and wiped his sweaty palm on his trouser leg.

“Please, Shane, just hear me out. You have to at least admit we are travelling the lost highway here?”

“I’m the one travelling Father, remember that. And I’m getting the distinct impression you’re making this up as you go along.”

“I know it must seem like that, but the truth is this is almost as new to us as it is to you. Sure we did think we had a way to beat this thing, and put an end to that blasphemous show. We were wrong. But I swear to you, Shane. I

swear that we won't have let you go into that house without protection. Some way of fighting that thing." The strain was clear in Mendez's voice as he spoke.

Ross could hear the man collecting himself on the other end of the phone and felt a stab of remorse. He wasn't being thrown to the lions here as he had first thought. "This man," Ross said after a while. "If he hates the church so much, why do you think he'll help me?"

"We don't," Mendez replied flatly. "Over the years we've made every attempt to bring him on board. This man's knowledge of the occult must be staggering. He seems to have had numerous dealings with it down through the years. Real practical experience which would be invaluable to us." Mendez sighed forlornly down the phone. "Something happened, something bad, I don't know all the facts, but let's just say it was bad, and the church didn't come out of it with much honour. But's that's all by the by. We have to make one final attempt, Shane. You have to."

"What can I do? I'm lost here," Ross said.

"Demon time," Mendez replied. "It's the only card we have left to play with this fellow. Show him the recording we have of the last show, show him Winthorpe's file. After all it's *his* demon that's doing all this."

"Guilt trip?"

Mendez gave a short hollow laugh at this. "Call it the last act of a desperate man. But without Hauser, I really don't see how we can stop that whole debacle which is making Michael Davis so much money." He exhaled, his fatigue all too evident. "It's obscene, it really is."

Ross had never felt so conflicted. Despite all the cloak and dagger routine Mendez seemed so fond of, the young priest couldn't help but feel for the man. He sounded rung out, exhausted from all the clutching at straws he had clearly been doing. They must have put all their faith in this 'spell' he had spoken of. What was it he had he said before on the subject of faith? Ross recalled with unease; *Sometimes, faith isn't enough*? So in the end Father Mendez he was just as lost as Ross at this point.

“What if this Hauser isn’t convinced, even if I show him demon time?” Ross asked. He bit his lip in anticipation of the answer which held his fate.

“Then it’s over.” Mendez replied. “We can’t ask anymore of you. You can go back to your life, and with our thanks. It’s our problem, I won’t have you put in harm’s way. All you will need to do is once you are with Davis’ people, try get as much information on the location of the show as you can, perhaps even where they are keeping that thing, then leave. If you have no protection you can’t go inside.”

Ross had to stop himself letting out a long loud sigh of relief at this. “Of course I’ll try, Father,” he gushed. “I’ll do my best to bring this guy on side.”

“And that’s all we can ask, Shane.” Mendez said. “Besides,” he added a little brighter. “What’s the worst that can happen? Sunburn? You get a few days in Mexico, on us. Not bad I’d say.”

“Not bad at all,” Ross agreed. He took out the envelope he had been given along with the tickets. It contained all the info he needed to get him to the town Hauser was thought to be living in. That and three thousand U.S Dollars.

“Just do your best, my friend.”

“I will,” Ross told him, he already felt pounds lighter now that the weight of the unknown had lifted from his shoulders. His good mood soured only slightly by the fact that he realised he was actually hoping this mysterious mister Hauser would flat out refuse to see him.

After all what was the alternative? Guest of honour on a show where he would come face to face with an alleged real life monster? And armed with what? Magic?

“Well as long as he doesn’t give me a fucking wand!” Ross blurted out before his brain could engage.

“Sorry?”

“Oh, nothing, Father, just thinking out loud... Without actually thinking,” he replied.

“We’ve all done that, Shane, believe me.”

“One last thing. If this Hauser does agree to help... Can he actually help? After all, that creature...” he couldn’t finish that ludicrous thought, this insanity seemed to be catching.

“I know what you mean,” Mendez assured him. “But put simply, we are all amateurs in this misbegotten game we’re playing. And I include that fool Michael Davis. I have a feeling he’ll reap what he’s sown soon enough, but then that won’t be an end to it... If that thing ever gets loose... But Hauser? He’s a professional.”

One hell of a game indeed, Ross thought despondently. And one where even death might not be the ultimate price, if Mendez somehow turned out to be correct about what Minx actually was.

He tried to put that out of his mind for now. It was no use to anyone dwelling on what might be. Beside, in a week, God willing, he might be out of it for good with body and soul intact.

“Well, adios, as we say around those parts,” Mendez said. “Safe journey.”

“Thanks, Father.”

“Oh and Shane? I don’t think he’ll give you a fucking wand, my friend.” And with this he hung up.

Ross sat with the dead phone against his ear for a full twenty seconds, blushing like a school girl. Finally he pocketed the phone with a shake of the head. Still he didn’t move, as if weight down again with what was before him. Ross knew he would have to at least try to convince this Hauser to help him. He owed the faith that Mendez had shown him that much. And his own conscience of course, damn it.

ELEVEN

Karl Hauser was only sixty two years old but to the casual observer he looked a good fifteen years or so older. Chasing the darkness in the world would do that to a man. Doing what he did, or had done took its toll on one's body as well as one's mind.

Hauser had hoped that now he had retired and settled his weary bones in Mexico, his lost vitality would somehow return. That his mind would regain the sharpness it had gradually lost throughout the years.

He looked into the bathroom mirror and an ancient stranger looked back. Grey eyed, white haired with skin like an inner city road map it was so lined. It didn't seem fair to the German, to be left so desiccated after a lifetime of sacrifice. But then again when did fair ever come into it?

He abandoned his ghostly reflection and came through to his spacious bedroom. And although he had only gotten out of bed ten minutes previously Gabriela was already in the room changing his sheets. Hauser stood in the doorway and watched her work.

Gabriela was about fifty as far as Hauser could tell but whereas he wore every year on his face and then some, she could easily pass for thirty five, forty on a bad day. Her long straight hair was still jet black and her olive skin was only just showing the early stages of age, and mostly around her deep brown eyes.

It could almost be supernatural if Hauser didn't know what supernatural really looked like. No this was just good old fashioned clean living and having a large loving family. Neither of which could be more foreign to him.

"Are you coming to the barbeque?" Gabriela asked without turning around. She bungled up the bedding and thrust it into her wicker wash basket.

Hauser had been so wrapped up in the letter he had received last week from Mendez at the Vatican that he had clear forgotten it was that time of year again. Three years ago Hauser had saved Gabriela's nephew, Pedro, from the clutches of a nasty little demon that had taken up residence in the village, Pedro

and a dozen others. It had been Hauser's most exacting case in years and had damn near killed him.

"He'd be heartbroken if you didn't come," she said and turned to him with the basket in both hands.

"Do I have a choice?" Hauser asked good naturedly in his now almost flawless Spanish.

"What do you think?" She said with a smile.

He could tell she wanted to say more, but there was an unwritten rule with the people of the village that you don't pry too deeply into the crazy German's life. They owed him that much.

"What's on your mind Gabriela?" He asked.

She glanced guiltily at the letter from Mendez on his bedside table, Hauser had forgotten he'd left it there. She was a devout Catholic and must have seen the Vatican crest on the letter head. "I didn't read it!" She blurted out. "But I suppose this means they found you."

Everyone knew Hauser's feelings on the church it had been the subject of many a drunken discussion between the German and the villagers since they had invited him to stay for saving the children. He nodded, "they want my help with something, but as always they can go..."

A look of daggers from Gabriela stole the curse from Hauser's lips. "I keep telling them I'm retired," he said instead.

"And so you deserve to be," she said.

"They never once helped me," Hauser said with an edge to his voice. He took a breath, all those years fighting on his own had made him so bitter it used to eat him up inside, but he knew it was something he really needed to let go of for his sanity as well as his health. But he had to admit it gave him no little satisfaction telling them to go fuck themselves.

Father Mendez was a reasonable enough man, Hauser had to admit, and the priest knew more than most at the Vatican about what evil truly looked like.

But if he insisted on bowing and scraping to a God that didn't exist, then the German had little time for him and his 'research.'

"So, you'll come?" Gabriela said.

"Will there be booze?" Hauser asked.

"More than enough for you, old man." She told him with a smile.

"Then how could I refuse?"

When Gabriela had left with the washing, Hauser stepped out onto the balcony of his room. She or one of the others had set out a generous breakfast for him as they usually did. He sat at the wooden table and poured himself a glass of fresh orange juice.

The balcony looked out onto the village's main square and already people were about their daily business. Occasionally one of them would look up in his direction and seeing him sat there would give a wave or doff their hats in greeting.

He felt like the mayor of the place at times like these or some drug cartel leader surveying his compound. Everyone who lived there knew his name and what he had done for them and in return they almost all contributed to his well-being. He had never asked to be treated like this but he knew they saw it not only as an honour for the lives of their children, but also a pleasure.

For all his years of wandering, for the first time in his very eventful life Karl Hauser felt at home and this was a place he could never imagine leaving again.

No, he had done his part in this life, more than most in fact. The things he had seen and done to this day made him wince but still he could be content that he had never taken an innocent life, just the lives of those either created by evil or those who had allowed themselves to be seduced by it.

TWELVE

Half a world away the steel shutters to a supposedly secret location rattled open, and two figures surreptitiously peered into the brightly lit storage locker which was one of three in the facility rented by Michael Davis' 'demon time'.

"I can't believe that's it," the young woman said with an edge of awe in her voice as she stepped inside the freezing lock up. She approached the coffin like box which was the only thing in this particular unit, but Lenny caught her arm as she got close to the black and yellow plastic warning tape that surrounded the strange container.

"Don't," he cautioned and gently pulled her away and into an embrace. Lenny had been told that it was okay to come into the massive storage unit as long as he kept outside of the taped off area due to the camera.

He eyed a webcam attached to the roof of the unit that as trained on the box itself, which was located slap bang in the centre of the place. He looked down into the girl's glacial green eyes. The colour of them made all the more vivid for them being blood shot from the joint they had shared outside.

She was a tiny thing really, perhaps twenty at most, and no more than five-two in height. Small compared to most but at six-three Lenny dwarfed the girl. He was about to suggest they leave when she blinked lazily up at him and rose on her tip toes for a kiss. Lenny still had to stoop awkwardly so their lips could meet.

He knew this was a bad idea and if he got caught it would mean his job, but as she pulled away and he gazed down into those twin emerald pools, his libido got the better of his brain once again.

Lenny was in sole charge of the storage lock up that housed the container that supposedly held the so-called 'Mister Minx', at least for the time being. A fact that would have sent that dickhead show runner Michael Davis into a shit fit if he ever found out.

He would see the producer down here from time to time in between shows and he had an air of the addict about him to Lenny. He was clearly torn

between disgust of the box or at least its alleged contents and the need to see it was still intact and locked away.

Lenny doubted the rumours about the creature were true, but in the end that didn't mean shit. The diminutive little punk chick (What was her name again?) and self-confessed demon time junkie had whipped herself into a near orgasmic frenzy when he had confirmed that yes part of his job as a security guard at the lock up meant keeping an eye on the strange curio kept well away from any of the other storage units.

This wasn't strictly true. He was a security guard here, but all security pertaining to the demon time lock ups was handled by their own people.

Apparently the girl, Sasha? Sandy? Something like that, had discovered its whereabouts thanks to one of the increasingly obsessive internet fan sites that devoted all of their waking hours in pursuit of the truth behind the myth.

And as a result she had cornered Lenny in the bar they all hung out at before and after work. Even that bar it turned out was quite well known in certain circles. Lenny offered up a prayer of thanks to the world wide web as she pressed against him with renewed urgency.

It hadn't been cheap to pay off the two official demon time security guards, who normally hung around the designated units for the show that housed not only the box but also all the props and large amount of set dressing. But as he locked lips with her once more he had the feeling it would be worth it.

The only nagging doubt at the back of his endorphin flooded mind was the knowing look the two guards had exchanged when he had paid them to disappear for half an hour. At first he had taken it as a 'nudge-nudge, wink-wink' look, but now that he was actually in the unit with the box it felt more like a look of two people who knew something he didn't.

He shook it off and let his left hand stray to the girl's right breast. After all what could happen in thirty minutes left alone with a horny woman and a television prop?

The punk pulled away and gave him a playful slap on the cheek, and for a horrible moment he thought he had misread all the signs, but the mischievous

grin she gave him put lie to that. She was playing with him, it was a little frustrating but he had plenty of time to indulge whatever fantasy she had in mind. Hell, he might even enjoy it himself he mused.

She took out her phone and swivelled on her heel to face the container. "I wanna take a couple of shots," she said.

"Okay, but you need to stay out of the tape. That fucking camera up there will see you then I'm screwed." Lenny told her. "And keep the flash off, there's plenty of light in here."

"Okay," she said and took a couple of selfies with the box in the background. "Smile Mister Minx. Do you think he's smiling in there?"

"Christ knows," Lenny said and the thought that there might actually be something in there made him shudder. "Hey, come on, let's get out of here." For some reason he suddenly wanted to get out of the locker. Despite its size he was beginning to feel the walls closing in around him.

"Oh, come on," the girl said. "Where's your sense of adventure?" She gave him a look of pure wickedness and took two steps back towards the tape.

"Hey, I said..."

She took two more and was now within a couple of feet of the taped off area. "They can't watch that thing all the time," she said gesturing up to the webcam. She let her hand move slowly up to the zip of her leather jacket and seductively pulled it half way down, revealing a black lace bra underneath.

Christ she was so attractive and way, way out of Lenny's league, he knew that it was his job not his brutish face that had gotten him this far with her and he couldn't have cared less. He swallowed hard and looked at the webcam. It was true, he remembered one of the demon time crew remarking the other night that it was more there to put Michael Davis' mind at rest that his prize asset was safe and under lock and key, and not running around, than for security purposes. After all, who in their right minds would try to steal that thing?

That Thing.

Lenny pushed the phrase out of his head. Dare he? He asked himself. He was still conversing with his inner angel and demon when the girl unzipped her jacket the rest of the way and let it part to reveal her perfect breasts.

"I want you to fuck me on the box," she said making his mind well and truly up for him.

He swallowed hard and looked around redundantly for something apart from the box he could you to climb up to the blind side of the webcam and throw his jacket or something over it to cover the lens. After all he thought as far as he knew Michael Davis wasn't even in the country, he was in mainland Europe somewhere the last he'd heard from the security guards, scouting locations for the next edition of the show.

So what if he was watching this very minute? He would just think the connection to the webcam had gone down and call one of his men (both currently at the bar spending Lenny's bribe.) Who knew the score and wouldn't return for a good twenty odd minutes when the girl would be long gone and he would have an anecdote to make his friends envious of for years to come.

THIRTEEN

"Wait there," Lenny said and made for the door. "I'll be right back." He ran through into the corridor outside the lock up. There was an office just at the end where he could get a chair and a plastic bag or something to cover the cam. He sprinted down the corridor, his footfalls echoing around him as they bounced off the concrete floor as he ran.

He burst into the office picked up the first plastic chair he came to and looked around for something to cover the cam. On the table was a plastic coffee

cup so he scooped it up and ran back down to the storage locker. He paused a few feet from the open door to compose himself then strolled inside.

Much to his horror the girl had dis-guarded her jacket and was laid on her back on the box itself. "Shit, get off there!" He said but she just arched her back and flashed him a smile of pure filth.

"We're waiting," she said and tapped the box.

Despite his growing lust Lenny couldn't help but wince at *we*. Sure this woman was as hot as hell and he could only imagine the weird shit she was into, but still he couldn't shift the thought that there might actually be some wizened creature in the crate.

"Snap out of it," he told himself out loud and concentrated on her lean body as she arched her back and ran her hands alone the strange looking metal charms that were nailed to the lid and side of the box.

When she let out a sigh and kicked off her biker boots and popped the top button on her black combat trousers, Lenny decided he didn't care if there were a dozen freaky things locked up in there, this was going to be the most fucked up, amazing few minutes of his life.

With the agility of a man half his age, Lenny climbed up on the chair and deftly placed the cup over the webcam which was at such an angle that it stayed in place perfectly.

"Gimmie your phone," Lenny told the girl as he pulled his shirt over his head and she threw it to him. "Smile," he said lecherously and took a photo. She posed seductively and he took another as she blew a kiss at him.

"Hey, I just thought," she said striking another pose. "Maybe demon time could use one of these for publicity, maybe I could get a job as a demonette."

"A demon what?" Lenny said never having seen the show.

"Demonette, I'm way better looking than those skanks, don't you think?" As if to accentuate her argument she straitened her left leg up in the air, pointing her toes to the roof and let her other fall over the side of the box.

It was more porn than art but Lenny didn't care. "Hell yeah," he agreed and made a mental note to send copies of these to his own phone later.

` "Well come on then," she coaxed and Lenny thumbed the phone's camera option to video and placed it on top of her dis-guarded jacket at an angle so the girl and box, and soon he were in shot. He then ducked under the tape and as he got close she dragged him on top of her and wrapped her legs around his waist. She kissed him hard and passionately as she ground her hips against him and let her long black painted fingernails rake down his back.

"Jesus!" Lenny hissed and had to concentrate on not exploding then and there. He began to think of anything to bring him back from the brink of (literally) blowing the best sex he was ever going to have. Football, that bad movie he had seen on TV last night. Anything, anything to keep control.

Just when he thought he was going to lose it altogether, she whispered in his ear. "Let's open the box."

"Christ no," He said and kissed her again. It was an insane suggestion and he was grateful for it as it cooled his lust just enough to keep control.

She pushed him away slightly and for a second Lenny thought she was going to reject him if he didn't comply, but her green eyes were still burning with desire. "Hey, swap over, this thing's freezing against my back, okay?"

"Sure," Lenny said and they awkwardly changed positions like two lovers trying to negotiate a single bed.

As he lay down the wood felt ice cold on his bare back, and as she straddled him he could feel the various metal charms that were hammered in the lid biting into his back a little. Sure it was uncomfortable but when she grabbed his hands and placed them on her breasts he was glad of the distraction.

At least with the discomfort came the much needed diversion he needed to avoid premature orgasm and the inevitable lifetime of regret he would torture himself with later at the missed opportunity of great sex with the most stunning woman he had ever or would ever be with.

Lenny closed his eyes as the girl began grinding her backside into his crotch. Yes this was going to be fucking amazing.

Kill her.

Where the hell did that come from? Lenny opened his eyes but the girl was still cavorting like a wild thing on top of him. He'd heard the words, no *felt* the words in his head. Hadn't he? As he lay there the charms at his back seemed to dig a little deeper, and the wood was a little colder on his bare back.

Look at her, Lenny. Look at what she really is.

Each syllable felt like the sharp jab of a needle behind his eyes. He screwed his eyes tight shut then opened them again suddenly afraid of the dark behind his lids.

The girl lent forwards and moved to kiss him again, but there was something different about that once beautiful pale face. Her eyes were a little older, her skin not pale now but yellow somehow like a thin layer of ancient paper stretched over her skull. She smiled her teeth black and jagged.

"What's the matter, Lenny boy?" She sneered down at him, her voice that of an old woman with her throat cut. "Don't you wanna fuck me anymore?"

Lenny tried to lift his body off the crate and roll her off him, but he felt as if something with cold dead fingers was holding his shoulders in place, pinning him to the harsh wood and jagged metal. He managed to glance to his right shoulder half expecting to see that arms had come up though the crate lid to hold him in place but there was nothing, yet still he couldn't move.

He moved to say *get off me* but it came out. "Don't stop!"

Then; *Please*... but his mutinous voice said; "more, more!"

"More?" She echoed and the word came out like a death rattle. She leant down until her mouth was an inch from his, her lips cracked and bloody like open sores. But still he couldn't move as the unseen claws at his shoulders gripped tighter still.

Kill herrrrr... The voice purred in his head.

Then that once beautiful creature threw her head back and let out an unholy cry. Lenny screamed and then suddenly felt the grip on his right

shoulder give way and he swung an almighty punch catching the thing straddling him hard on the left hand side of her head. The girl was knocked off him and onto the floor from the force of the blow. Lenny ripped himself away from his unseen captor and leapt to his feet.

He stood panting over the prone girl, fists clenched ready for her to leap back up and attack him with whatever supernatural force she had flowing within her.

But the girl began to sob and drag herself stiffly onto her hands and knees, blood pouring out of her mouth and onto the concrete floor of the locker. She looked up at him with a look of pure shock on her young face. A beautiful normal looking, but terrified face.

"Oh, Jesus," Lenny said and he could have sworn he heard something hideous chuckling from inside the crate behind him. "Oh, Christ I'm so..."

The girl suddenly pounced to her feet and flew at him before he could finish. "You mother fucker!!" She screamed and began to viciously claw at his face whilst simultaneously kneeing him in the balls. Lenny went down like a boxer throwing a fight and tried in vain to protect his eyes as she rained blow after blow down on him.

Yes, through ringing ears and indignant screams Lenny could definitely hear laughing now.

Michael Davis watched open mouthed as the camera phone footage played out on his laptop. It was the third time he had watched it since getting the call from Gorodetsky, his Russian head of security about a 'breach in security' at the lock up.

He was on Skype with the granite faced Russian now. He finally switched off the video file and flicked the screen back to Gorodetsky. "Where are they now?" Davis asked.

"The girl's with our boys at the moment, they've had to promise her all kinds of shit to keep her quiet. She says she wants to be a Demonette!"

Davis shook his head in disbelief. The poor woman had just been attacked but all she could think about was appearing on the damn show! "Okay, tell her we'll let her know," Davis said.

"She is pretty hot, boss," Gorodetsky offered. "Anyway, she knows she was trespassing in the first place and she's a massive fan of the show. So she shouldn't be too much of a problem if we keep her quiet."

"Tell her we'll get her Minx's autograph or something," Davis said, after all that wasn't the weirdest thing he had gotten the creature to do.

"Will do, boss." The big Russian replied. "Oh, and about our boys? I know they fucked up, but I've got to be honest boss, we don't have anyone else willing to look after the son of a bitch. And besides, they are shitting themselves that they're going to get fired."

"Okay, keep them on," Davis relented. He knew even those two wouldn't be dumb enough to do something like that again. Besides he had already decided to use this little incident as further publicity for the show. 'Possessed security guard attacks fan of the show.' "Now you're sure Minx is secure?" He asked.

"Yes sir, still in his crate. They've checked it over, it's still totally intact."

"Good." Davis replied. He fell silent for a moment as he recalled the faint but still audible laughing on the end of the phone footage. It was a voice he knew only too well. He shook off the sound, they had all become too accustomed to Mister Minx and this was a timely reminder of what he was still capable of, even from inside his wooden prison it seemed.

"Anything else, boss?" Gorodetsky asked pulling Davis back to the matter at hand.

"No," Davis replied but then remembered the battered and bloody security guard. "Oh, yeah. What happened to the guy?"

"Lenny? He's still in casualty. They reckon he might lose an eye and a bollock!"

“Jesus,” Davis breathed. He shut the lid of his laptop and contemplated the demon. “Still got it, Mister Minx,” he had to admit. “Still got it.”

FOURTEEN

Dusk had well and truly taken hold of the day when the taxi dropped Father Ross off at the outskirts of the village of Santuario, Mexico. Where the German Hauser had last thought to have been living. But it had done little to tame the obsessive Mexican heat. The young priest arched his aching back and would have tried to slap some life back into his numb buttocks were he not out in public.

The majority of the journey had been pleasant enough as they had left Mexico City and driven on down the highway. It was a long trip and had cost upwards of five hundred dollars U.S but as the church were paying, neither Ross nor his extremely chatty driver Carlos worried too much as the meter continued to climb, ticking off the miles and Pesos as they travelled.

It had been the last hour or so, when they had turned off the main highway and continued on increasingly lesser maintained roads that the journey had really started to take its toll on both passenger and driver alike.

Carlos’ stories had dried up and his already lined face had taken on a permanent look of concern as the taxi hit pothole after pothole. Until Ross had become so concerned that the man might give up all together and ditch him in the middle of nowhere to save his car shaking apart altogether, that he had felt obliged, both out of genuine concern and guilt at what the trip was doing to Carlos’ only form of livelihood, to offer the driver an extra hundred dollars U.S for his trouble.

As Carlos gladly sped off back to civilisation leaving him there, Ross picked up his suitcase in one hand and pulled the strap of his laptop carrying

case over his shoulder then set off. He was immediately was hit by two things in quick succession. One, the heat. The taxi had been thankfully air conditioned but now that he was out in the dry Mexican evening air, he felt his shirt sticking to his back as sweat broke out all over his body after just a few steps towards the large whitewashed arch way that seemed to be the only way in through the walled village exterior.

Then two, the smell of wood smoke mixed with the undeniable aroma of barbeque. He could hear raised voices someway off as he made his way into the seemingly deserted outskirts of the village.

Suddenly a volley of fireworks went off over head painting the darkening sky a myriad of colours followed by a roar of approval from an unseen small but vocal crowd still some way off. It was as if the village were heralding his arrival, but Ross quickly dismissed the notion. Going on what Mendez had said about Hauser, his visit would not be welcomed, even if the village had known he was coming.

And with his Ross realised he didn't have the first idea what he was going to say to the German in way of introduction. The man had no love for the Catholic church, Mendez had made that much clear.

Ross suddenly felt a little self-conscious of his dog collar and even thought of taking it off for a brief moment, then thought better of it. No, the old man would have to take Ross as he found him. All he needed to do was show him the episode of demon time he had stored on his lap top and hope that was evidence enough for the man to help him. If indeed he could.

Ross trudged on towards the sound of the gathering and could now hear music drifting through the buildings and the glow of what must be powerful lights in the near night sky above the roof tops.

Up ahead through a narrow alley which snaked its way between two rows of thin two story houses, a flash of movement caught his eye. A child darted out from behind a building and ran down the alley towards where Ross was, furtively glancing behind him as he went.

The child, a boy of perhaps ten let out a squeal as four other children, three girls and a boy appeared and gave chase.

As they came closer, Ross could see the four pursuers were all wearing what looked like brightly coloured homemade Halloween masks and the priest wondered at first if it was perhaps a Mexican Day of the Dead celebration. But he seemed to remember that event was much later in the year, close to Halloween in the west if memory served.

Either way, the children were so lost in their game that if they weren't carful they would run right into him. Ross was about to move to one side to let them pass when the lead boy chanced a look up to see where he was going and saw the priest standing what was now perhaps twenty or so feet away.

The boy, who had been laughing uproariously suddenly skidded to a hold, kicking up a cloud of dust as he did so. Seeing this, the others stopped also, some way back, panting audibly through their masks.

Ross held up his hand in greeting but much to his astonishment the boy let out a yelp of genuine fear and staggered back. "Sorry," Ross said cursing his lack of Spanish. "It's alright my name's..." The words caught in his throat, even in the dimly lit alley Ross could see the boy was terrified. He was staring wide eyed at of all things his dog collar.

Ross' hand instinctively went up his neck. "It's okay," he said again but this did nothing to ease the boy's palpable fear.

Another volley of fireworks exploded over head, much closer this time and this seemed to snap the boy out of his stupor. Then all five turned and ran back up the alley way like they had the Devil Himself on their tails and out of sight leaving Ross alone once more.

Somewhat haunted by that look of terror in the boy's eye, Ross set off again following the sound of the fiesta which took him deeper into the village and as he walked on, the narrow alleyways with their overbearing buildings on either side gradually gave way to a more open feel to the architecture.

Up ahead he could see rows of multi-coloured lights strung from building to building. And with them the first real sign of life over the age of ten in the village.

He passed a couple bathed in vivid reds and blues who were kissing in a doorway. Two old men were staggering down the street their arms interlocked for mutual support, each with a bottle of wine grasped in their free hand. Further on he had to politely push his way through a group of fifteen or more revellers several of whom Ross noticed eyeing him up somewhat suspiciously.

Again it seemed to be his dog collar that drew the most attention. One moment they were lost in the music which was drifting from close by, or laughing in some shared joke amongst them, only to stop until he had passed on by.

"Sorry, sorry," he found himself saying. For his passing by or his attire he wasn't entirely sure. Ross remembered Mendez had told him Hauser had little love for the church, but had the German infected the whole village with his distain?

Mexico, he knew well was a mostly catholic country but not here. He was beginning to think that he might actually be wise to take off his collar. And couldn't help but think that this wasn't distain he was encountering this was of all things, fear.

FIFTEEN

The reason for the near deserted streets soon became apparent after Ross negotiated a large group of teenagers who were having a very disorganised football/wrestling match while several on lookers hooted support whilst eating large portions of delicious looking barbeque and sipping on cola bottles. Ross' stomach growled at the smell and he realised he hadn't eaten since leaving the airport, hours ago now.

The area opened up into a surprisingly large village square which was filled with perhaps two hundred revellers. All the buildings surrounding the

square were festooned with brightly coloured flags, lights and streamers. At the far end was a prefabricated stage some three feet off the ground where a six piece band were playing what sounded like a mash up of traditional mariachi music and some kind of heavy Mexican rock to Ross' untrained ears.

Off to his right, Ross followed his nose to see three massive wood burning barbeques, going full blast, piled high with sumptuous looking meats of all kinds. Each manned my three cooks who cheerfully filled plate after plate which were then passed out into the nearby crowd.

Next to this was a large open fronted bar that had several tables out front all of which were packed with merry looking drinkers from late teens to late eighties by the look of things. Young and old alike lost in the festivities.

Ross couldn't help but smile at the scene and definitely thought about taking his dog collar off for a while if it would snag him a cold beer or two and a plate of food before seeking out the elusive German. He put down his suitcase and laptop bag and unbuttoned his shirt to his chest and wafted the material to try and raise a breeze.

Ross was contemplating the bar when he caught sight of the group of children he had inadvertently scared earlier. They were gathered around two women, one was about fifty with a long floral skirt and simple white blouse with her black hair tied up in a bun, the other was a good twenty or so younger wearing jeans and a t-shirt with her dark hair loose around her shoulders.

They looked quite similar to the priest who instantly pegged them as perhaps mother and daughter. The children were chatting animatedly to the two women, each trying to get their attention whilst clearly talking over each other. The younger woman looked across the square to Ross while the other tried to calm the children who were now all pointing in his direction.

The two women exchanged words and then the younger prised herself away from the children and made her way through the thong of merrymakers and over to where Ross was standing.

He tensed, trying in vain to read the young woman's demeanour. He tried a smile which he could only imagine how forced it looked but he almost sighed out loud in relief as the woman smiled warmly back.

“Hi,” Ross said lamely but she cocked an ear and pointed to the band clearly not hearing him.

“Por favour, perdona a los niños, ha sido algún momento, ya que han visto a un sacerdote.” She shouted over the music until she finally got to him.

Ross just looked blankly at her so she tried again, softer this time. “Es el collar de perro, los malos recuerdos.” She said with a smile, pointing to his collar.

“I’m really sorry,” Ross said awkwardly. “No Spanish I’m afraid?”

“Oh, you’re American?” She asked.

“No, English. I’ve come from England.”

“England?” She said with no little surprise. “You are a long way from home, Padre.” She continued in very good English.

“Tell me about it,” he replied. He looked across to the older woman and the children, who were still glaring at him.

“I think I scared the children earlier,” he said. “I’m sorry, not sure what happened.”

“It’s the collar,” she said pointing to his dog collar once more. “They have mad memories I’m afraid.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that,” Ross said with growing unease, unsure exactly what that could mean. He held out a sweaty hand. “I’m Father Ross, Shane.”

The young woman seemed a little amused at his formality but took his hand nevertheless. “Very pleased to meet, Father. My name is Alicia.

“Please, call me Shane.”

The woman nodded with a smile, but a moment later her face grew serious. She gestured to the older woman and children. All of whom had now taken off their masks save one, a girl who now appeared to have forgotten her earlier fright and was seemingly lost in the music, judging by the way she was

swaying in time with the beat. “My mother says you have been sent by the Vatican.”

Ross hadn’t expected that and had to think about this for a moment, yes he supposed he had. “I guess you could say that. I’m looking for...”

“Hauser,” she cut him off. “My mother was afraid someone might try again to take him from us.”

“No,” Ross insisted. “It’s nothing like that. I just, well I really need his help with something.

Alicia turned to her mother and nodded grimly. With this the older woman shooed the children away and they ran off across the square to a small stall selling ice-creams and treats.

“Please,” Alicia said to Ross and gestured for him to follow her. Ross picked up his suitcase and looped the laptop strap over his head and followed her across to her mother, who had now taken a seat at a picnic table which was cluttered with empty plates and spent beer bottles.

“Mama, this is Shane, he is from England.” This won a raise of the eyebrow from her mother and Ross got the feeling he was going to have to go through this woman if he were to have any chance of meeting the elusive German. “Please, take a seat,” Alicia said to Ross and moved off. “I’ll get you something to drink.”

“Thank you,” Ross called after her and took a seat on the bench across from ‘Mama’. Much to his surprise the woman’s face softened as she studied the flustered looking priest.

“Can I respectfully ask you to remove your collar, padre?” She said. Although like her daughter, her English was good, her accent was much stronger than Alicia’s so the priest had to concentrate on what she was saying, especially above the music blasting from across the square. “I mean no offence,” she continued. “It’s just some of the younger men who are, shall we say, a little worse for the drink, might cause you some trouble later.”

Again this mistrust of priests and in such a Catholic country. Ross nodded and removed the plastic strip from his collar and put it in his jacket pocket, this wasn't the time and certainly not the place to argue the point.

"Thank you. By the way, my name is Rosa."

"Pleased to meet you, Rosa." Ross said with a nod. He got a flash of good old fashioned Catholic guilt at feeling much better having removed his collar which made him smile without realising it.

Rosa lifted an eye brow at this and smiled herself. "Some of us were a little concerned someone might come. Hauser received another letter from your Vatican some days ago."

"I understand he doesn't like my kind very much, Rosa," Ross said. "But all I ask is just a little of his time."

He was contemplating showing the woman the video when Alicia came back with two ice cold beers, she handed one to her mother and placed the other on the table in front of Ross.

"Oh, thank you." Ross said gratefully and took a sip of beer. It was so cool and refreshing he gasped out loud much to the amusement of the two women. "Tut, sorry," he said and felt his cheeks burning.

"I'll see you later, Mama. Father." Alicia said with a nod to him and set off towards the stage which the band were now vacating. The singer took his mic stand and placed it front and centre of the stage and lowered the stand so the mic was about at his waist.

"Thank you," Ross called after her as she broke into a jog to join a large crowd which had gathered in front of the stage in anticipation of the next act.

"You must forgive us, we are very protective of our Hauser. We owe him so much." Rosa said and Ross turned his attention back to her. "Do you know anything about what happened here, Father?" Rosa asked. "About why we hold senôr Hauser in such high regard?"

"To honest Rosa, no. Let's just say I'm flying blind here. I've heard some things about him." He faltered, *things*? That he was a demon catcher?

Could he tell this woman that? Something he didn't truly believe himself, despite demon time? "To be honest, I don't even really know why I'm here."

She smiled. "You are here because there are things in this world that cannot be easily explained. Things that our prayers, our faith even cannot always protect us from."

There was such understanding and compassion in her eyes that Ross found himself lost for words. He had thought he would have to somehow justify why he was here, but she knew. Perhaps not about Michael Davis' freak show back in Europe, but certainly that thing's aren't always what they seem in the waking world.

He was about to speak when something akin to a wicked grin crossed the woman's face. "Speak of the Devil," she said with no little glee.

SIXTEEN

A cheer went up from the crowd gathered by the stage and Ross' attention was drawn to a balcony covered in lights and bunting to his right which looked down on the square. A grey haired man appeared and waved almost dismissively to the people below, as if slightly ill at ease with the attention. He was dressed casually in a white shirt with white flannel trousers and had on a cream coloured Panama type hat.

He shouted something in Spanish down to his audience and waved them away with his hands which raised a laugh from them then he sat in a chair and rested his elbows on the balcony's ornate balustrade to watch proceedings.

"Hauser?" Ross said.

"Hauser," Rosa confirmed.

A middle aged woman carrying a tray came out onto the balcony and placed a glass and a bottle of what looked like wine on a table next to the German. The two exchanged a few words, the woman laughed at whatever he said and made a friendly swipe at him with the tray which he easily ducked to avoid.

It was such a curious scene, the man had the air of reluctant authority about him. Not like a mayor or politician but something else. Ross looked at the almost adoring faces in the crowd, young and old alike, looking up at him. And could quite easily imagine Hauser as some kind of mythical revolutionary type. In only a few moments, Ross could tell this man had a hold over these people. More Che Guevara than El presidente but a hold nevertheless.

A shriek of feedback through the PA system brought everyone's attention back to the stage. A young girl of perhaps twelve clutching a piece of paper walked onto the stage and over to the microphone with a quiet formality.

When she got to the mic the crowd moved away from the stage in a hushed silence and settled around the edges of the square leaving a large open area and waited for her to speak. The lights dimmed until one spotlight remained shining down on the girl.

Ross looked at the now shadowy faces of the crowd, set in anticipation of what was to come. The silence that had now descended on the square was almost oppressive compared to the cacophony of music and laugher it followed. The mood had changed in mere moments from one of carefree frivolity to one bordering on the ritualistic.

The girl began reading from her notes, her voice clear and confident as she spoke, but with a note of palpable emotion to it which caught Ross off guard somewhat. He had half expected an amateurish school play type performance from the girl, but this had a raw edge to it that took the priest aback. Although he had no idea what she was saying he felt his skin breakout in goose flesh despite the heat.

As she continued, another spot light came on hitting six children, three girls and three boys their ages ranging from perhaps six up to sixteen. It followed them as they came through the crowd in procession two by two and

walked slowly towards the centre of the square. They were wearing what looked to Ross like choir cassocks and each had their hands were clasped together in front of their faces as if in prayer.

A rumble of whispers ran through the crowd and Ross saw, despite the obvious mistrust of the church here, several of the older people cross themselves. He caught Rosa out of the corner of his eye doing the same. He chanced a glance at her and could see the beginnings of tears glisten in her dark eyes.

Still followed by the spotlight the children stopped in the very centre of the square but continued to walk in place, eyes closed, hands clashed in prayer as the young girl went on with her impassioned narration.

Ross caught the odd word he understood here and there as she spoke. 'Hauser' came up several times as did 'iglesia' which he had heard one of his Spanish colleagues say a few times during his time in the seminary. That meant church if memory served. Then 'padre', but more disturbingly she ended with 'diablo'. He didn't need a degree in Spanish to know what that meant.

"Diablo!" The girl shrieked again after a moment of silence. Then a hiss as two large dry ice machines either side of the stage flooded the square with smoke. As it was a windless night the smoke soon settled until it was a blanket over the entire area, covering the taller children from their waists and up to the chests of the smaller ones.

The smoke drifted over to where Ross was seated and he had to waft it away, he noticed some of the audience actually taking a few steps back to avoid it getting too close to them.

Back over by the front of the stage, the dry ice shifted as if touched in a light breeze. Ross strained to see and thought he caught sight of a large dark shadow within its thick billowing mass. There was a murmur of discontent from the crowd at this and some of the smaller children watching clutched to their parents legs or demanded to be picked up so they could bury their heads in familiar bosoms. Again some of the older villagers crossed themselves others looked away altogether.

What kind of celebration was this? Ross thought to himself with a growing sense of unease.

Yes, as he peered into the gloom Ross could definitely see something moving now within the sea of dry ice like some aquatic predator moving towards where the six children were still blindly praying. The young priest got a sudden stab of fear. Just what exactly was he witnessing here in this small none descript village in the middle of nowhere? A harmless tradition? Or some horrendous, blasphemous ritual sacrifice?

What if Hauser didn't just banish so called demons? What if he could create them too? Christ what if those six children weren't players in a show, but lambs to the slaughter? After all hadn't Ross thought that the way the villagers had first greeted Hauser's appearance was bordering on the messianic?

Ross let out a low curse under his breath and tried to push the lunatic notion out of his mind, but failed as the dark shape moved fluidly just under the cover of smoke and began to circle the children. He looked up at were Hauser was holding court. The old man was just sitting watching passively sipping his drink. The woman who had brought him his drink however was standing with her arms wrapped around herself with the look close to horror on her face.

Jesus Christ, what was this? Ross was suddenly all too aware of just how out of place he was here, and just how far away from home he had travelled. And most of all just how much this place hated the church. He looked at the six children, dressed like a church choir in their cassocks. Or were they sacrificial robes?

Then Ross, along with most of the watching crowd, cried out in shock as the thing under the smoke suddenly reared up in front of the children. It was silhouetted where the suddenly blinding spotlight reflected off the dry ice it emerged from, making a nonsense of its physiology. It was big, Ross could make out that much, but its limbs seemed too long for its body. Then its black mass of a head almost split in two revealing a fleeting glimpse of dark vicious looking teeth.

"Jesus, God!" Ross shrieked as the thing lunged at one of the children. Many in the crowded echoed this but to his disbelief more still were whooping

and laughing at the sight. Some threw their hands in the air and others actually clapped as the child screamed and his stomach seemed to explode in a shower of thin entrails. A moment later the child was gone, lost in the smoke.

SEVENTEEN

Ross got to his feet and felt his head swim as the shock of it hit him. Someone was at his side, he turned, it was Rosa, she had a hold of his shoulders. "Ssh, it's alright, Father. Look." She said pointing back to the scene of execution.

But he could do nothing but stare at the look of mild amusement on her face. "What is this madness?" He said and she physically took hold of his face and turned him back.

The remaining five children all scattered as the smoke began to dissipate. "Deja de!" It was another child's voice coming from the stage.

Ross knocked Rosa's hands away from his head and looked on at the surreal sight. A boy of perhaps eight was standing next to the girl on the stage, he was dressed exactly like Hauser, complete with fake white beard and white wig sticking out from the bottom of a homemade Panama hat.

The crowd went wild. And began chanting; "Hauser, Hauser!"

Back in the square the creature reared up again as the smoke began to dissipate from all around it. It took Ross a moment to process what he was seeing. It was a puppet! Now that the illusion was fading along with the smoke, he could see it was being operated by four master puppeteers all dressed in black. Two were controlling the four twisted limbs, one in front one in back. Whilst the other two were working the massive misshapen head and jaws.

"Hauser! Hauser!" The chant continued as the child playing the old man raised a piece of paper above his head. The 'creature' coward seeing this and the crowd cheered.

Up on the balcony, Ross could see that both Hauser himself and the once scared woman at his side were chanting and clapping too.

"What the fuck is this place?" Ross said.

The mini Hauser jumped down off the stage and began to circle the cowering puppet. He lunged trying to touch the paper to the thing, but it dodged dramatically which won a cry of "ole!" from the crowd. He lunged twice more each time just missing the target as they continued dancing around each other. Then finally the boy made a feint left and as the thing moved to avoid the anticipated contact, he leapt to the right and slammed the paper into its chest where the paper stuck.

The crowd let out a roar of approval as the puppeteers raced around the square making the creature convulse very convincingly until finally they threw it into the air letting it fall hard to the ground and made their exit leaving the puppet in a crumbled heap.

The victorious child put one foot on it and raised his hand in victory.

The place erupted and all the main lights came back on.

"Dulces para todos!" The boy shouted and at this a dozen screaming kids ran into the square and began to beat and pull at the puppet which burst open showering them with a mixture of confetti, sweets and treats of all shapes and sizes.

Ross half sat half fell back down onto the bench where Rosa joined him. "What the..?" Was all he could muster with a shake of the head. She thrust a fresh bottle of beer into his hand and he took a long swig.

The child who had been the creature's victim got to his feet to join in the free for all for candy as did the other performers. Ross could now see that in fact his guts were nothing more than strips of red ribbons stuffed under his cassock.

He took another long pull on the beer draining half of it and gasped, not caring this time if anyone heard. "That's an interesting looking piñata," he said watching as the destroyed remains were dragged from the square. The band

reappeared on stage and began playing a slower number to which several of the villagers began dancing to.

"There is an interesting story behind it," Rosa said. "You look like you could do with some food, Father."

In all the excitement Ross had forgotten just how hungry he was, he took another drink and looked at the beer, his second, which was now three quarters gone. What with the heat and the floor show his head was beginning to swim and this thoughts cloud somewhat.

"I think that would be a good idea," he said. Ross looked up at the balcony to see Alicia was up there now talking with Hauser and the middle aged woman. The German was clearly not happy with something and Ross reasoned that he was the topic of discussion. This was confirmed when Hauser looked directly at him for a moment, even at that distance he could plainly see a look of contempt on the old man's face. Then back to the two woman who were clearly haranguing him.

"Poor Hauser hasn't got a chance," Rosa said getting to her feet. She gestured up to the balcony. "You must understand," she continued. "Hauser has had it very hard, and from what he tells us much of that has been due to the indifference of your Vatican."

"They're trying to convince him to talk to me." Ross said.

"Yes, Gabriela has a way with him, he can be a how you say, old bastard? At times, but he has a good heart, and our love. She will talk him around."

"But you don't even know why I'm here." Ross told her.

"No, but it must be of great importance for you to come all the way from England. Besides, he knows we will not let you take him away."

"As I said to Alicia, it's not like that. Something's going on, back in Europe. God I don't even really believe it, but I really could do with talking to him. Apparently he's got experience in..." He had to think for a moment before adding lamely. "Things"

“Oh, that is true for sure,” Rosa said. “We here in Santuario know that more than most.”

Ross couldn’t help thinking back to the bizarre show he had just seen. He shuddered slightly as he wondered what events had inspired such a twisted tale.

“Patience, Father. I’ll get you some food and another drink?”

“A soft drink, please?”

“Of course,” Rosa said with a smile. “Yes, patience. Poor Hauser will be much more accommodating after another bottle and five more minutes with Gabriela and my Alicia.” With that she set off towards one of the large barbeques that was still blazing away full blast.

Ross finished his beer and looked back up to the balcony. Sure enough, the older woman was still speaking to Hauser who actually seemed to be shrinking further and further down in his chair as she spoke.

EIGHTEEN

It was sometime later when a reluctant Hauser finally relented and had agreed to grant the English priest a few moments of his precious time. Thanks in no small part to the opening of a second bottle of his favourite local wine and of course the insistence of his housekeeper/conscience and voice of reason, Gabriela.

Ross was sitting on Hauser’s balcony now, waiting for the German to make an entrance. He looked down into the village square which had long since been cleared and the last of the celebrants, young and old, had wandered off into the night and home.

The priest checked his laptop again like a junior partner waiting to make a power-point presentation to the chairman of the board. He tapped the keyboards touch pad once again to stop the computer go into hibernation mode

as it had threatened to do ever since he had turned the machine on, some thirty odd minutes ago now.

He cursed having not thought to bring a mains adaptor with the two pin configuration favoured by Mexico but checking the battery life he was relieved to see it was still pretty much full, indicating a good couple of hours of power left. Surely that would be enough if Hauser didn't keep him waiting too much longer.

Raised voices speaking heatedly in Spanish drew Ross's attention over to the large double patio doors that led out on to the balcony. Although there were a set of delicate lace curtains drawn across it, he could see two silhouettes beyond engaged in fierce debate. About him Ross had no doubt and wondered if perhaps Hauser had changed his mind and was refusing to see him after all, even if only for a few minutes.

Ross shook his head wearily. It was too late and he was far too tired for this. He was feeling more than a little drowsy after such a long and eventful day as it was. Let alone after the eleven hour flight, three hour taxi ride not to mention having the bejeezus scared out of him by a bunch of kids and a monstrous, misshapen piñata.

He let out a long sign of despondency and rubbed his tired eyes with the heels of his hands. "What the fucking hell am I doing here?"

"I thought priests weren't supposed to curse?" A voice said from behind him.

"You kidding?" Ross said not looking, the voice was clearly German. "I learnt all my best swear words in the seminary. We used to have competitions."

"I bet you did," Hauser replied. "Still, you should be glad Gabriela doesn't speak a word of English, even the dirty ones."

"Crap!" Ross turned to see Hauser standing in the doorway with Gabriela. "Sorry," he said to the woman flustered, then remembered she didn't (thankfully) understand.

The woman simply smiled at him then fixed Hauser with a look of such venom Ross was doubly glad she didn't understand. "Sé amable, Hauser," she said then to Ross with a nod. "Padre."

"Sí, Sí," Hauser said to her as she moved back through the doors and shut them leaving the two foreigners alone.

Hauser sat down at the table across from the priest. He poured himself a glass of wine from the bottle in front of him and even though there was a second glass he just placed the bottle back down an took a sip.

"Thank you for meeting me," Ross said to get the conversation started.

The German shrugged and took another sip before indicating after Gabriela with a nod of the head. "Believe me, I didn't have much choice." Hauser said and eyed the priest from under his hat. "Still," he relented after a moment's contemplation. "You have come a long way."

Ross nodded. "Tell me about it," he said wearily. He gestured down into the square. "That was quite a show," he said.

"Yeah, it's fast becoming an annual tradition here," he said. "But the children love it."

"Strange story. Is it some sort of local ancient myth?"

Hauser took another sip of wine. "Local, not so ancient," he replied and looked off into the darkness beyond the light of the balcony and to some distant memory.

Ross studied the older man trying to get a handle on him. Close up, he looked much more haggard than his body language at a distance early had indicated. Then he had the air of a much younger man about him, his gait, and the way he held himself. But his physical appearance added ten years to him.

Hauser smiled slightly obviously sensing his scrutiny. "So, let's have it. Why have you travelled over five thousand miles to see someone who I'm sure you know doesn't give a shit about the Vatican's latest woes? Whatever they are these days."

"Yeah, Father Mendez said you might feel like that."

“So, it was old José that sent you. How is that Spanish bastard? Still holed up in that tomb of a Vatican library?”

“Truth is I’ve no idea. I’ve never actually met the man.”

Hauser seemed surprised at this. “You’re not one of his God squad?”

Odd term, Ross thought. “No,” he replied. “Whatever that is.” This won a frustratingly knowing smile from the German. Was this some joke between Hauser and Mendez? One which Ross wasn’t privy to, but perhaps a part of?

‘What do you get if you send a priest half way around the world?’ Type of thing. Ross didn’t much like the thought of being a punchline in this routine of internet demons and remote Mexican villages.

As he sat there looking at the smug German, Ross could once again feel the events of the last few days catching up with him. All of a sudden he became aware of the absurdity of it all. Maybe it was some cosmic joke or something after all. Ross suddenly felt a flash of anger.

He had spent the last few minutes rehearsing in his head just how to approach the subject of demon time with the German. As if he was truly beginning to think any of this was real. Demons? He felt like he had let himself be railroaded this whole time.

What was he doing here? He fumed inwardly. Certainly the show demon time was real enough, and yes it had caused a lot of pain and distress to four of his fellow priests over its short lifetime. But surely, surely it was all smoke and mirrors.

He thought of the puppet and how, albeit briefly, he had believed such a thing could exist. It was easy to be drawn into it all, especially if you add a potent mix of suggestion and good old fashion TV special effects to the equation.

Oh, to hell with it, Ross told himself and fixed the German with a look which he secretly hoped had an edge of mockery to it.

“I’m here,” he finally said. “Because Father Mendez said that you caught a demon once.” He was impressed he managed to keep a straight face.

The German didn't so much as flinch. "More than once," he replied not missing a beat. It was said without the least bit or irony or humour which took Ross aback a little.

Okay, if that's how we are playing it, Ross thought. In for a penny, in for a pound. "Have you ever heard of a man called Michael Davis?"

Hauser shrugged. "Not that I remember," he replied. "Why?"

"Rumour has it that you sold him a demon a while back."

A flash of recognition bloomed in Hauser's grey eyes. "Christ, yes. Back in England!" He shook his head remembering. "It was shameful really. The poor bastard was so scared out of his mind I could have sold him anything I wanted to. Yes, it was one of my last encounters."

"For real?"

"Sure, the thing was there to reap all kinds of shit on his sorry body and soul. I had a tip he was a target, so all I had to do was keep an eye on him and wait for it to strike. Mind you as it was I was nearly too late. Still, I stopped it and sold him the thing plus the means of keeping it bound. Easy money. Don't know why I never thought of doing it earlier, I could have made a fortune over the years." He laughed at his own foolishness.

"Why would you do that?" Ross asked.

"Why not? He practically begged me to once he'd changed his trousers! The poor fool had no idea the thing would only last a few hours at most. God knows what he thought he could do with the thing. It properly turned to dust before he could figure out where he was going to put it."

"What if it didn't?" Ross asked him.

Hauser dismissed this with a wave of the hand. "It is possible to preserve the body, if you're quick. But that one? No, I bet it turned to shit within a day." He said refilling his glass and still not offering any to Ross.

"It's still alive, according to Father Mendez, and Michael Davis of course."

Hauser stopped all of a sudden with the glass half way to his lips. "What?"

"The thing, the creature, it's still alive, that's why I'm here."

"Bullshit," Hauser carefully put the glass, un-drunk back onto the table. "That's not possible,"

Ross thought he caught a hint of fear now in the old man's voice. "It's all over the internet," he said.

Yes a flash of fear crossed his eyes. "No, something like that withers and dies," Hauser insisted. "They're not meant to last more than a few hours afterwards. Whether they are successful, or like this one, if they are stopped before they can complete the task for which they were created. They are only really created for one specific job, that's their whole reason for existence."

"I don't think this one got the memo," Ross told him. He took the laptop and opened up the media player.

"No," Hauser shook his head with a frown and looking troubled he picked up his wine and downed it in one with all the ease of a seasoned drinker. "Can't be," he said to the empty grass.

"Let me show you," Ross selected a preloaded video file. "Ever heard of demon time?"

"Demon what?" Hauser watched as Ross readied the laptop, his eyes narrowed with anticipation.

"Demon time, it's an internet reality show and its getting more popular by the day. A priest volunteers to go into a house which has a 'so called' real demon in it. Their task is to try to exorcize the thing before it can half kill them or drive them to insanity and out of the house, whichever comes first. The producer is Michael Davis. And its star is *your* demon."

The old man drummed his fingers nervously against his glass and for a moment Ross thought it might shatter. "Not my demon," he said without looking at the priest. "It was meant for that sleaze ball, Davis. All I did was trap it."

“Why didn’t you just destroy the thing when you had the chance?” Ross asked him.

“A shit load of cash,” the German replied.

“So Davis did pay you for the creature, after you saved him?”

Hauser shrugged. “Who am I to refuse a fool’s money?” He replied. “Come to think of it, I should have charged the bastard for catching it in the first place. Y’know like Ghostbusters?” Hauser shook his head and smiled to himself.

“People have nearly died.” Ross told him.

“People die every damn day, that’s what they do.” He put the wine glass back down on the table. “Besides, if what you say is true, they have all volunteered?”

“That is true, strictly speaking,” The priest relented.

“And they were all men of God?” He ran his gaze over Father Ross, coming to rest on where his collar once was. “Men like you?”

“Yes,” he replied shifting in his seat somewhat. It sounded more of an accusation than observation.

“Then they would have died in a state of grace.” Hauser said plainly. “I’m sure they said their Hail Mary’s before marching into battle.

“You have to see, this whole thing is an abomination.” Ross said deliberately leaving off saying ‘if it’s true’.

“And like all abominations, it makes great reality TV. I prefer the one where they torture celebrities in the jungle. Have you seen that one? Make them eat bugs and shit? Very popular I believe.”

Ross ignored him and hit play. Hauser eyes were drawn to the gaudy opening title sequence which was a rapid fire edit of the previous shows, which never gave the demon more than a few frames of screen time. Ross watched Hauser’s red rimmed eyes widen and he physically winced as the final shot, a tantalizingly just out of focus freeze frame of Mister Minx itself.

“Look familiar?” Ross let the programme play and angled the screen close to Hauser who subconsciously sat back in his seat a little as if fearful the thing would jump right out and attack him.

“This is so wrong,” Hauser whispered as he watched the highlights of the last episode. And for the first time since Ross had met the man, the bravado drained from him as quickly as he had just drained the wine from his glass.

NINETEEN

The German continued to stare at the screen long after the show had ended and the picture cut to black. His eyes had gradually narrowed as the clip played out and his brow had crumpled like a paper coffee table after a bowling ball had been dropped on it.

“Amazing what you can do with special effects these days,” Ross said after a long moment watching Hauser. “Particularly think it’s clever how you never actually see the thing in any great detail. Keeps up the illusion.”

“That’s no illusion,” Hauser croaked.

“I’ll grant you it’s impressive, but you can’t expect me to believe that thing actually exists?” There was something about Hauser’s reaction that was gnawing at Ross’ certainty and he didn’t like the doubts it was conjuring up.

“Tell you what,” Hauser said after a long pause. “You just keep believing none of this is real and you’ll be better off, trust me.” He poured himself a glass and this time actually filled Ross’. “And stay away from that show.” Hauser added.

Despite his fatigue, Ross gratefully picked up his glass and took a small sip, even if just to take the edge off his growing unease. The wine was sweeter than expected and not bad at all for a local batch.

“Madre de Dios!”

Both men turned to see Gabriela and Rosa standing in the open patio doorway. They must have slipped in whilst he and Hauser were watching the show. It was clear by their expressions that both women had seen more than enough.

Rosa moved out onto the balcony but Gabriela stayed in the doorway clutching the lace curtain as if not wanting to get too close to the captured images she had seen.

“It’s okay...” Ross found himself saying apologetically but Rosa cut him off.

“This is true?” Rosa asked Hauser.

At first it seemed Hauser hadn’t heard her, but then he slowly nodded. “Christ knows how, but yes it’s real.”

“Look...” Ross said feeling the overwhelming urge to be the voice of reason, even though he knew it was more to calm his own doubts than theirs.

“No!” Rosa said with a sharp edge of conviction. “Father, you say you do not believe this? Then why are you here? Why have you come such a long way for a... A fiction?”

It was a good question, and one which made Ross’ heart hit his boots. He shook his head unable to answer.

“Rosa, Hauser,” Gabriela said softly from the doorway. She clearly understood the essence of what was being said if not the language. “Muestrale.”

Hauser winced. “No,” he said firmly.

“Sí,” Rosa agreed. “She is right, Hauser. Show him.”

“Christ, Rosa. Don’t you know ignorance is bliss?” Hauser said.

“Show me what?” Ross asked.

The old German let out a long breath through his teeth. He looked first to Rosa then across to Gabriela and his face softened more than Ross thought

possible. Gabriela smiled at him and nodded ever so slightly. Ross could see there was nothing but love for the old man in those tear filled eyes.

"La Iglesia," Gabriela said to Hauser.

The church.

Hauser drained his glass then stiffly got to his feet. "C'mon padre," he said reluctantly. ""If you are going to have any chance against this thing. You are going to at least believe why it's real."

If it hadn't been for its surroundings, particularly the ill kept graveyard, the church or at least the building which had once served as the village's sole place of worship would have been very easy to miss.

At first, as they walked along the waist high stone wall that encircled the cemetery, Ross thought the building at its centre was in fact some kind of funhouse. Although it was still hard to make out any great detail at that distance, and in the gloom between night and dawn, he could just about make out what looked like numerous paintings on the building, just vague shapes and colours from where he was. But it still put him in mind of a funhouse entrance and he wondered absently if it were somehow connected to the festival earlier.

Both men paused by an old wooden archway which marked the entrance to the graveyard. Ross swept the torch he had been given over the ground just beyond and could just about make out an overgrown cobbled path which as far as he could tell ran through the gravestones and up to the large hulking silhouette of a structure at its heart.

Hauser turned on his own torch now and with a forlorn shake of the head set off through the archway and into the cemetery. The German hadn't said a word since they had set off and had the look of a condemned man making the final walk from his cell to the gallows as he trudged on.

Ross followed on hesitantly a few paces behind and as Hauser's torch was lighting the pathway ahead the priest let his own pass over the various gravestones as they went. Many were overgrown and had clearly been left to the elements. But a few here and there stood out as being newly cleared of weeds, the stonework scrubbed clean, name plates polished or renewed.

And on occasion as they walked he could see fresh flowers had been placed in ornate vases on some of the newer looking graves. He caught sight of the age of one of the better tended stone crosses near the path. Miguel Torres; May 2004 to September 2013. The poor lad had only been nine years old when he had died. Ross didn't want to think too hard as to what had taken him so young.

As they approached the dark hulking structure itself Ross turned his torch on it to illuminate those vague shapes and colours he had noticed from the wall. The whole front of the building was covered with a large wooden façade which had been constructed over the entire front facing part of the church as if to deliberately conceal its original purpose.

All the windows were blocked leaving nothing but a thin doorway that masked the usual large thick wooden double doors that most churches of this size have.

Now that they were closer, Ross could make out just why he had first thought this was the frontage for a carnival funhouse. Even in the meagre light offered up by the torch he could make out enough to see it was absolutely covered with a multi-coloured mural. The light picked out many different scenes painted in two dozen or more hands, sometimes two or three on top of each other. Some he could see were painted with great artistic skill, others clearly the work of children.

A donkey's head poking over a fence, its eyes crooked and too big for its face, and with a smile too human for an animal. Next to this a splash of deep blue filled upon closer inspection with once brightly painted fishes of all shapes and sizes their colours now faded with time.

A sunrise beautifully rendered by an artist of clearly great skill filled with ornately painted birds of all shapes, colours and species. But it was a sky also

occupied by a flock of birds whose wings were so mismatched that flight would have been impossible. But still the two wildly different styles complemented one another perfectly.

Everywhere he looked some new revelation came in to view. It was an almost dizzying array of art work and Ross felt like you could study it all night and still only get a flavour of what it contained.

"It was mostly for the kids," Hauser said from beside him as they reached the heavily padlocked door which was home to a family of painted ducks and what looked to Ross like an odd assortment of farm animals which had been created by a lunatic God. That or painted by a five year old on a sugar rush.

"Therapy, if you like," Hauser continued. "After what happened they closed the place up tight, tried to forget what it was I guess. They still hold services, just in the square. No iconography and definitely no priest."

Again with the priests Ross thought.

Hauser tucked his torch under his arm and pulled out an extendable key chain that was attached to his belt. "Gimmie some light, will you?"

Ross tore his gaze away from a particularly disturbing scene of six stick figure children, their simple faces set in unmistakable fright as a large dark shape with yellow eyes loomed over them, and shined his torch onto Hauser's hands so he could select the desired key.

The German glanced at Ross as he opened the large padlock and looked like he wanted to say something, maybe in way of explanation as to what he would see inside. But then he just mouthed something inaudible and shouldered open the door.

The interior to the church was lighter than Ross had thought it would be. The reason soon became apparent as both men stepped inside. The whole building had been gutted by what must have been a severe fire. The rapidly brightening morning sky could easily be seen through the bare skeletal rafters of what was left of the roof and its meagre light gave some substance to the murky interior.

High to Ross' right a large blown out stained glass window stretched up towards the ruined roof. It's formerly ornate imagery now as twisted and blackened as the inside it had once looked down upon.

It put Ross in mind of one of those inner city buildings hit by an incendiary bomb during the blitz. What remained of the pews lay strewn left and right, barely recognisable they were so chard and broken.

"Watch your step," Hauser cautioned as they made their way down the cluttered aisle. He gestured to the altar at the very end. "There it is," he said.

Ross shone his torch down to the far end of the devastated church. The altar's legs had been replaced by half a dozen breeze blocks on either side. And on it lay a large coffin like box approximately eight feet by three feet which as they got closer he could see was made of metal.

Hauser kicked a blackened piece of lumber out of the way so they could get close to the object. "None of this was my idea," he said as if in way of explanation. "It was like this when I came back here after deciding to call it a day."

"Looks like some kind of messed up shrine if you ask me," Ross observed. But a shrine to what?

"That's exactly what it is. Christ knows why they didn't just bulldoze the whole site after it happened," Hauser said.

Both men stopped in front of the altar like two parishioners awaiting communion. "Guess they can't let go of what happened here," Hauser continued. "You saw the fiesta and the façade outside. It's their way of making sure future generations remember it all, I suppose. Superstitious types for sure, but good, good people."

"Just what did happen here?" Ross asked looking at the ominous box on the altar.

"Look for yourself," Hauser said and gestured to the box. He glanced around then moved over and sat on one of the few pews that were both upright and intact.

Ross hesitated. “Go on old man,” the German coaxed. “It won’t bite.” His face cracked open in the most devilish grin at that.

“It’s not locked?” Ross said in faint surprise although he wasn’t entirely sure why.

“No need,” Hauser replied.

Ross stepped forwards and grasped the lid of the box. He was surprised at just how light the lid was, this box was made to conceal rather than imprison. He lifted the lid which was hinged at the back and it opened with unexpected ease.

TWENTY

Father Ross’ first thought as he gingerly peered inside the box, was that this was another of the villager’s puppets, as what lay inside was a similar, if more twisted cousin to the one from the square earlier. But as his eyes gradually adjusted to the gloom it became all too clear the thing inside was no piñata.

What he had first took to be a covering of those crepe paper leaves common on a lot of piñatas was in fact on closer inspection a thick covering of dried flowers. Ross could see patches of undeniably organic matter here and there where the flowers had fallen away from the creation.

Loathed to touch the thing, Ross instead blew the covering of flowers away from the crumpled body. He lifted his torch and shone it down into the box. He instantly repulsed as the thing appeared to move. “Jesus, Mary and Joseph!” He gasped and just about managed to swallow his hammering heart which had leapt into his mouth, back down to where it belonged. The illusion of movement happened again as his torch beam played over the body once more. It was just shifting shadows caused by the light as it moved over the thing.

Ross cursed under his breath at his own stupidity and waited for his heart to stop racing a little before he continued his reluctant examination of the contents of the box.

Yes, now that he looked closely he could see it was a wizened creature perhaps the size of a large man curled up in a foetal position. But this thing was far from human. Its limbs seemed too long for its emaciated body and stick thin as if they would quite easily snap even under the meagre weight of its torso.

A long crooked spindly arm covered in small black scales was draped across the thing's withered bestial head as if it were trying to shield itself against the light. Ross peered under the arm which was partially blocking its neck as a flash of greyish white caught his eye.

"It trapped them in here during choir practice," Hauser said softly from behind him. "Six kids, organist and a couple of parents."

Ross had to lean over the altar and into the box to get a better look. He held his breath as he could only imagine what a long dead corruption like this would smell like, despite its bed of flowers. He narrowed his eyes and held the torch closer to the thing. What was that on its neck?

"I got here just in time," Hauser continued, a disembodied voice in the shadows. "Or just too late, depending on who you ask." There was an unmistakable despondency to his voice as he spoke.

The young priest finally recognised what he was looking at. "Oh, Jesus." The creature had the remnants of a faded dog collar on its neck. No, he looked closer, this wasn't a disguise in the conventional sense. The white collar was actually part of the desiccated creature's skin. It must have taken on the physical form of a priest as part of its own body.

His free hand went inadvertently up to where his own collar would have been if he hadn't removed it earlier. Now he knew why they distrusted priests so much.

"Yeah," Hauser said seeing his reaction. "The son of a bitch took on the form of their local priest, sick bastard. Someone they trusted without question. Christ only knows what it would have done to them all if I hadn't shown up."

The German shook his head before continuing, trying to dislodge the memory or remember it, Ross wasn't sure. "You see, Ross. That's what these things do, they take great delight in perverting what you hold dear. You had never seen a more devout group of people. Christ how this thing must have jerked off on their pain. It sapped the faith right out of them. These things..."

He gestured to the box. "These things and the scum that create them don't care about anything but causing suffering, and the longer the better. They're authors of pain, just for pain's sake."

"But you stopped it," Ross said.

"It had all but changed into what you see there when I got in. It was taunting and abusing those poor children. I was too late, it had already mutilated one... The fucker was wearing the poor lad's entrails like a garland of flowered around its scrawny neck." His voice trailed away and Ross thought he heard the old man bite back a sob at the memory.

Ross thought back to the fiesta and the puppet show. Kids in cassocks, death creeping all around them as they prayed for help. He winced inwardly and came away from the monstrosity in the box. It wasn't hard to imagine those weren't ribbons exploding from some terrified child's guts when that nightmare attacked.

"Miguel Torres?" Ross said turning to Hauser. It was his turn to wince this time as even in the near darkness Ross could see the look of horror in the old man's eyes as he nodded.

"How is this possible?" Ross asked. He thought back to that disgrace demon time, to poor Father Winthorpe fleeting the building and the abomination inside, and the three others who had gone before him. He felt a stab of guilt at not fully believing it was anything but an elaborate illusion.

He glanced back over to the box, the lid was still open, then without asking his feet to move, he was back over to it. He moved to close the lid, but forced himself to look down at the creature curled up inside on last time.

"Christ only knows," Hauser said. "And He isn't telling."

Ross closed the lid and screwed his eyes shut. A mixture of the thing inside and the puppet from the square seemed to be burnt onto his retina, lest he ever forgot what he had seen here.

He desperately wanted to quiz Hauser on his part in all this. How did he know these things existed? How did he know to come here when he did, or turn up in England just in time to save that sick opportunist Michael Davis? But in the end, did that really matter? What he really needed to know was; "Can you help me fight this thing?"

"Once," Hauser said wearily. "Truth is this thing Davis has shouldn't even still be alive. It was created to get him, make him suffer for whatever reason, then kill him and disappear back to whatever hell it came from."

"But you've fought it before, trapped it." Ross said.

"I sold Davis everything. The charms to hold it, even one to subdue it. Truth be told most of the trinkets he thinks are useful don't mean anything at all." Hauser smiled at this but it didn't last. "I just wanted out of it all. Since I killed that thing," he nodded to the box. "Which damn near did me in. I just wanted to retire. The people here offered to look after me for life after I saved those I could. For life, Ross! And believe me that was the first, best offer I'd ever had in that transient life I'd found myself in. I knew it was only a matter of time before I got too slow, too old or just too damn sloppy and then I'd be the one withering away in a box somewhere."

"You have nothing left?" Ross asked with a sinking feeling.

Hauser shook his head. "That thing in England was my last. I couldn't get out of there fast enough. Davis has everything, mostly useless, but everything and I was glad to sell it to him."

A long silence fell between the two men. Ross looked up at the brightening morning sky. For inspiration?

"Don't go into that house," Hauser said after an age.

Before he had come to Mexico that would have been an easy request for Father Shane Ross to agree to. But after what he had seen here over such a short period of time, the children, that surreal fiesta the grave of poor little

Miguel Torres; Born May 2004 died September 2013 in the most horrible of ways. And not to mention that creature in the box that had caused so much torment. Ross wondered if Mendez had known all along what he would find here, and the impact it would have on the young priest.

Because although in the end Hauser could give him no silver bullet or ancient wisdom that he could use to defeat the creature. He was at least now armed with the knowledge that Minx was all too real. And all said and done wasn't that really the purpose of his visit here? Meeting those who had actually been touched by this evil but that come through it?

Innocents corrupted, but who had somehow come together for comfort and healing and thus defeat that monster's legacy. To move past it and on with their lives without ever truly forgetting poor Miguel and what true evil lurked in the world.

He thought back to the fiesta again. Was he now the puppet in this sick carnival of internet horrors? If he was, and he did go into that house armed with nothing more than faith and the good book. '*Sometimes faith isn't enough'*. He knew it wouldn't be sweets spilling out of his broken body live on the internet if he failed.

'*Don't go into that house*,' Hauser had said. It was good advice but advice he knew he could ultimately not take, despite every fibre in his being screaming at him to heed it.

Indeed, to his credit and despite his obvious hatred of the church, Hauser then spent the next two days of Ross' stay at the village trying again and again to talk him out of this foolish endeavour. It became clear to the young priest that the German had taken a shine to him and the feeling was mutual. During the last few hours before he was due to return home Hauser had even tried to persuade him to stay in Mexico, out of the reach of the Vatican, Mendez, and above all demon time and its twisted star.

It was a tempting offer especially out here away from all the fear and doubt. Santuario and its inhabitants made for a compelling argument, that much was true. Perhaps he mused as he prepared to make the long tortuous journey

back to Europe and his appointment with Minx. He would return here when, if, it was all over and of course if he still had body and soul intact.

'*Don't go into that house*.' If he had said it once, Hauser had said it a thousand times since the revelations at the church. But Ross' response each time had been just as repetitious.

"I have to."

TWENTY-ONE

When the lawyer in the expensive looking suit had turned up unannounced to visit farmer Joe Martinez with an offer to hire out his unused two acre field, he had assumed it was for some kind of outdoor concert. Not that he cared one way or the other. The field had remained over grown and untouched for almost a year ever since the bottom had fallen out of the Spanish housing market and he had thus been unable to sell the land to what had been, before the crash, quite a few interested developers. But now it was all but useless in the current climate despite being situated as it was only ten miles or so from Barcelona.

So when the lawyer had appeared on his doorstep a week ago Joe had taken one look at this out of place towney and had decided on the spot to ask for five thousand euros and see just how much the man would try to whittle him down.

In truth Joe would have happily accepted three, so he had been nearly floored when the man from the city had come straight out and offered him ten thousand euros in cash and no questions asked for exclusive use of the field, and the dirt road that connected it to the main highway for seven days tops.

Christ, thought Joe, they could hold a pagan orgy for that kind of money for all he cared, complete with ritual sacrifices.

The two men had shaken hands on the deal and the lawyer had returned the next day with a simple contract and the ten thousand in cash. The lawyer had assured Joe with a glint in his eye that was so common with his kind in Joe's experience. That the contract was merely to protect their investment and that once they had finished they would not be filing it anywhere official so although it remained unsaid. Joe was free to keep the whole ten thousand with no need to bother the tax man.

Within a day of the deal three tractor drawn gang mowers had turned up and made short work of turning the over-grown field into a near perfect bowling green. Joe watched on in quiet bemusement as a small army of workers then arrived and began constructing a dozen or so prefabricated buildings around the outskirts of the field followed by four large articulated lorries carrying all manner of equipment.

From where Joe spent his days idly watching the commotion from up on the hill which over looked the field. He had been amazed at the swiftness the construction had taken shape and it had been only three days into the operation when the field now resembled a small densely packed temporary village.

Huge spotlights where then erected followed by a large grandstand flanked by two smaller seated areas either side all looking down on an as yet untouched clearing. Miles and miles of cables snaked from large generator trucks and weaved their way between the buildings. Yes he thought this must be some kind of festival complete with what looked like a large outside broadcasting set up. Perhaps to show the concert live on TV he thought.

Joe was contemplating calling his sons both of who were in their twenties and living in the city to see if either knew who might be the headlining act. When strangely as the construction seemingly neared its completion instead of a stage, a small section of the crew broke off and began to erect what looked like a two story rickety old house in the clearing which was quite clearly the centre of all this attention.

The only stage he could see was a low one some twenty feet wide and only a foot or so high which led up to the strange house's porch. Once this was

all completed a line of yellow and black warning tape was then placed around the house.

That night as a large security fence was put in place around the outline of the entire field, Joe watched as the lighting crew tested the massive lighting set up and four giant screens flickered into life. Mostly they showed shots taken by the various camera men dotted around the venue as they rehearsed, conducted by some unseen director, probably up in one of the stilted prefab buildings situated at the rear almost out of sight.

Yes Joe mused, whoever this band was it looked like they were going to put on one hell of a show.

Finally the largest screen flashed up two multi-coloured English words in a dizzying array of rapidly changing fonts.

Demon time the band was apparently called.

Joe Martinez had never heard of them.

TWENTY-TWO

Jeff Miller, demon time's director for the last two shows, sat in the middle row of the newly constructed main grandstand and watched as a dozen or more casual Spanish labourers milled around clearing away the construction trash that had built up over the last few days. They were just now finishing sweeping the small stage that would host Dex Dexter and the Demonettes.

He looked up at the brightening mid-morning sky and a smile played across his face as he contemplated the day's work.

Yes, demon time was the best and worst directing job he had ever had. He got to travel around Europe and who knows? Maybe beyond in the next few months as the show went from strength to strength. Take today, they were

setting up this travelling insane asylum in the small Spanish coastal town of Calella which was only a dozen miles or so from Barcelona.

The show was in two days, which gave him ample time to rehearse his set ups for the coming madness. The job was well paid (for the internet anyway) and Miller had almost total creative freedom to film the show as he saw fit.

Sure the producer Michael Davis could be a difficult prick at times and something of a control freak when it came to the production and logistical side of things. But once the location was chosen and the construction began, Miller was then allowed to take over and let his talent shine. After all he was the best damn live director working outside the mainstream and Davis knew it.

These were all ticks in the good job column, but then sitting down there in the shadow of the grandstand was the big red tick in the bad column. The house.

Even in the Spanish heat, Miller felt a chill as he looked down on the house. That two story child's nightmare of a structure just plain scared Miller. He had only set foot in it once, on his first day and had steadfastly refused to ever enter it again. Even when, like now, that twisted little fuck Minx wasn't even in residence.

They were just finishing up bolting the last section of the elaborate set into place. The rickety looking (though actually quite sturdy) front porch.

Even from where he was sitting, and in bright daylight he could feel his guts churning in fear. It was a childlike fear, like some half remembered trauma from his past. He knew damn well everyone felt the same. Just some more so than others even though no one would speak of it out loud. Even the hard core construction crew whose sole responsibility it was to build and tear down the monstrosity before and after every show felt it.

They were just better at hiding it than most Miller guessed.

Sure the building had been designed to resemble some kind of classic haunted house of horrors. The roof and walls just off kilter. Its façade weathered to look like it had stood at the gates of hell for a thousand blood drenched years.

Yes it was an impressive piece of set construction there was no doubting that. But it was something more than the mere look of the thing. It seemed, at least to Miller's over sensitive nerve endings, to almost radiate for want of a better word. Evil.

You could physically feel it, it was as if all the corruption and blind acidic hate that emanated from that pitiful creature when it was in residence, had somehow seeped into the very wood, glass and steel of the place.

That creature has contaminated it until it was more than just a set. It was a living, breathing charnel house. And it terrified him.

The walkie-talkie clipped to his belt spat out static snapping Miller out of his daze. He unclipped it.

"Boss?" It was Keeler, Miller's head gaffer, who along with his team were in the house setting up the lights and ten remote control mini cameras Miller had instructed them to place in key areas to best capture the mayhem when the action kicked off inside.

"Keeler, how's it going?"

The gaffer's voice was more static than words but he could just about make out what he was saying.

"Nearly ready for a camera test. You know you could always come on in and lend a hand?"

"Fuck that," Miller said under his breath. Then he brought the walkie-talkie back up to his mouth. "That's why they pay you the big bucks, Keeler."

The director stood and looked out over the nearly completed set up. A set of electricians were working on the two massive spotlights that would light the house come nightfall when they would do a whole technical run through with the cheerleaders and that clown Dexter.

But thankfully not the main star of the show. That thing wouldn't be put in place until the very last possible moment and only by Davis himself. A job he was welcome to as far as Miller was concerned.

“I’ll be in the production gantry thank you very much. Come see me there once you’ve finished. I want to see how that shithole looks from there.” Miller said into mouth piece.

“Will do,” Keeler replied and the walkie-talkie fell silent once more.

Miller clipped the walkie-talkie back onto his belt and began to make his way over to the exit stairs at the back of the grandstand. But even with the house out of sight he could feel its presence like rancid breath on the back of his neck.

TWENTY-THREE

In the house itself, John Keeler tucked the walkie-talkie into the side pocket of his baggy combat trousers and took the IPad out from under his arm and tapped the screen.

He was rewarded with a shot looking down on himself standing in the middle if the large downstairs room from one of the cameras mounted in the top right hand corner of the set.

He waved to himself and then selected another camera in the room which was low down by the door. He nodded with satisfaction that meant all the cameras in here were fine.

He was about to flick the IPad to standby when he caught a glimpse of what looked like an out of focus figure on the screen just over his left shoulder. He froze and let his hand holding the IPad drop as if not looking at the image and what it had captured behind him might somehow not make it so.

But he had seen something, hadn’t he? Perhaps it was a misplaced shadow on the wall or some stain he had not noticed before. He closed his eyes and held his breath and waited for whatever it was to make a sound, shift slightly anything to make its presence flesh.

“Fuck it,” Keeler spun around gripped with a sudden cold fear. But was confronted with nothing more than the blank back wall of the room. No twisted creature, no ghost. Nothing but a large patch of fake (at least he assumed it was fake) greenish black looking mildew.

“Christ,” Keeler cursed under his breath and gave a slight shake of the head. It wasn’t unusual to get spooked when you were working in the house. Everybody did at one time or another. But this just felt different somehow.

Keeler slowly approached the stain on the wall. And as he drew closer he could see it was almost pitch black with no hint of green as he had first thought. He tried to think back to the last time he was in the house. Just after the last show when they were stripping down the lights and cameras. Had the stain been there then? No he didn’t think so, but he reasoned it may have been added by the set dressers after the last show to add (as if needed!) a more sinister look to the room.

Something heavy shifted in the room above which made Keeler start. Followed by loud banging and muffled voices.

“Christ, get a grip!” he told himself. There were three, no four others upstairs he remembered working on the lights and cameras up there.

That was when he felt something lightly touch his back. He spun around, he was still alone, of course he was alone. Full blown panic was now threatening to overwhelm Keeler as he got an image of that twisted fuck Minx in his mind’s eyes, crawling around the walls in here, hiding in shadows. Maybe even watching him.

Again he told himself to keep it together, he was alone in here, but still the feeling grew. Minx wasn’t even in the country yet as far as Keeler knew. Davis would wait until only a couple of hours before the show before he wheeled it out. Keeler looked over to one of the boarded up windows and was relieved to see bright sunlight outside. But the feeling didn’t last long.

That creature had been in this very room, perhaps squatting right where he was now standing. Its residual sickening presence hung heavy in the air around him almost like a physical manifestation of evil and hate.

He had a horrible thought; just what exactly did anyone really know about that thing? About what real power it did or didn't have?

A cold paranoia gripped Keeler now and he looked around the room again. What if it didn't even need to be physically present to cause its mischief?

He glanced up at the camera in the top corner of the room and another horrible thought hit him, it was illogical, he knew, but still it felt all too real all of a sudden.

What if *this* was the show? What if that bastard Davis had changed the format from wannabe exorcists to hapless crew members?

Again banging and clattering from upstairs. He looked up at the ceiling. A dark stain was growing close to where the fake light fitting was fixed to the plaster board.

He tried to think rationally, someone had spilt something in the room above. Probably knocked over a can of touch up paint. Paint that was now dripping through the cracks in the plaster, dripping right at his feet.

Keeler looked down to where the drops of dark liquid had landed by his boots. He instinctively scuffed it with the toe of his boot and froze.

If it was paint, then it was red paint.

Someone, *something* was scurrying around upstairs in hurried faltering steps.

Welcome to demon time.

"Oh, Christ," Keeler uttered in horror.

It was in the house, right upstairs in the very room above him. Mister Minx was in the house.

"Oh, Christ, oh Christ!"

He frantically looked around for a weapon, anything but all he had was the useless IPad still clutched in his sweat soaked hands.

The door was close, then it was just a short sprint along the hallway and out into the warm summer air.

Keeler listened, more banging and shuffling upstairs but it now sounded to have gone through into another of the upstairs rooms. Perhaps onto the landing, perhaps waiting for him at the top of the stairs, ready to leap down on him when he was only feet from safety.

More blood, for surely that's what it was hit the bare boards at his feet.

That monster must have taken the others so quickly they didn't even have time to cry out. No time to scream, only time to bleed.

"No," he tried to clear his head, this was lunacy. He half knew it was all in his head, but the fog of fear clouded his better judgement.

Fear, deep and primal taking a hold of him. Squeezing out the last drop of rationality from his brain.

"Christ, Christ." Keeler willed his leaden feet to move towards the slightly ajar door which led out into the hallway.

He thought of Max and the others upstairs and got grotesque flashes of their gory ends. Slashed faces, eviscerated bodies.

He had to get out of here before he was next. He had to get out and get that mother fucker Davis, and Miller who was probably even now moving the remote camera in for a close up of his terror stricken face.

He looked at the camera by the door. "Fuck you," he said but not too loudly lest he drew the attention of that unholy creature upstairs.

Keeler shuffled over to the door as if wading through knee high water and as he reached it he gingerly peered out into the long hallway. The front door was thankfully open at the end but it seemed to him as if even the bright Spanish sunlight feared to shine over the threshold of this house of horrors.

He opened the door which fair screamed on its hinges, that was a deliberate gag his fear addled brain remembered dully. No need for lame sound

effects when you could rig the hinges to grate against one other like that every time the door moved even an inch. Keeler had always thought that had been a nice touch from the set construction team, until now. Now he hated it.

He edged out into the hallway and was a split second from running screaming towards the door when he heard something step onto the top of the stairs (creaky of course) and then take another two steps down.

Keeler froze as his already near catatonic brain over-loaded with fear. Minx was coming down the stairs now, slowly step by creaking step. Down to where Keeler was frozen to the spot.

He was vaguely aware that he was sobbing now and cursed himself for giving Davis and the show exactly what they wanted. Probably in a glorious close up.

Step by step closer and closer, Keeler couldn't help but look towards the bottom of the rickety stairs were Minx would appear at any moment. That twisted hateful thing was going to kill him live on the internet.

"God, help me," he sobbed and remembered to his shame just how unmoved he had been watching those very same words uttered by what was it? Four priests now? He seemed to remember scoffing at them for clinging to their pathetic faith even as Minx drove them from the house in disgrace.

But still, as the snot and tears ran down his face, he uttered them again just the same as a twisted shadow reached the bottom of the stairs.

Max Cramer, Keeler's assistant appeared at the bottom of the stairs and staggered into the hallway. He was covered in blood and his face was battered and bruised. Cramer looked genuinely surprised to see Keeler standing there.

He stood for a full ten seconds staring at Keeler with a dazed look on his face before his blank expression finally melted into one of recognition. He smiled and Keeler could see that half his teeth had been knocked out.

"Max," Keeler said.

Cramer nodded and moved falteringly over to where Keeler was still rooted to the spot.

“Max,” Keeler uttered again. “We’ve got to get out of here.”

Cramer stopped just in front of him. “Hello boss,” he lisped through broken teeth.

“We’ve...”

“Hell of a day,” Cramer interrupted and raised his right arm.

John Keeler hadn’t noticed the bloody claw hammer in his colleagues hand until he brought it down hard onto his forehead. Then there was nothing. He was dead after the third blow, but still Max Cramer continued to pound his skull to a bloody pulp counting each hit as he did so. He lost count at twenty.

TWENTY-FOUR

“Say, isn’t that Max Cramer?”

Jeff Miller was sat at his desk in the stilted prefabricated production hub, deep in concentration going through his camera set up notes for the forthcoming show. So he was only vaguely aware Carol one of the production assistants had spoken.

“Huh?” He grunted not looking up.

“What the fuck? Is that going to be part of the show?” She said.

There was an edge of fear in the woman’s voice that made Miller look up from his notes. She was standing in front of the main monitor which dominated the office.

“Is what going to be part of the what now?” He said.

Carol turned away from the monitor to look at him. Miller was surprised to see she had gone ashen. All she could do was gesture mutely to the screen.

Miller got to his feet and moved over to stand next to her. He followed the gesture to the screen, and his breath caught in his throat.

On the screen was a long shot of the house and a figure standing on the front porch. Miller leaned closer to get a better look and then expertly took control of the camera's remote control system which was on a bank of switches and controls on the desk in front of him.

He tapped the zoom and the shot closed in on the house and to the figure which now stepped down off the porch and onto the low stage.

As the camera closed in he heard Carol let out a strangled sob. The noise made the hair stand up on the back of his neck and was the perfect soundtrack to what he was seeing.

Max Cramer had stopped and was now just standing there. He looked like someone had tipped a bucket of blood over his head he was so drenched in the stuff.

He had a bloody claw hammer grasped in his right hand which hung limply by his side.

"Christ's teeth," Miller uttered. "What the hell happened in there?"

Carol cried out behind him and started to fumble in her skirt pocket for her phone. "I'm calling an ambulance."

"No!" Miller warned. "Call Davis first." That was the standard response to anything weird that happened around demon time's sometimes troubled (cursed maybe?) production.

"Sure, sure," Carol replied and hurriedly scrolled through her phone book.

Miller was transfixed by Cramer's blank expression, then he had a horrible thought. Weren't there others in the house? Including Keeler?

"Shit," hands working with a practiced efficiency and without taking his eyes off the screen, Miller moved the mouse and clicked on one of the house camera icons.

The picture flicked to the main downstairs room. Empty. He clicked onto the hall camera and cried out in shock.

A body was hung, no not hung... He tapped the camera's control letting it slowly zoom in for a better shot. *Crucified* to the closed door of the downstairs room. The victims head was little more than a bloody pulp but Miller recognised John Keeler's trademark lumper jack shirt.

Someone screamed behind him. But he just couldn't take his eyes of the screen. Again without really realizing he was doing it, Miller flicked between the other cameras in the house.

Stairs, empty. Landing, empty but with a splash of what could have been blood on one wall. Back room, bingo. One of the other crew members, Perkins was it? Again the body had been crucified this time to a wall, his head bashed in beyond all recognition.

"Christ Jeff, that's enough!" Someone shouted, but the voyeur in him just couldn't stop.

Next room, same nightmare. This time the victim was a woman, not that you would have known it from the destroyed face. But Miller knew Bev Rice had been wearing a micky mouse t-shirt today because he remembered ogling her breasts through the tight material earlier. Again she was nailed to a wall arms stretched horizontally from her body.

"Jesus!" It was Carol again, she sounded close to hysteria. "Please God tell me this is just part of the show!" Another voice, way off, comforting her as best it could.

'*Please God tell me this is just part of the show*.' And secretly Jeff Miller wished that it was.

That was it wasn't it? Miller tried to remember if there was anyone else in the house. Just in case he gave another click of the mouse. Final room, final victim. Hung on six inch nails through the palms. No head to speak of, a bloody mess. Miller realized he had no idea of the guy's name. He was new and Miller didn't remember ever actually speaking to the man.

A large figure appeared at his side. “Turn this off, Miller.” Thick Russian accent, all authority and threat. Nico Gorodetsky, Davis’ head of security. The Russian put his hand over Miller’s on the mouse. “I said, turn this off.”

Miller let him pull his hand away but kept looking at the grainy snuff film image on the monitor.

“And you had better not have been recording this,” Nico added.

No he hadn’t, but oh how he wished he had.

TWENTY-FIVE

When the call had come to inform him of the events at the house, Michael Davis had been in a Barcelona hotel room approving the latest ‘Mister Minx’ T-shirts that they would be selling at the show.

He had been so engrossed in the new designs and the growing potential of the merchandising catalogue that he had forgotten for a moment that Minx was an all too real entity and not just a very marketable special effect.

Now he was reminded of exactly what the creature was.

Davis plunged his hands into his trouser pockets and stared at the house. It was just after 2pm but even out in an open field like this with the sun beating down on him. Davis wished he hadn’t left his jacket in the car. That monstrosity in front of him seemed to rob all the heat, and hope for that matter, from its surroundings.

Nico Gorodetsky was standing next to him. Davis wasn't a short man but the big Russian was a good head taller than him. Gorodetsky and his team had taken control of the whole debacle with an almost frightening efficiency.

The bodies had been 'disposed of' and Max Cramer was already on his way to a Portuguese hospital that the Russian knew would ask no questions about their new arrival for the right price.

Any witnesses on the crew had been briefed and Davis had been surprised that none of them had actually quit over the incident. He guessed everyone surrounding this circus of horrors was becoming more and more desensitised to the bizarre and supernatural.

It would have been easy to believe by the time Davis had arrived that the whole event almost hadn't happened at all. And if he hadn't spoken to an alarmingly calm Jeff Miller about what he had witnessed, he might well have half believed the party line they were all now spouting that Max, Keeler and the others had simply quit. After all new crew members popped up and disappeared often here at demon time.

"You should burn that fucking house, Boss." Nico said. "Preferably with that thing inside."

Davis nodded. "I know, I know." He replied with a weary resignation. Common sense always had that ring of truth about it, whether you liked it or not.

He could almost feel the Russian's eyes on him. "But you won't," Nico said. It wasn't a question or a hope. It was what it was. A fact.

"Greed is a powerful sin, Nico." He said and craned his neck up to look at him with a faint smile.

The Russian had already turned back to the house, always vigilant around it and its sometime occupant. "And also a fatal one," he said.

The whole thing had a sickening inevitability about it. A dawning sense of some upcoming self-fulfilling prophecy. Had Minx actually failed in its mission to kill Davis? Or had it simply drawn out the process?

Davis dismissed the notion, or at least pushed it to the back of his mind, where he kept the events of that night he first crossed paths with the monster and that shadowy Kraut.

"Did Cramer say anything, afterwards? Say why he did it?"

"He said the creature was in the walls and had possessed the others, so it could fool the charms and get out into the world. Crucifixion was the only way to stop it."

"Christ."

"Exactly." Nico said without a trace of sarcasm.

"Where's the little fuck now?" Davis asked.

"He's safe, still under lock and key in the box. We have him in a lock up just a couple of miles from here."

Safe? It from us or us from it? Davis pondered grimly.

"And the guards didn't report anything..." Anything what? Christ get a grip Davis told himself but still he kept rambling. "It didn't, I don't know, do anything? Whilst all this was going on?"

"The monster is asleep, miles away. It didn't *do* anything." The Russian told him.

"Course not," Davis said more in hope than conviction. Because the alternative made his bladder twitch.

"Sir, if I may make a suggestion?" Gorodetsky asked in that polite Russian way of his.

"Of course, Nico."

"Make this the last show. Let me burn the house and dispose of the creature."

"Then you'd be out of a job," Davis told him.

"This job I can do without, boss."

"You could quit?"

“You know I won’t do that. I agreed to keep you safe whilst you were on this strange journey of yours. And I will, so will my boys.”

Davis turned to Gorodetsky who finally looked down at him. He had heard the Russian and his team were ex Spetsnaz, part of the old soviet special forces. Regardless they were hard as fucking nails. Nico was in his late fifties so was old enough.

Davis had hired him because he was a fucking tank and a very well respected private security contractor. He had expected a mercenary but what he hadn’t expected was the absolute loyalty that came with the appointment. When this guy signed on, he really signed on.

“Thank you, Nico.” Davis said with genuine emotion and wondered if this guy was his only true friend in the world.

TWENTY-SIX

“Can I get you anything else, Father?”

The young priest didn’t answer so the production assistant stepped out of the hotel room and onto the large balcony where he was sitting at a table reading from his bible. Well the bible that had been provided for him by the production.

Susan Rodriguez stopped and had to shield her eyes against the bright mid-morning sunlight which was in stark contrast to the cool air-conditioned gloom of the hotel suite. She nearly staggered straight back in again as the wall of heat hit her a second later.

She was about to speak again but had a sudden feeling she was intruding on the priest who seemed deep in thought or perhaps prayer. Out of his sombre clerical clothing and dressed casually in a linen shirt and canvas trousers one could have easily mistaken him for a tourist.

Rodrigues had been working for Michael Davis productions for almost five months now and the up and coming show would be her second. It had been her job to chaperone Father Winthorpe in the days leading up to the previous event as she now did for this Father Ross.

But as with the other priest she would steadfastly refused to go anywhere near that unholy sideshow itself. Her job as 'talent' liaison ended the moment she put the priest into the car and he was driven off to where the show was being held.

She knew it was somewhat hypocritical but keeping her distance from the show itself helped her feel less culpable in what happened afterwards. She wouldn't even watch the thing on the computer and didn't want to know any of the probably gory details when they all met up for the after show party later.

Whereas Winthorpe had been a sober serious type from the outset, always praying and fumbling with his rosary (again supplied by Michael Davis Productions.) Ross, who was perhaps ten years younger, seemed quite good-humoured and polite. But of course as the time drew closer to the air date he was beginning to take on the air of a condemned man awaiting his call to the electric chair. And she couldn't blame him.

"I'm sorry, did you say something?"

Rodrigues realised she had been daydreaming and wondered just how long she had been standing there. "Oh, sorry Father," she said a little flustered. "I was just asking if you needed anything else?"

My head examining? Ross thought grimly but simply shook his head and thanked the woman for her enquiry.

"Just call reception if you need anything later," she told him.

"Will do."

Then she was gone Ross put the bible on the table in front of him and took in the view. The hotel was situated at the edge of a large luscious park. He didn't have much experience with jet setting (well until lately that was) but it wasn't hard to imagine this place was five stars all the way, situated as it was in the centre of Barcelona.

Feeling like he was once again caught up in a whirlwind, Ross had barely been back in England a week when the call had come to whisk him away to, at the time, God only knew where.

All he had been told was to only pack a small case as the production would provide him with everything he would need, including a crucifix, bible and even the clerical clothing he was to wear.

The whole thing had put Ross in mind of an actor being taken off to some exotic location. Which he supposed in a way he was, but a player in a movie for which the ending and his character's fate had yet to be written.

When he had been collected from his home by the middle aged woman who had barely left his side since, Susan she had almost reluctantly told him her name was. Ross had actually been frisked by the monosyllabic driver and security guard who no doubt was standing guard outside the hotel room at this very moment just in case Ross got the urge to go out unaccompanied into the Spanish sunshine.

It had all happened so fast, Ross only had enough time to call Mendez and tell him he was off but couldn't tell him his destination, and of course the old priest had tried once again, as he had upon Ross' returned from Mexico, to talk him out of this madness.

"Shane, please you don't have to do this," Mendez had pleaded.

"I have to try," Ross told him. When Ross had gone to Mexico, it had been hoped that Hauser would be able to provide him with something, anything to arm the priest against his upcoming meeting with the creature 'Mister Minx'. In truth at the time Ross hadn't believed such things were truly real.

But the conviction in that small Mexican village, particularly amongst the children and then of course the creature in the box Hauser had shown him. Had left Ross in no doubt of the reality that now faced him, in sunny Barcelona of all places.

"I have to try stop this thing, Father." Ross said although he had no idea how, and he could almost hear Mendez shake his head in resignation on the other end of the phone. Then it had occurred to Ross that he hadn't even seen

the priest from the Vatican in the flesh. He had an image of a silver haired dark skinned Spaniard with skin like crumpled leather. But in truth Mendez might not even had been much older than he was, for all he knew.

"And Hauser didn't give you anything? Any indication how to defend yourself against it?" Mendez asked more in hope than expectation judging by the tone of his voice.

Nothing, Ross reminded himself. Only the absolute conviction that he had to try. Something, anything, the image of that poor child's grave seemed to be burnt into Ross' retina. "Miguel Torres; May 2004 to September 2013" Ross whispered without realising it.

"Who?" Mendez asked.

"I have to try, for Miguel Torres," he said firmer this time. He thought back to that desiccated thing in the box on that charred altar half a world away now. So far in miles but never far from his mind's eye. He had to at least try for that poor nine year old boy and for what had once been his priest both corrupted and murdered in the most horrible of ways.

And of course for that small Mexican village scarred for generations to come. And for what was almost worse than all of that. Because as far as anyone knew, it was all for no reason at all. What had Hauser said? They cause pain for pain's sake or something similar. Whomever *they* were. Perhaps an encounter with the creature might shed some much needed illumination on the meaning of all this pain and suffering.

And now Michael Davis comes along to profiting from his own would be assassin, that creature Mister Minx which was a kin to the monster that had killed Miguel Torres. The priest couldn't believe it, but he mused that might actually be the worst of all of it all.

Yes Shane Ross knew he had to try, even if it was only to make even a little sense of it all. Of child killing creatures in the shape of priests and internet sensations skulking in the shadows, praying on those fallen priests foolish enough to face its corruption in the hope of some kind of redemption. Foolish priests just like Father Ross himself.

TWENTY-SEVEN

"*I can make nightmares flesh*," Mister Minx had once told Michael Davis. "*Or, I can simply use these*." The creature had grinned and tapped its claws on the door frame of the house and Davis had sworn he had seen a glint of mischief in its soulless eyes when he had involuntarily flinched at the noise as much as the action. Despite the fact the thing was safely trapped behind the charms nailed to the doors and windows.

That had been just after the first show when the thing still had the slight pretence of power to it. It was a shadow now of that maleficent bastard, not that the public at large could possibly tell. To them it still was and perhaps always would be, the fearsome Mister Minx.

It was shortly after this that Davis had come up with the idea of researching into the past of the priests before letting them enter the house. He had no doubt Minx could dream up no end of horrors to torture these holy men on its own but still, knowing the fallen priest's own personal little peccadillos never failed to surprise and alarm both the contestant and the growing audience alike.

When he had first suggested it to the creature, Minx had simply shrugged and said; "*Why waste your time? You want horrors? You want me to torture the Christ lovers? That is the easy part. All I have to do is imagine the collar wearing cocksucker is you. That is motivation enough for me to cause them mischief.*"

Then it had actually winked at Davis and that was without doubt the one image of the creature he would take to his grave. Not its first appearance that horrible night months ago now. Nor when it loomed over him ready to visit it's terrors upon him. That slight tilt of the head almost human in its execution then that wink. Shudder.

Despite the demon's taunt Davis had taken to compiling a short dossier on the next priest, then leaving it on top of the box holding Minx when it was placed into the house just before the show. Of all the surreal sights associated

with the creature, seeing it sitting on the box reading the papers like a diligent student preparing for his final exam was perhaps one of the greatest.

Davis almost felt sorry for Father Ross as he tossed the three page document onto Minx's box. Ross had been a drug addict before his rebirth and as such Davis could only imaging what horrors the little shit would conjure up for him later that night.

The producer shook his head ruefully. He was going to hell and when he finally got there he wondered if Mister Minx would be waiting there to finally fulfil its raison d'etat.

He thought back to when he had first told the creature what he was going to do with it now that it had failed its mission and it was under his control, well perhaps never under his control but it was Davis' prisoner nevertheless.

Minx had gone ballistic and had begged and screamed for Davis to let it die. It was humiliation enough that it had failed its one and only reason for existence without being paraded in front of a public it was so eager to avoid.

Davis glanced up at the ceiling, there was still a stain from where the blood had seeped through the plaster from the other night's mayhem. Davis started and took a couple of staggering steps back as the creature shifted slightly in the box.

He had recited the incantation to stir the demon some ten minutes previous so it would be fully wake in perhaps another half hour. He tried to regain his dignity and was damn glad the thing couldn't see him from inside that coffin.

He let out a soothing breath and lifted the walkie-talkie he was holding up to his lips. "Nico, what's the status on the audience?"

After a moment the Russian's voice came through loud and clear. "Inbound, boss. Should he here in about an hour."

Gorodetsky was in the first of eight coaches that had picked up the nearly five hundred strong crowd from the pre-arranged meeting place just outside of Barcelona.

“Good. Let’s get everyone set. We start the show half an hour after everyone is in their seats.” Davis told him.

“Roger that boss,” Gorodetsky replied and the walkie-talkie fell silent once more.

Davis backed out of the room superstitiously keeping his eyes on the box and only finally turned his back on it when he had passed the charms placed on the front door frame which kept Minx trapped inside.

And as he made his way passed the still empty main grandstand and towards the small production village that was tucked away from the public area, he did what he always did just before a show. He lied to himself. “Last show, this has got to be the last fucking show.”

TWENTY-EIGHT

One thing was for sure, whatever happened tonight. Win lose or draw. This would be Father Shane Ross’ first and final show. The young priest sat in his trailer which was situated at the centre of the production village set off way in the back of the field which was home to the show.

He was transfixed by a large framed photograph which hung on the opposite wall by the door. It was a classic grainy bigfoot style photograph, just out of focus, a shadowy figure to the far left of frame as if caught at the last moment as the taker swung their lens back at a hint of movement in their peripheral vision.

But the image which fair radiated malice to Ross’ over sensitive state wasn’t of the famed yet elusive sasquatch. This was no creature of legend, at least not to those like Ross who had seen its kind in the flesh before. No this thing was all too real and all too close. Mister Minx, the demon in demon time.

It was a publicity shot of the monster which like most of the shots in the show itself could just about be explained away as an illusion, little more than a blur of movement captured by the photographer mid-action, and most likely in the very house he would soon be walking into live on the internet and in front of God only knew how many adoring fans. And armed with what, faith? A second hand bible and crucifix provided by the show.

Ross had caught a glimpse of the house as he was driven across the field and over to his own personal plush trailer. The star of the show. Well perhaps co-star, Minx was the real star here.

Just seeing the house through the back tinted window of the limo they had laid on for him had been enough to chill the blood in his veins.

His constant companion, the normally stoic security guard and driver had seen him crane his neck as they passed and had asked him for the third time since they had set off from the hotel if he was sure he still wanted to go through with this.

No he wasn't, but he would do just the same.

Ross had tried to place the man's accent. Eastern European he thought but couldn't decide if it was Russian or somewhere a little further west.

The man's demeanour had changed so dramatically since this morning that Ross had guessed what was coming, even before his other constant companion Susan Rodriguez had come in the hotel suite to tell him the news that tonight was indeed going to be the night of the show.

The woman had fussed around Ross making sure he had everything he needed. She went through how the day and evening would pan out. His vestments, bible and crucifix would be waiting for him in the trailer they had hired for him, which was as they spoke being driven to the show's secret location.

She had assured him it was a top of the range model favoured by pop and movie stars alike and that his every need would be catered for in the lead up to the show.

She had barely left him alone until it had finally been time to go. Then she had disappeared a moment before the driver entered his suite with the look of a prison officer about to escort a condemned man to the gallows.

Ross stood and walked over to the trailer's large window and hitched the curtain aside to peer outside. He started in shock. It had been bright sunshine when he had arrived but now dusk had well and truly taken a hold of the Spanish sky.

The area outside was lit with several lights hanging from overhead cables which stretched like a spider's web from poles spaced out around the area's perimeter.

He could see a large white brightly lit canvas marquee at the other end. The front was tied back so he could see inside.

It seemed to be the production's make up and costume tent. He could see several people milling around carrying costumes and cases. Four long trestle tables dominated the tent at which were seated a group of woman all scantily clad in their underwear whilst people buzzed around them, applying zombie make-up prodding and teasing their spiky hair.

Two women wheeled a large clothes rail in to the tent followed by a young man with a clip board and wearing a headset. The two women began handing out the tatty looking costumes whilst the young male production assistant tried desperately to concentrate on whatever he was supposed to be saying to them surrounded as he was by barely dressed females. So these were the famous demonettes Ross mused.

As he watched, four of them got to their feet and began going through what he imagined was their routine for the show. Two others, still dressed in their underwear, grabbed black pom-poms off a table and joined in.

Another older woman dressed in jeans and a loose man's shirt took a piece of paper from the production assistant and shooed him away. She then began clapping out a beat which they danced to, he couldn't hear her but it was clear she was the choreographer barking out instructions to the dancers.

Under any other circumstance it would have been a wonderfully erotic scene, even for a catholic priest. (After all he wasn't dead yet.) But instead, or indeed despite this, the sense of foreboding he had been feeling since arriving gave way to one of melancholy as he watched.

He was wondering if any of them knew all of this was actually real, when an old fashioned hearse drawn by two jet black horses moved slowly passed his window. Ross let out a short sharp laugh. And he wasn't sure what was the more surreal. The fact that a horse drawn hearse had passed by or that it didn't seem out of place at all.

TWENTY-NINE

"It's perfect, it's just fucking perfect," Dex Dexter gushed as he circled around the horse drawn hearse that had come to a stop outside the show's large hospitality tent.

Michael Davis took a sip from his chilled champagne and watched as the host ran an exquisitely manicured hand over the black lacquered wood of the carriage. He was flanked as ever by his personal make up girl Sandy who kept trying to touch up his face as he walked. The host looked comically camp as he moved, he still had a wad of tissues tucked into his collar to keep his suit make up free.

"I knew you'd like it," Davis said.

"What are the chances of me keeping it after the show? Can you imagine riding around in this thing all day?" Dexter asked.

"Less than zero," Davis replied. "It costs a fortune just to rent. It goes straight back after the show."

The horses began to shy slightly as Dexter reached them, unnerved Davis mused by the host's bright sparkly silver jacket. And their owner who doubled

as the coachman had to brace himself against one to steady the beasts. “Hey, steady now girl,” he whispered.

“Magnificent creatures,” Dexter said and gently patted one on the flank.

“Sure are,” Davis agreed. He allowed himself a moment of satisfaction. Hiring the hearse had been an idea he had been toying with for some time now. Dexter would be driven into the arena in the hearse then emerge from the back. Not cheap but the effect of his reveal would be worth the two grand euro price tag.

Once they were back inside the hospitality tent, Dexter went back to his schmoozing. He slumped himself down onto one of the large sofas that were dotted around the place and he took yet another glass of champagne from the tray of a passing waiter.

Davis himself hated this part of the show. Meeting and greeting all the V.I.P guests who paid upwards of a grand to gain access to the back stage area and a chance to meet the host and see how everything was put together behind the scenes.

And inevitably there would be those, usually the more wealthy and bored amongst them, who would seek Davis out and pull him to one side conspiratorially to request an audience with the real star of the show. And as always Davis would politely decline even when the wallets came out and the wads of cash were waved under his nose.

He always refused not only to maintain the mystique surrounding Minx’s existence, but more importantly for fear of what the creature would do to them if it got close enough. (Maybe he should film that!)

Davis checked his watch, show time was now only thirty minutes away. As was usual at this time he got an acidic ache in his stomach. Would tonight be the night the priest actually won, and all this would be over? Or worse still, would this finally be the night Mister Minx somehow got free and could finally complete the mission that had no doubt been festering in the thing’s addled brain ever since it’s capture? Kill Michael Davis in the most horrible of ways.

He took in the tent, more to take his mind of that doomsday scenario than anything else. This corporate hospitality side of things had really come into its own in the last couple of shows. Some thirty people, all paying customers were enjoying the complementary food and drinks before they took their places in the more expensive seats out front.

And there was Dex Dexter, holding court, surrounded now by half a dozen admirers. Looking at him now it was hard to believe just how destitute the entertainer had looked when Davis plucked him out of obscurity to front the show.

The first time Davis had seen Dexter in the flesh he looked to the producer like the personification of the phrase 'crawl into a bottle'.

The sometime entertainer, comedian and gameshow host, depending on what the occasion demanded. Had been washed up and barely employable after his ill-fated (though obscenely popular in its homeland) stint hosting the Japanese game show 'Kamikaze Krazies.'

Although Davis hadn't seen the show itself it had become increasingly notorious for the near deaths of several of its contestants. It was apparently a cross between gladiators and live action dungeons and dragons. Where the contestants would have to negotiate a labyrinth of traps and obstacles in order for the final two to then fight for the prize of fifty grand U.S.

As Davis understood it, the more the show grew in popularity the more dangerous the public demanded it to be. Health and safety rules were bent to breaking point, injuries grew (as did the ratings.) Until finally two contestants in the last five shows were killed, live on camera.

And through it all Dex Dexter's smiling face could be seen hosting the show, thrusting his mic into the bleeding faces of the fallen. It had later emerged that allegedly the producers had deliberately steered the show towards being little more than a glorified snuff movie.

Police had been called, arrests made and Dex Dexter had fled the county in disgrace barely escaping with his liberty and life intact. That was when Davis had come across the host in a seedy Soho night club. Davis had heard Dexter was fronting an X-rated comedy revue so had gone to see for himself.

Whilst the quality of performers on show left much to the imagination the booze addled Dex Dexter still had a certain sleazy charm about him, charm that the producer knew would be perfect for demon time. Once the drunk was cleaned up and sent away to de-tox for a week or two of course.

A bell over the tannoy signalling the ten minute warning before the show was to start, pulled Davis back to the here and now. He watched as the tent slowly began to empty and the V.I.P's were shepherded away to their overpriced seats.

A production assistant he didn't recognise came up to him carrying an iPad clutched to his chest. "Erm, Mister Davis?" He asked timidly. "Show's about to start, sir. The director wanted to know if you'll be watching from the control room as normal?"

"I will," Davis told him. "Tell him he can start the preshow whenever he likes, I'll be up in a moment."

"Yes sir," the assistant said and darted away.

Davis followed the boy out into the balmy night air as the behind the scenes hustle and bustle played out around him. He glanced over to the large trailer the priest was in and contemplated going over there for a moment but then put the idea out of his head. After all, what could he say?

So instead he began to make his way over to the stilted prefabricated production office which held the main control centre from which the show would be directed.

He passed the hearse which was getting a final polish before its grand entrance and as he did so the first cords of the demon time theme tune blasted out through the PA system some way off. A massive roar from the assembled crowed made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on edge.

"Magic time," Dex Dexter said as he appeared from around the other side of the hearse. He ran a comb through his thick dyed black hair and put it into his jacket inside pocket.

"Knock 'em dead, Dex," Davis said.

“Always,” the host replied flashing his bright teeth. “Say, Mike,” (Christ how Davis hated that.) “I was thinking, maybe I’d go onto the porch tonight during my opening speech...”

“No!” Davis snapped back a little too fearfully. He took a breath. “Stay away from the house, Dex. You know the rules.”

“Oh, c’mon, just onto the porch, the crowd’ll love it. Whip em up into a frenzy.”

“I said no!” Davis said with finality.

Dexter shrugged. “Okay, you’re the boss.”

“I mean it Dexter. Stay on your mark. Do that thing you do, but stay away from the house.”

“Your concern is very touching,” Dexter told him.

Davis was about to reiterate his point when an assistant director came jogging over. “Places please, can’t you hear the music?” He threw a thumb at the hearse and addressed the coachman who was now in a crisp black undertaker’s suit complete with black top hat. “Get this creepy thing over to its mark. Mister Dexter you’re on in five. We’re already live!”

“Well I’ll see you later, Mike. It’s show time!”

Dexter gave a theatrical flick of his hand and followed along by the side of the hearse as the coachman led the horses over to the edge of the arena.

The crowd let out another raw of approval as no doubt the demonettes were starting their opening routine.

“My life,” Davis said with a shake of the head and began to make his way over to the production office to watch the show unfold.

And thus began the final ever episode of demon time.

THIRTY

The tension was so palpable it bordered on the oppressive. It was like a physical presence weighing heavy in the air, five hundred breaths caught in five hundred throats as they waited. Waited for the show to start proper.

They had seen the spectacle of the opening number unfold before their eyes. Yes it had made the whole experience feel finally real as it played out with choreographed perfection before them, but that was not why they were here.

They were here for the supernatural. They were here to feel the blood freeze in their veins. In short they were here to feel something beyond their reality.

Darkness descended on the arena. As the last of the dry ice that had heralded the demonettes opening number drifted towards the night sky like a half remembered memory.

Back in the control room, Michael Davis watched like a general on the cusp of an epic battle as the players took their places unseen by camera and audience alike. He turned to the director who was silhouetted against the large central monitor that dominated the production office. Waiting for that one syllable that would start the show. That one word that would seal someone's fate tonight. Who knew? Maybe his own.

Jeff Miller leant forwards ever so slightly, studying the image before him. He glanced to the other monitors which depicted the behind the scenes manipulations. Until finally he seemed satisfied everything was in place.

"Action."

The whispered word was ether and a hammer blow all at once.

Down below the large window of the production office where Davis was stood. The dark shape of the horse drawn hearse began to move out of the darkness and into the subdued light of the arena.

Although Davis hadn't asked for it, the sound supervisor had decided to place a mic under the hearse so it picked up very single hoof fall to great effect. And against his better judgement (which would no doubt change once the show was over) Michael Davis decided then and there to give the guy a raise as the effect was so spectacular.

The arrival of the hearse was greeted by hushed whispers of anticipation from the crowd rather than a roar. They could have cheered as it emerged but instead they were caught up in the whole drama of the scene. They seemed content, on mass to let it play out to its theatrical conclusion.

Although it broke the undeniable tension of the scene, Davis couldn't help but look to the monitor which showed the live feed the internet was seeing. He felt a pang of regret which he didn't like. It was a great shot, the hearse silhouetted against the subtle glow of the ambient lighting as it made its way to the centre of the arena. It was good, but it did little to relay the sheer tension of what those here were feeling live.

But still when the screen cut to a panning shot of the crowd Davis was pleased to see several dozen of them were wearing official demon time and Mister Minx t-shirts they had purchased before entering for twenty-five euros a pop. He made a mental note to check after the show to see how many they had sold and how many had been pre-ordered online.

Finally the hearse drew to a stop. And for a moment Davis wished he was just some ignorant observer in the crowd. But he was cursed to hear the all too necessary behind the scenes directions whispered around him.

"Christ this is fucking gold," someone said to his right, in a hushed almost reverential tone.

Miller, the director rested his right hand against the speaker of his headphones. "Ready when you are, Dex," he whispered as if fearful he might be heard by the crowd. Then; "Jay, make sure you're tight on the back of the hearse when he pops out. Clara, get ready with the floodlights when he does. I want maximum shock and awe. This is the big reveal."

A beat passed. Dexter ever the showman was keeping them all waiting. Davis hated the bastard but his talent for holding a crowd was undeniable. The

monitor running the live feed cut to a panning shot of the crowd again. Pale faces in the near darkness, bums teetering on the edge of their seats.

Boom! The back of the hearse burst open and Dex Dexter sprung out through the doors with theatrical ease.

"Hit it!" Miller instructed and the powerful floodlights came on bathing the hearse and its occupant with a blinding light. Dexter's heavy metal theme tune began to blare out of the PA system in perfect synchronisation.

The crowd when wild.

As Miller directed the cameras, Davis drew his attention back out of the large observation window to watch it all live. He felt Goosebumps breakout as Dexter began to work the crowd into a near frenzy.

In all the lunacy it looked for a moment like the coachman might lose control of the two horses as they reared up at the commotion around them, but it just added to the drama of the scene.

Finally as they bucked and whinnied he just about manged to rein them in and with great skill eased the hearse away and back over to the back stage area and sanity.

Dexter slowly raised his hands up into the air and milked the adulation that was now bordering on the hysterical.

"Fuck me!" Someone snapped in the booth and Davis saw it was the sound mixer who was frantically pushing faders and adjusting the mixing desk levels. "Christ that's loud!"

It's music to my ears, Davis thought. As the showman down below slowly let his hands fall in a 'quiet' gesture to the crowd and the five hundred strong zealots willingly complied.

The camera moved in to a close up of Dex Dexter's face and it picked up the slightest hint of a smile.

"Welcome," he whispered. Then shouted; "TO DEMON TIME!!"

Again the roar from the crowd fair rattled the Perspex of the viewing window as the lights pulsed brightly. Several of the production staff inside

whooped and hollered along with everyone outside. And without realising it, Davis found himself clapping as Dexter began to strut up and down the low stage. He was in complete control of the masses like some gaudy otherworldly cult leader. If he said riot, there was no doubt in anyone's mind here tonight that they would riot and be glad of it.

Father Ross came out of his trailer and into the balmy night air as another roar went up. He could just about see the glow of the arena over the line of thick treetops that shielded the behind the scenes production village from the open field and the show itself.

He found he was clutching the borrowed bible to his chest as if for protection. Then he realised that was actually what the book was. His only means of defence and possibly attack at his disposal. That and his wits and what limited knowledge he had brought back with him from Mexico.

"Okay Father?"

Ross turned to his large eastern European bodyguard who was waiting by the trailer's steps with a skittish looking production assistant.

Ross nodded, it was a lie and the man clearly saw it as such.

"Last chance," he said.

"Hey! None of that!" The production assistant snapped. "We have a show to run here, Rubin." The young man's face dropped as he realised just who he was talking to. "I erm, What I meant to say..." He fumbled.

Rubin silenced him with a look. He turned back to Ross waiting for him to speak.

"It's my choice," was all the priest could say in way of explanation.

"Erm, this way Father," the assistant said meekly and gestured over to the other side of the back stage area where four of the zombie cheerleaders were waiting by a gap in the vehicles.

Ross followed a couple of paces behind the assistant as he made his way over to them. He glanced back to see that Rubin was still standing by the

trailer, clearly having no intention of joining them. The two men locked eyes for a moment and Ross was shocked to see fear in the large man's gaze. Rubin nodded slightly and looked away.

The production assistant turned to Ross as they reached the strange looking quartet waiting on their mark for their cue.

"Please wait here, Father. I'll let you know when it's time. The girls here will lead you out into the arena. All you have to do is let them guide you over towards Dexter and the house. Then..." The young man paused, it was as if it just hit him what all this actually meant. That this wasn't just some normal stage production where he was leading an extra to his mark.

"Then, I'm on my own," Ross finished for him which raised such a blush to the man's cheeks that Ross could see it even in the gloom of the back stage area.

"Hi Father," one of the pale faced zombie cheerleaders said in a light friendly voice. It was hard to tell under all the grease paint and fake blood but she looked to Ross like she was barely out of her teens.

"You're American," Ross said with surprise. Although he could hardly believe that was going to be the most surprising thing that would happen tonight.

"Canadian," the girl replied with the practiced boredom of someone who clearly spends most of her time correcting ignorant foreigners regarding her accent.

"Sorry," Ross found himself saying.

She girl waved a dismissive hand. "That's okay," she broke ranks and slipped her arm through his. "Just stay with be Father. I'll get you there."

With this she led Ross over to the others. Each gave him a smile in turn and for a moment, being so close to the artifice of the show, the priest almost found himself half believing it was all fake.

Suddenly the four of them started clapping and Ross looked up to see the horse drawn hearse coming towards them. They split into two groups to let the

horses walk past. The coachman doffed his black top hat to the ladies and gently drove the horses off down the field.

"Guess he'll be coming back for me later?" Ross said.

This won a ripple of nervous laughter from his undead companions and a wince from the production assistant.

Another whoop of delight from the crowd and Ross looked over between the trucks. From where they were waiting he had a perfect view of the low stage where Dex Dexter was strutting around as he talked to the crowd perched high up in the stands around him. And boy it was clear even from here that the host was loving it.

THIRTY-ONE

"Friends," Dexter said and held both arms out to silence the crowd which he held well and truly in both hands. "It's almost time..." He seemed to let that sink in for a moment and even from where he was waiting, Ross could almost feel the sense of anticipation from the crowd wash over the host like radiation from a cracked fusion reactor.

"To introduce the star of our show," Dexter finally added with sombre gravitas.

Dexter looked back over his shoulder to the vague outline of the house someway behind him, just on the very edge of the light like a grey shadow against the night sky.

He spun back to the crowd. "What is this strange creature that fascinates and scares us so? Where does it come from? And what sick and devious mind dreamed it into reality, making nightmare flesh?"

Up in the production booth Davis' eyes narrowed as he watched through the observation window. Dexter was off his mark, he was a little closer to the back of the stage than usual. He could sense more than hear Miller the director whispering improvised directions to the camera crews below.

Dexter stepped off the back of the low stage and onto the grass.

"Fuck, fuck!" Miller cursed. "Jack, stay with him. Clara, keep the follow spot on him, but for Christ sake don't light the house, that'll ruin the whole effect.

Lucky as he glanced at the monitor showing the live feed, Davis could see that both the cameraman who was framing the shot and the technician on the follow spot here experts at their jobs. Dexter was in full frame shot from a high angle so as not to show too much of what was behind him but lit just enough to maintain the atmosphere.

"I'll fucking kill him," Davis breathed as Dexter took another couple of steps back.

A ripple of uneasy chatter ran through the transfixed crowd.

"Stay with him," Miller whispered into his mic. "That's it no tighter, wicked shot. Flood lights get ready to light up the house on his cue."

Dexter lifted his face up to the surrounding crowd who as one gazed on like loving disciples, hanging on his every syllable. "You know, people ask me if Mister Minx is real? And I'm sure there are even those amongst the crowd here tonight and the countless thousands watching at home who doubt his existence."

Dexter smiled wryly and shook his head. "They think this is all just some elaborate magic show." He let his head bow until his chin was almost touching his chest.

A beat then he added softly. "Shall we see?"

"Behold!!" He shouted and the flood lights hit the house from two sides to reveal it in all its theatrical nightmarish glory.

“YEEESSS!!” The crowd screamed in unison. The word stretched out to the very limits of their breath until after an age it slowly died down and hot on its heels a chant began.

Starting in low with just a few voices at first but soon it grew into a crescendo of adulation. Two words over and over, louder and louder. “*Mister Minx, Mister Minx*.”

The live feed cut to the remote cameras in the house, switching from one to the other looking for the creature.

This played out on the main screen above the arena, much to the delight of the assembled masses.

“C’mon,” Miller hissed through his teeth as he studied the shots. “Where is the little shit?” He tapped a button on his console which cut between the cameras inside the house.

“He’s in there,” Davis assured him.

Then a dark shape flitted past the screen and was gone by the time the remote camera whip panned to try catch it again.

The crowd outside fair shrieked at the brief appearance. And continued chanting their hero’s name.

Davis had been so wrapped up in the action on screen and the crowd’s perfect reaction that he lost track of what Dexter was doing. He looked back out of the window and down into the field below and nearly cried out in horror.

“What the hell is he doing?” Davis uttered.

Miller glanced at his boss then at one of the other camera shots. “Christ, cut to camera three!” He tapped the controls and the shot of Dexter came onto the screen. “Stay with him, stay with him, pull out a bit so you get the house in shot as well.”

Dexter was within fifteen feet of the house’s rickety off kilter front porch now, way closer than he had ever been before.

Seeing the shot of Dexter sauntering towards the house on the main screen, the crowd hushed somewhat. It was clear Dexter sensed this as he smiled to himself and then spun on his heal to face them once more.

He was now at the very edge of the porch steps. "Shall we pay Mister Minx a visit before we start the show?"

Davis felt the sweat freeze on his skin. "You fucking idiot," he breathed. "I hope he fucking drags you inside." The thought actually made him smile. How about that for a ratings winner?

Outside the crowd was baying its approval so Dexter turned and theatrically placed his foot on the porch. He paused like a soldier stepping into a mine field then as if satisficed he wasn't going to lose a leg, he took another step so he was now standing with both feet on the porch. He bounced up and down testing its strength.

Miller cut to a camera above the door facing outwards and Davis got the satisfaction of seeing a flash of doubt cross the host's powdered face as he glanced at the door ahead of him.

The noise from the crowd dropped to one of hushed anticipation as he took another step, then another up the creaking porch and over towards the closed front door.

"Mister Minx?" Dexter taunted in a high voice. "Oh Mister Minx are you there?"

Dexter's foot caught something and he looked down to see a row of charms nailed across the bottom of the door. He tentatively towed one with the tip of an expensive Italian shoe.

"What the fuck is he doing?" Someone said behind Davis. "Did you know he was going to do this?"

Davis shook his head but couldn't take his eyes off the figure by the door.

The camera zoomed in on the charms as Dexter gently kicked one again.

“No, no, no,” Davis whispered terrified now. Didn’t the idiot know what he was toying with? He felt the sudden urge to tell Miller to cut the feed. His mind desperately searched for an excuse to re-set the whole event.

Maybe he could blame technical difficulties, anything to stop the fool meddling with forces he didn’t understand. Powerful magic that was the only thing keeping Minx trapped inside that house.

It would be scant consolation seeing Dexter torn to shreds if Minx got out. Because Davis knew there would be only one direction Minx would go in, full tilt. His direction.

At this he glanced behind him and was reassured somewhat to see Nico Gorodetsky standing at the back of the production office, arms folded quietly watching proceedings. The Russian caught Davis’ gaze and nodded slightly.

Back at the house Dexter ran his foot over the charms and then made his way almost on tip-toes over to the window at the side of the front door. Where he ran a hand now over the charms nailed to the frame.

Dexter looked over his shoulder to crowd and camera alike. “What say you we take these off and let our friend stretch his legs a little?” He ran his hands over the charms again.

A ripple of nervous laughter swept through the crowd.

Davis nearly pissed his trousers as he thought he saw one of the charms move under Dexter’s light touch.

“Stop him,” Davis found himself saying. “This is enough, stop the show. Cut to commercial or whatever the hell it is you do.” He was aware of the audible fear in his voice.

“Nar, this is gold,” Miller said and cut to a panning shot of the transfixed audience.

“I said...” Davis snapped and turned to Miller. He stopped mid-sentence. Everyone in the room was staring at him open mouthed. He had always carried himself with an air of confidence around the production crew, who all knew it

was he who was in charge. They had clearly never seen even the hint of weakness in him before and it had stunned them.

"It's okay Boss," his ever present assistant Tiff said meekly. She took an uneasy step towards him but thought better of it as he turned to look at her. It was clear from the shock on her face and the way she clutched her IPad to her chest that his eyes, like his voice, betrayed his growing fear.

"It's all part of the show, right?" Tiff added uncertainly.

"Christ, now what's he doing?" Miller said.

Everyone looked to the main monitor. Dexter was peering in through the grubby glass of the window. He cupped his hands around his eyes to get a better look.

Some people in the crowd were actually standing as if trying to get a better view.

"Mister..." Dexter suddenly leapt back with an undignified yelp (which the crowd instantly mirrored) as Minx's twisted face slammed into the (thankfully) reinforced glass of the window right in front of him.

Much to his credit, Dex Dexter resisted fleeing the porch for the relative safety of the stage but instead, ever the professional, turned to the crowd and clasped his right hand over his heart with all the exaggeration of as silent horror movie star. "Mother!" He said.

The crowd erupted into shrieks of relieved laughter and began to rapidly applaud.

"Fuckwit," Davis said and could feel the vein in his temple throbbing alarmingly. He glanced at the main monitor but instantly looked away, Mister Minx's face leered out through the dirty window as if it was feeding on the sheer energy coming off the crowd.

The shot played out of the large screen in the arena as it did in countless homes across the globe.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you. Mister Minx!" Dexter announced with a wave of the hand back to the house.

"*Mister Minx, Mister Minx*!" the crowd was in rapture.

And despite everything Davis had to admit this was the best opening to a show ever, even if his reputation with the crew as a hard ass had taken a hit.

As if to compensate he barked; "Okay, okay, stop gawping, we have a show to run. Get the priest in position. Let's get this thing moving!"

He took a little satisfaction from the startled look on the faces of those around him as they snapped to attention and began hurrying around to prepare for the main event.

THIRTY-TWO

The production assistant next to Father Ross cocked his head to one side as he listened to the incoming instructions through his headset. He nodded. "Understood."

The assistant then turned to the priest and his surrounding zombie entourage. "It's show time Father," he said and gestured with his IPad towards the back of the main grandstand were Ross could see a camera crew was waiting no doubt to accompany him out into the arena.

The Canadian girl slipped her arm through Ross' once more. "Just stick with me, Father," she said with genuine warmth.

'Showtime,' Ross thought to himself as he was led over to the edge of the arena. Up ahead he could see the rest of the demonettes going through a complicated dance number to the accompaniment of a vaguely familiar heavy metal song which was blasting out of the massive PA as a steady cam operator weaved deftly amongst them.

He glanced to his right as they walked to see an ambulance parked out of the way amongst half a dozen production trucks and vans. Two Paramedics

(God he hoped they were real and not just two more performers) were lent against the vehicle sharing a cigarette.

One of them looked up and smiled somewhat embarrassed seeing the priest staring back. He half-heartedly waved and then made great play of studying the stethoscope hung loosely around his neck.

'See you soon,' Ross thought gravely.

It was strange, but as they finally got to their mark where the camera crew were waiting and Ross could see the show playing out in front of him in greater, theatrical detail. It actually made him feel better.

Despite everything he had learnt over the past weeks. Seeing all the behind the scenes artifice of the show and the all too real sweat on the performers faces of demon time up close. He allowed himself to entertain the thought that it might all still be okay.

Minx was real, of that there was no doubt. But would they really let the creature, which he had to admit had been emasculated to the point of parody by Hauser's tricks and charms. Hurt, even kill him?

Ross thought back as they stood there waiting for whatever cue would signal his arrival into this circus. Wasn't it true that in all the shows he had seen, the priests involved had never actually been hurt by Minx? Not physically at least. Had they?

He racked his brains and ran through each show in his head. There had been injuries, that was for sure. But these were only truly self-inflicted as they tore and beat themselves trying to rid themselves of the nightmares Minx induced. That and of course the rapid, blind panic driven exits they endured at the end.

One he recalled had even dived out of a top floor window. Which had taken no little effort as they were obviously reinforced to help keep the demon in.

The young priest glanced down at the bible grasped tightly in his hand and decided then and there that he wasn't going to play this game by Michael

Davis' twisted rules. He had far too much respect for the book and more so for what it represented.

And with that, a great sense of calm came over him. He could finally see how he could take control of the events unfolding in front of him. He was mentally strong, and even more advantageous than that was the fact he had knowledge of Minx being all too real. And the name of the one man who had been the author of his current incarceration and humiliation. Karl Hauser.

The creature couldn't possibly know the German hadn't been able to impart some all-conquering wisdom to him during their brief time together in Mexico. For all Minx knew he could kill the thing with a simple phrase. If that was how things worked in this strange new world he now found himself in of course.

Besides, it was clear from the brief glimpse one got of the creature from show to show that it was getting frailer by the episode. Cooped up and humiliated as it was, unable to fulfil its one and only raison d'etre. To make Michael Davis suffer. And not how it had turned out, the other way around.

And of course, if push came to shove, Ross was more than prepared to beat the crap out of the abomination with his bare hands, live on the internet, if that's what it took to put an end to this whole travesty.

Ross had been so lost in his new found hope that he hadn't notice the music and stage show had come to an end. He was literally pulled back into reality by a tug on his arm from the Canadian girl who along with her three deathly made up colleagues had begun to lead him out from behind the packed grand stand and into the arena itself.

They were greeted by a massive 'whoop' from the crowd as he was hit with a bright spotlight, blinding him for a moment as they walked slowly across the grass and towards the low stage, where Dex Dexter was waiting flanked at either side by five demonettes waving black pom-poms in time with the new music blaring from the P.A.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Dexter announced. "I give you, Father Shane Ross!"

This was greeted by a mixture of cheers and boos from the crowd as they finally reached the stage.

"Off you go, Father," the Canadian cheerleader said as she ushered him up on the stage. "Bon chance," and with that she and the other three made their exit whilst waving enthusiastically to the crowd. A moment later they were joined by the rest of the undead troupe leaving the two men alone on stage.

Dex Dexter was at Ross' side in an instant and moved him effortlessly to a taped cross in the middle of the stage, where he was once more hit by a bright follow spot coming from high up on a lighting gantry situated behind the main stand.

Dexter put an arm around the priest and the two of them stood there soaking up the crowd's reaction. And after what seemed like a full five minutes to the priest the crowd finally began to quieten down.

As they stood there, Michael Davis studied the priest from his elevated vantage point. There was something about the young man's demeanour he didn't like. Although he couldn't quite put his finger on just what it was.

"Another cocky one," Tiff said and moved to his side.

Was that it? Davis wondered. The priest didn't seem at all fazed by the upcoming clash with Minx or by the crowd and assorted cameras around him. Not that that was anything new, most of the others had gone in with an air of self-righteousness about them. All eager to crash head long towards the vindication they so desperately craved.

"Yeah," he said but it was something more.

"Minx will soon put a stop to that," one of the others said with smug edge to their voice.

Let's hope so, Davis thought but kept it to himself.

"Well Father," Dexter said and squeezed Ross' shoulder. "That was quite the reaction." He took a look at the priest. "I must say, you do look confident."

He tapped the bible in Ross' hand with his microphone. "So what tricks do you have up your sleeve? Does it have anything in the good book for what you are about to receive? Must admit I've never read the thing myself. Not enough pictures for me."

This won him a few muted titters from the crowd.

"C'mon, Father. What have you got planned?"

"Can you keep a secret?" Ross asked him, his voice calm.

Dexter pulled him closer. "Sure, after all it's just you and me," he said conspiratorially and gave an exaggerated wink to the crowd.

"Well Dex," Ross said but addressed the grandstand. "To be quite honest, I'm here to shut this shit down."

This won a condescending '*oooohh*!' from the audience.

Dexter laughed. "Well I have to admit I admire your confidence, Father. But I do seem to remember your four predecessors felt the same way. Before going into the house that is," he threw a thumb over his shoulder.

Ross shrugged as nonchalantly as he could. He could feel the house and it's occupant behind him like a physical presence. He had to concentrate on keeping the dark thoughts of what he might find inside to the back of his mind.

"That may very well be true," Ross said. "But I know what scares that thing."

Again the crowd let out an "ooohhh."

"Well, well, Father," Dexter said. He tapped the bible yet again. "All in there I guess? You must have rock solid faith in your God is all I can say."

Ross shook his head and gently pushed the bible into Dexter's stomach. A little taken aback the host inadvertently took a hold of it.

"Keep it," Ross told him. "As a wise man once told me. Sometimes faith isn't enough."

Dexter grasped the book awkwardly nearly dropping it. He seemed a little flustered by this turn of events, but no sooner had he realised that he turned on the charm once more.

"A brave man indeed," the host said. "Ladies and gentlemen. What do you say we get this show on the road?"

The crowd roared its approval.

Dexter was about to manoeuvre Ross towards the house then the priest pulled away. He turned to look directly into the nearest camera, and was rewarded by seeing a red light above the lens go on. He gave a smile as he stared down the barrel of the camera.

Up in the production office, Michael Davis turned to look at the live feed. The priest seemed to be staring directly at him.

This was confirmed then Ross said. "Oh, and by the way. I have a message for Michael Davis."

There was an audible gasp from the others around Davis.

The priest smiled ever so slightly. It was a knowing smile and it scared Davis almost as much as the creature did.

"Karl Hauser says hi."

Fuck. Davis mind began to whirl, shock clouded his thoughts. He half tried to tell Miller to cut the feed, to stop the show as something was terribly wrong here. But all he could do was mumble something even he didn't catch.

"Oookay," Dexter said uncomprehending. And was about to speak again when an unholy shriek came from inside the house.

"*HAUSER!!!!*" Minx screeched.

The whole arena gasped in shock as the word tore through them. Excitement replaced by total terror. Several people got to their feet, ready to flee, at the first sign of anything unholy bursting out of the house.

Ross bit back a cry of his own. Fear twisted his guts at the word which seemed to come from a deep dark place of utter loathing. He had gambled on

the German's name putting fear and doubt into the monster and Davis alike. He didn't know how the producer had reacted to the name. But he was now in no doubt what the creature felt. He had hoped for fear but had gotten hate instead, a dangerous miscalculation?

Dexter was babbling something in slack jawed shock at his side, but the priest tuned him out. Tuned everything out but the task at hand. The gargantuan effort of just putting one foot in front of the other as he turned and walked stiffly off the low stage and over to the porch. He had to fight every fibre of his being which was screaming. *Run*!!

But somehow he managed to urge himself on. Up onto the porch and step by laboured step over to the front door.

He held out a shaking hand towards the handle but the door opened by itself, screaming on seemingly ancient hinges and he was met with a blast of cold rancid air.

And so with the world watching, Father Shane Ross walked into the darkness of the house and disappeared from sight as the door shut behind him.

THIRTY-THREE

The contrast from the floodlit exterior to the sudden gloom of the house robbed Ross of his sight for a moment. And with the loss of his vision, panic threatened to overwhelm him. The creature could have been a hair's breadth away from his face and he wouldn't have known it.

Ross screwed his useless eyes shut and then slowly opened them and was rewarded as the gloom began to give way and his eyes gradually became accustomed to the meagre light in here.

He was in a deceptively long entrance corridor which stretched off to a half open doorway at the far end. To his right was a set of rickety off kilter

stairs leading up into total darkness. Not a place he had any desire to go anytime soon.

The walls and floor around him had the look of the aftermath of a savage fire. They were blackened and charred, but as his sight improved he could see beyond the effect, as he looked closer to the wall next to him he could make out brush marks in the dark patches and was once more reminded of the fakery of the show. This was something he would have to cling onto if he wasn't to let the situation overwhelm his senses all together.

This was a game show after all, yes one with an all too real antagonist, but a gameshow nevertheless. As if to remind him of that fact, a soft whirring sound drew his attention up to something metallic above the door at the far end of the corridor. A camera, no doubt positioning itself for a better shot was located in the top corner to the right of the door and the priest had to fight the urge to give it the finger.

Now was not the time to play to the crowd. He had a very real job to do here, and if he was honest, short of physical violence it was a job he had yet to figure out how to complete.

Ross studied the hallway in front of him and the half open door at the far end. Was Minx in there? Or perhaps upstairs, hiding in the deep shadows at the top of the steps? He cocked an ear but couldn't hear anything save his own breath and the whirring of cameras around him. He offered up a curse as indecision rooted his feet to the spot.

"*Rossssssss*..." The word was drawn out for a full five seconds sounding more like the hiss of some reptile than his name. The location of its speaker was impossible to pin point as it seemed to bounce off the walls around him.

He let out an involuntary gasp, something as familiar as his own name had never sounded so foreign or so threatening to him.

"Fucker's not so cocky now, is he?" The director Miller smirked as he looked at the shot on his monitor. The priest standing stiffly by the front door, scared shitless. It was gold.

“Just wait until Minx gets in his head,” someone else put in, which won a chorus of affirmatives from around the room.

Davis so wanted to believe that, but all he could think about was the German and what part he might yet play in all this.

After the priest had entered the house Davis had insisted Miller show him, off air, all the camera angles he had of the watching crowd. He scanned them intently, looking for that one familiar face amongst hundreds of strangers. He wasn’t sure if he was relieved or more worried at not being able to locate Hauser amongst the masses.

“Whoa, hang on,” Miller said and the live shot cut to a close up of Ross as a flash of fear crossed the priest’s ashen face.

Davis tore his attention away from the crowd and back to the priest. Yes something was going on down there. “What’s the little shit up to?” He said.

The chief sound engineer, whose name he didn’t know suddenly leant forwards and turned up the volume on his headphones. “What is that?”

Ross’ breath caught in his throat as the sound of what appeared to be a dozen or so glasses ‘clinking’ together softly faded up around him. He scanned the hallway’s floor, half expecting to see it filled with rolling bottles of some kind, but there was nothing but set dressed boards.

“Once and addict...” The words from the demon once again came out of nowhere, yet everywhere. Its voice, which was a sickening mixture of bass, baritone and falsetto all fighting for supremacy, set Ross’ teeth on edge and he felt his stomach flip in terror at the alien sound.

‘*Once and addict*?’ What did that mean? Then he remembered the fake dossier they had slipped the show. Fake, yet with a central thread of truth to it. Ross’ addiction in his teens. He shouldn’t have been surprised the creature would have been told about that dark passage in his past. After all it was perfect ammunition.

“Stupid,” he whispered to himself, he hadn’t expected that, despite the past shows. Each priest he now remembered had been taunted by their less than laudable pasts. Moments in their lives when they had fallen short. Partially healed wounds the demon had delighted in reopening.

“Ancient history,” Ross said out loud, and again was greeted by the clinking sound. Not bottles he now realised, but something else. And yes he had to admit, something vaguely familiar. It arose long hidden memories in him, ones he had thought lost forever, banished by his faith and sobriety. Dark horrible memories of a time in his life where he had been at his lowest ebb. At his most vulnerable.

It wasn’t bottles clinking together. It was glass syringes.

“Christ,” he gasped. Why hadn’t he prepared for this? Ross closed his eyes and tried to block the memories from his mind. “Christ, help me,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Was that a prayer or a curse, Father?” The creature taunted.

God that voice!

“Taking your Lord’s name in vain so soon?”

“I know what you are,” Ross blurted out. “Hauser told me everything about you.”

“I would have thought that cocksucker was long dead,” Minx said. “A slow painful death I was hoping for.”

Ross bit back a reply and instead concentrated on keeping his composure. The last thing he needed just now was that thing’s voice rattling around his head before he could get it together enough to continue.

“Still, he’s not here now, is he?”

“Maybe,” Ross lied. “Maybe not.”

The clinking syringes seemed to fade back up after it had spoken, louder than ever and close by. Ross told himself over and over to ignore them. They’re nothing but an illusion he thought desperately. All an illusion, that thing can’t hurt you, can’t physically hurt you...

A thud as something hit the floor just in front of him. Ross opened his eyes a fraction. No it wasn't the creature, he looked down as something glinted by his foot.

"God," he uttered. It was a glass syringe embedded in the floorboard by its needle. A murky brown liquid swirled around inside it.

"Bet that looks pretty good around about now, eh Father? Go on, take a hit for old time's sake. You look like you need it."

Ross shook his head. But was greeted by even more clinking, this time above his head.

Offering up a silent prayer, Ross looked up to the high ceiling. "Dear, God."

From directly above his head and stretching all the way down to the door at the far end. The ceiling was covered by dozens and dozens of half-filled syringes hanging precariously by their needles.

"You got two ways you can go, Father," the demon taunted. "Back the way you came, or straight ahead."

A light breeze caressed his sweat soaked back and he could hear the murmurings of the crowd outside. He didn't need to turn around to know the front door had opened offering him a tantalizing escape route.

"Well?" The creature asked from the shadows.

A stronger breeze hit his back and sent a ripple through the syringes on the ceiling. One, then a second were detached by the movement sending them falling to the floor where, like the first they stuck into the wooden boards.

They sounded all too real to Ross, but he had to be sure. So he reached out a foot and kicked at the closest syringe, silently praying his shoe would pass right through it. But instead he felt the glass connect with his toe and shatter, spilling steaming liquid onto the leather.

"How?" He uttered, but the creature only offered up a half-hearted chuckle in response. Again the light breeze hit his back causing the syringes

over head to brush against one another again. Three fell this time with an ominous 'thunk' as they stuck into the floor.

"Illusion is all a matter of perspective, priest," Minx finally offered. "It's as real as I want it to be in here. Out there? That's your world with its physics and its rules. But once you crossed over that threshold. You are in my world. And my world is a lot less..." It paused. "A lot less... Unyielding to ones will and whim, if you like."

A step or two back and Ross would be in the comforting arms of reality. Another step forwards and he was into the realm of the unknown. He glanced down at the broken syringe at his feet and the stain on his shoe. Impossible yet seemingly real.

"Did Hauser prepare you for that?" Minx asked.

No was the simple reply.

"So?" Minx asked and Ross could hear the door at his back open a little further. This was met by the distant calls from some of the crowd.

The door at the far end of the hallway also opened a little further to reveal part of the living room inside, but still no glimpse of the creature, if indeed he was skulking around in there.

Ross summand up all the courage he could muster. He knew he couldn't fail so soon. He imagined Father Mendez was watching this back in the Vatican at this very moment. Perhaps even Hauser and the villagers were huddled around a lap top in Mexico. Not that the German could do much good all the way over there.

"Your whole existence is wrong," Ross told the open door ahead.

"Oh, I quite agree," the demon answered. "But the question is. What are you going to do about it?"

What indeed? Ross thought and with that took two steps forwards. He cried out as the front door slammed loudly behind him, the motion sending a shock wave through the impossible array of syringes overhead. He winced as several fell around him. He couldn't be sure but he thought he felt one brush

against his right shoulder on its way down. Either way it spun off awkwardly just at the edge of his peripheral vision and smashed on the floor to his side.

Two more stuck into the floor boards by his feet as he took another couple of steps forwards. He tried to push them from his mind and just concentrated on walking as steadily and as purposefully as he could towards the living room. Although each step brought with it the anticipation of a needle in the flesh.

He continued on down the hallway only allowing himself the briefest of glimpses up the stairs as he past them. The steps disappeared into blackness before they reached the top. Was that faded bloody foot prints he could see on each step?

He stopped suddenly as the glint of light on glass flashed a foot from his face as another syringe fell. This time it stopped mid-air as if caught by an unseen hand. Ross gasped and watching in horror as the syringe slowly rotated until its needle was pointing directly at his right eye.

A bead of filthy looking liquid bubbled from the needle like venom from a snake's fang. The smell of freshly cooked heroin stung his nostrils bringing with it a tidal wave of unwanted memories that threatened to knock him on his backside.

He swallowed back a scream and did his best to stare down the syringe.

"No," he spat through gritted teeth. "No."

As if in response, the syringe lunged forwards a little until it was too close for his eye to focus on in the gloom,

but he fought the urge to flinch. He looked passed it to the door which was now only some ten feet away.

'No?' A voice said in his head.

"No," he answered it firmly.

The syringe dropped and he heard it smash.

"Well let's get on with it then Father. They want a show, let's give them a show." The demon said.

The door to the living room opened fully now to reveal a dark twisted shape in its far corner.

"Yes let's," Ross agreed and strode into the room.

THIRTY-FOUR

"Christ," Tiff said as the living room door closed behind the priest. "That was a little dark, even for this show!"

"Stay on the door," Miller said. "This is gonna be the best show ever. That priest's a fucking rock star."

"Hmm," Davis uttered. He turned to Nico Gorodetsky, who was now sitting off to one side watching proceedings with this usual detached professionalism.

"Your guy searched him, when he picked him up. He didn't have anything, unusual on him, right?"

All the Russian did in way of response was look at him and raise an eyebrow.

"Yeah, course," Davis answered for him. Stupid question.

The producer silently chided himself. Mention of the German's name had him paranoid.

As if anticipating his mood, Tiff handed him her IPad. "Chief, take a look at the numbers for tonight."

Davis took the IPad and looked over the figures. "Jesus, these right?"

"Yep," Tiff replied with no little pride. "Those are live numbers. Word of mouth is huge on this thing. We've gained five thousand new subscribers

since the priest went inside. And that's just from the last update of our Facebook page."

As usual, the Euro sign flashed cartoon like before his eyes. That never ceased to lift his mood.

"I'm gonna stick with the priest," Miller said softly as he guided one of the remote cameras. "Don't want to linger too long on Minx. Besides, I've just eaten and the ugly fuck always makes me sick."

Davis handed the IPad back to Tiff and looked once more at the live feed. One of the remote cameras slowly zoomed into a close up of Ross as he glanced furtively around the room. The chill in his stomach warmed a little seeing the fear in his eyes. That was not a man with some secret weapon tucked away somewhere, he told himself. That was a man in fear for his life, and that was ratings gold. He just hoped Minx wouldn't tire of torturing him too soon.

Back in the dank smelling room, Ross glanced around. He could see three cameras in here, all whirring, panning and tilting for the best shot of proceedings.

"Why don't you smash those?" He asked still unable to look at the thing in the corner full on. It was bad enough skulking around his peripheral vision.

"Charms," the creature replied. "Like those on the door and windows. I did try once, but the pain was terrible." Minx paused for a moment and Ross could feel the demons eyes on him. "You could though?" It finally said with an expectant edge to its awful voice.

From where he was standing Minx was little more than a shadow in the large room to the priest. Off in the corner, crouched with an old arm chair between them. But still Ross couldn't bring himself to actually look over at the demon, not yet at least. He just made sure he had it in sight, just in case it decided to leap at him.

"I saw a creature, one like you. It was dead though," Ross said whilst examining a dark stain in the floor by his feet.

“Hauser.” Minx said plainly.

“He’s quite something,”

“He sent you here, didn’t he? Sent you to finish me off?” Minx sounded almost excited now at the prospect of its imminent demise. Perhaps even hopeful.

It was a surprise and a notion Ross didn’t want to discourage so soon. “He’s a man of great power, great knowledge of your kind.”

“Yes, yes he is that, isn’t he? That and so much more?” Yes there was definitely something akin to hope in the creature’s awful voice. Strange that.

Minx moved close to the chair now and Ross caught a glimpse of its bony fingers as they grasped the top of the cushioned head rest.

“Come on,” the demon said. “You have been bluffing, waiting for the right moment. You can tell me, Hauser gave you means to end me. To end this whole debacle.”

“Maybe,” Ross answered cautiously.

“That must be why you are here. I’m sure your Vatican loathes this show. They sent you here to bring the whole sorry mess down. How you say? ‘Shut this shit down?’”

“Is that what you want?” Ross asked guardedly.

That was when Minx’s bald head appeared above the back of the chair. Although it was almost completely in silhouette, its bright cat-like eyes shone in the gloom.

“More than anything,” Minx replied.

The remark caught Ross off guard. Was this all part of its act? To play the victim in an effort to lure him into a false sense of security before it began messing with his mind again?

He inadvertently glanced up to the room’s high ceiling but there were no dangling syringes overhead.

“Wouldn’t that mean Davis gets away?”

“Well,” Minx relented after a little thought. “Perhaps not more than *anything*.”

Ross could tell by the demon’s eyes that it was smiling at this and he was damned glad he couldn’t see its twisted grin which was still obscured by the chair.

He suddenly felt his head swim for a moment and had to look away. If Minx’s physical appearance was deteriorating from show to show, its eyes still had an undeniable power in them. He was quite sure a man would go mad if he stared into those twin pools of hate for too long.

Then those terrible eyes narrowed with suspicion. “Or did the old German give you nothing. Are you just like those other pious bastards? So self-righteous in there absolute conviction they could exorcize me?”

Minx’s talon tipped thin fingers gripped the upholstery of the chair. The material shredded under its touch. “Are you a liar, priest?”

Ross couldn’t help but feel stung by the naked accusation in the creature’s horrible voice.

“I came here to end you and end this show,” he replied with conviction.

“Then do it!” Minx shouted. “Fuck my mission, and fuck Michael Davis! If you have it in you, end me!”

Before Ross had chance to react, Minx leapt out from behind the chair with surprising speed. The thing was a blur of movement in the darkness and was on him in a moment.

Ross cried out in pain as Minx slammed into his chest knocking him backwards. The creature clung to him like an infant clinging to its mother, its thin needle like claws dug into the flesh of his shoulders instantly drawing blood. Ross lost his footing and stumbled backwards.

Then there was a split second when both priest and demon hung in the air, and then Ross fell hard onto his back, knocking the wind out of him with Minx still on his chest.

Minx pressed its reptilian like face close to his and for a horrific moment Ross thought it was actually going to kiss him. Its scaly forehead touched his and the priest closed his eyes so he didn't have to look into Minx's.

"Kill me," Minx hissed. "Say the words, draw a symbol in blood or shit, I don't care. Do whatever Hauser taught you to do and just fucking KILL ME!"

"I, I..." Ross fumbled for the words.

"Kill me or I will torture you to the very brink of insanity," Minx taunted. "Then I will drag you over that edge and I promise you, if you don't then kill yourself first, you will be lost to madness forever!"

Even in his growing terror, Ross was aware of a camera whirring close by. Zooming in for a close up no doubt. It was easy to forget with a demon perched on your chest that all this madness was playing out live on the internet.

Although Minx didn't look like it weighed much, the thing was radiating a cold harsh aura that was threatening to freeze the breath in Ross' lungs. He had to force himself just to take the shallowest of breaths and wasn't the least bit surprised to see that hard won breath misted the air.

Kill Me. The two unspoken words tore themselves into Ross' brain like twin bullet hits making him gasp out loud.

Then although it didn't seem possible, the creature's face softened slightly as it looked down on him. It seemed to be studying his intentions desperately searching for any sign of its destruction within his face.

Oh, God. Ross thought. It wasn't a prayer just a cold hard realisation. As he looked up into the creature's face looming over his, he was hit by Minx's true motivation.

This thing just wanted to die. Not to torture, not to maim, but to be free of its pathetic pain filled existence. He had bargained the monster would be cowed by the mention of Hauser's name. The one man you had defeated it. But this wasn't fear. This was a desperate hope of release.

'*Kill me or I will torture you to the very brink of insanity,*' Minx had said. And Ross had nothing.

Minx waited for a coup de grace that would never come. After a long pause a flash of confusion crossed its nightmare of a face. Its misshapen head tilted to one side as it studied Ross.

The demon screwed its eyes tight shut forcing blood red tears to stream down the ragged scales on its cheeks, as it seemed to realise this was not the final encounter it sought.

"I'm sorry," Ross choked out. It was all he could think to say.

Minx didn't move for the longest time then it let out a heart-wrenching sob. It was so raw Ross feared his own heart would break.

"Why didn't he kill me when he had the chance?" Minx asked and Ross could hear genuine emotion in its grating voice.

"I don't know," the priest replied.

The demon shook its head and more crimson tears came. "Sometimes I wonder what I did to deserve such suffering," Minx said as it stifled another sob.

Taking his chance with the demon distracted by its own woeful existence, Ross twisted under it and freed his left shoulder from its grasp. Then before Minx could react he punched it as hard as he could in the side of its head.

The whole right side of its face seemed to crumple under the impact of the blow, as if the bones in it were made of nothing more than glass and Minx was sent sprawling to the floor.

Ross gasped and gratefully sucked in lungful after lungful of air as the heat returned to his chest. He frantically scrambled backwards away from the prone creature until he was sitting facing it with his back against the wall.

Then he did his best to ready himself for the onslaught to come. But it soon became apparent Minx was no longer a threat as it laid in the foetal position with its chin tucked into its sunken shuddering chest. At first he thought it was unconscious, or dead even, but as he watched sobs began to wrack its emaciated body.

All Ross could do was look on in disbelief at the pathetic sight. This was no act, Minx was a defeated creature. Not from his blow, but because it had hoped, as perhaps it had always hoped every time a new priest had entered the house, that this time would be the last. This time it would be defeated and put out of its misery.

No wonder it had been so cruel to the others. It had taken out its frustration on them for their failure to end it all.

Clearly it had let itself truly believed this time would be the last, no doubt due to the mention of Hauser. So this latest failure had been too much for it to bear. It was finally crushed under the sheer weight of it all. But worse still, despite Ross' physical assault. It could not die.

Not whilst Michael Davis lived.

THIRTY-FIVE

Not whilst Michael Davis lived. That was a fact Davis himself knew all too well.

Everyone in the control room was staring open mouthed at the live feed playing out on the large monitor in front of Miller the director. It was a slow zoom in to Minx prone on the floor. This was the clearest and longest shot ever of the creature on the show. And it was not a good one.

"He's beaten him," Tiff whispered almost in awe from behind Davis.

But Davis knew better, Minx would soon regain its strength. Self-loathing was a powerful catalyst, and Minx had enough of that to burn.

Yes and he knew when that emotion kicked in, it would soon give way to hate, then to cruelty and finally to a red, red rage. And when it did, and with

Davis so tantalisingly out of reach, there would be only one place for all that power to go. Father Shane Ross.

"Give him time," Davis said with the confidence of a man who had read this particular script before. "Give him time."

He was already concocting a plan in his head to explain away why for the first time ever on demon time. A priest had actually died.

Davis took a look at the other smaller monitors showing the non-live camera shots. The crowd were almost hypnotized by the drama they were witnessing. Many were actually on their feet, some clinging to others in dreaded anticipation of what was to come. And yes, some were actually weeping.

Miller, ever the masterful live director cut to a panning shot of the crowd. It zoomed in on a young couple, perhaps just in their twenties. They were both openly crying.

"Fucking beautiful," Davis said to himself. The only sour note was that they were both wearing one of those unofficial 'Mister Minx Army' t-shirts. Still it was a pretty cool design Davis mused; a black and white sketch of the creature done in minimalist broad powerful strokes, with the Mister Minx army logo in blood red.

He would rip that off for sure in readiness for the next show.

"What are you?" Ross asked as Minx slowly pushed itself up from the floor and slumped down in a sitting position, its head bowed, bloody tears drip, drip dripping onto the wood floor boards by its knees.

"A figment of someone's imagination," Minx replied softly.

"But whose?"

Minx shrugged its bony shoulders, but didn't raise its head as if it were ashamed to face the priest. "All I know is why I was created, not by whom."

It was such a wretched sight that Ross found himself feeling sorry for the creature. Even a little guilty for nearly caving its skull in. He had expected mind games, he had expected violence even, but he had not expected this.

Again that damn whirring as the cameras around them panned and tilted for the best shot. Intruding on the unfortunate creature's grief with an indecent disregard, like news crews swarming around a school bus crash.

Then before he even felt it creeping up on him, Ross suddenly flew into a blind rage. He grabbed a hold of a nearby coffee table and smashed it repeatedly against the floor until one of its legs splintered off. He tossed the table aside and scooped up the leg. He felt the satisfying weight of it in his hand. Yes that would do nicely.

Minx looked up at Ross as the priest loomed over it. It held its face up, willing the blow to split its skull in half whilst still knowing even if it was beaten to a pulp it would heal in time.

But Ross wheeled away and smashed the camera closest to him, then he leapt up and smashed the one attached over the window looking down on them. This left just one attached up in a corner where the wall met the ceiling by the side of the door.

Ross strode over to it making sure it had a good view as he approached. He raised the table leg above his head and paused for a moment. He knew it was a cliché but he said it all the same.

"Show's over," then he threw the leg at the camera. It was a sweet shot smashing the lens first time.

"Oh, you bastard!" Miller said in the control room as he switched from one dead camera to the next. "What do I do? What do I do?" He babbled. Then his professionalism kicked in an instant later. He cut to a shot from above the front door looking down the long hallway to the closed door of the room Minx and the priest were in. He tapped a couple of keys and the shot began a very slow dramatic zoom into the doorway.

“Perfect,” Davis said. If he was honest he was surprised that none of the other priests before Ross had thought to do that just to fuck with the show. Although to be fair, Minx could be quite distracting when it was in full flight.

“Where’s Keeler?” Someone said referring to the show’s head gaffer. The one who would normally be charged with fixing the cameras in there.

“Keeler quit, remember?” Someone else replied.

Davis glanced at Nico who actually smiled at this. Keeler had been bludgeoned to death the other day whilst in the house and Davis had almost forgotten the story they had concocted to explain away his sudden departure from the show.

“Don’t worry,” Miller said. “We can make this work. Just look at the crowd, they’re lapping it up.”

It was true, a good two hundred or more of them, the real hardcore fans of the show were now on their feet eyes fixed on the massive screen.

Tiff came to Davis’ side. “Boss, Dex wants to know if he should go up there and say something whilst we figure out what we’re gonna do?”

During the show and much to his chagrin, Dexter was relegated to underneath the main stand where he had to wait for the priest to come careering out of the front door before he could get back in front of his beloved cameras for the exit interview.

“This *is* what we are going to do,” Davis replied. “That ham just wants to get in on the action. He’s no fool, he knows this is history right here. Tell him to stay put and out of the way until I tell him to move.”

“Okay, Boss,” Tiff said. She was about to move off when she glanced at her IPad. “God’s teeth!” She exclaimed.

Davis reluctantly looked away from the observation window. “What?” He said.

Tiff showed him the IPad screen. It was showing live viewing figures. “Just leapt up ten thousand in the last five minutes!”

God bless social media, Davis thought. Yes this was going to be a night he would never forget.

THIRTY-SIX

Father Ross slumped down in the tatty arm chair Minx had been hiding behind and surveyed his handy work. There were thin wisps of smoke drifting from two of the destroyed cameras. The other was laid smashed close to where the demon was sitting.

"Why did you do that?" Minx asked. It was looking at the smashed camera as it spoke. No, Ross realised not at the camera, but at the charm that had been attached to it, which had fallen close by.

"Because it needed doing," Ross replied.

From where he was sat Ross could see that the ornately carved charm looked to be about the size of an American silver dollar, round but with several V shaped cuts in it so it almost resembled a small non-symmetrical Chinese throwing star.

Minx, never taking its blood shot eyes of the charm, edged away from it a little, as if fearful it would leap up at it at any moment.

"If I get rid of all those things, will you be able to leave?" Ross asked.

The demon shook its head ever so slightly. "They wouldn't let you. Besides where would I go?"

That was a good question. "What can I do to end this?"

"It can only end with the last beat of Michael Davis' black heart," Minx said and turned to look at the priest. "Then I will be myth... Perhaps even at peace."

Ross inadvertently gasped and looked away so as not to meet its gaze. After all despite its condition, those eyes were still those eyes.

"This is not my fault!" Minx said. "I cannot help what I am."

"I know, but that doesn't change what you are. What you were created to do." Ross gestured around the room and to the smashed camera on the floor. "All this is wrong, despite what you are. This is a cruelty you don't deserve."

Minx chuckled, it was a horrible gurgling sound that brought bile to the back of Ross' throat. "Perhaps I do," it said with a shrug.

Ross couldn't help but look at the creature again and was damn glad it was staring off into space and not at him. He felt so conflicted. On the one hand this thing was capable of such great brutality, that was after all why it existed.

But still he couldn't shake the feeling that if anything Minx was the real victim here. It couldn't help what it was just as Ross couldn't help who he was. No one, demon or priest alike can run from what they really are deep down. Good or evil, right or wrong. We are what we are.

"You know the worst thing about all this?" Minx said after a long while, clearly the creature had long wanted to unburden itself. "Worse than all this public humiliation? I was created to react, not to think, certainly not to contemplate my existence! I had one purpose and one purpose only from the moment of my conception. To kill, kill, kill Michael Davis. Make him suffer in the most terrible of ways..."

Outside the house in the area hundreds listened on. In the control room and back stage area, crowd, cast and crew alike were transfix. Everyone could hear Minx's voice at as it blared out of the P.A system and they hung on its every word. It was like some demonic soliloquy delivered to the masses.

High up in the control room Michael Davis didn't hear the collective gasp from his colleagues as the demon mentioned him by name again. Often many had wondered how he had come across such a creature (those who believed it

was real anyway) and now that they had their answer they turned as one to look at the producer.

Davis was standing by the large observation window with his arms wrapped around himself shaking ever so slightly. And although he had his back to them it was clear he was terrified. It was as if his worst nightmare was coming true right before them all. A well-kept secret broadcast for tens of thousands live across the globe.

No one, least of all Davis himself thought to cut the live audio feed to the house. All they could do was hang on the demon's every heart felt word.

"From the very first moment I can remember," Minx continued. "It was as if I had spent a thousand years planning my revenge on him. It was though he had done me some terrible wrong. I felt nothing but the burning desire to reap my vengeance on him, although in reality there was no vengeance to take. I didn't know why he had to suffer, and in those exquisite moments of ignorance that followed my creation, I didn't care. I was made solely to cause him harm. Although I was only self-aware for a heartbeat or so before entering his hotel room, I had millennia of hate welling up inside me."

Minx paused for a moment, it seemed to shrink a full foot as it remembered all this. Yes Ross thought to himself, this was a confession. And wasn't confession supposed to be good for the soul?

"I was in rapture, perched there on his chest," Minx remembered. "I was going to make his suffering last a week if I could... Then came the pain, *my* pain, the first I'd ever felt. That bastard Hauser trapping me, mocking me as I writhed in an agony I could not comprehend." Minx stopped and held up a shaking bony hand which it made into a fist.

"Such pain," Minx said. "I was only supposed to last as long as it took Davis to die at my willing hands. Then be glad of the release once the deed was done."

It looked around the room, its prison cell. "I wasn't meant for this. I wasn't meant to think, contemplate my place in the world. Just to act on

instinct, torture, kill and be gone. Yet here I am, carted from one indignation to the next. With only brief moments of relief from the agony of simply existing. And those moments of bliss? Torturing your kind. Not for hatred of the church, that's as abstract a concept to me as love or friendship. No, I torture you in lieu of the one human I should have despatched long ago now, Michael Davis."

There was a long pause as the creature's words hung in the air.

"I'm so sorry this has happened to you," Ross finally said without thinking.

The creature smiled. "Not what you expected, am I?"

"No," Ross answered truthfully. "But," he continued equally as truthful. "I can't help you kill Davis."

Minx shrugged. "Perhaps you can," it said turning back to the charm on the floor.

Ross saw this. "I don't think that was designed to kill you."

"Kill me? No. But it has such power."

Minx edged a little closer to the charm on the floor, like a child towards a hand grenade.

"I can do things," it said never taking its eyes of the silver disk. "Even in this pathetic state, the human mind is such a fragile, malleable thing to me."

"Shit," Ross looked across the room where the table leg he had used to smash the cameras was still laid.

The demon cocked its head at this and after a moment of deliberation, a smile cracked its face. "No, not you priest." Minx edged yet closer to the charm, it began shaking in fear or pain, Ross couldn't tell.

"When you entered this place, when you said his name," Minx said. "I dared to hope you would be the instrument of my salvation. Yet, that hope was dashed when I looked down upon your face. But now...?

“Minx?” Ross said calculating how long it would take him to get to the table leg and then bash the little shit’s brains in.

The demon stopped within grabbing distance of the charm and Ross wondered if it had lost its nerve. But then it turned to look directly at him and despite his terror Ross somehow found the strength to hold its nightmarish gaze.

Minx smiled and tapped its temple with its left talon. “I have an army,” it said. “They call themselves fans, but deep down it’s more than that. Ordinary people who over time have come to find themselves obsessed with this fucking show, but more so with me. Despite never having any interest in the occult before they cannot help themselves. They have to know everything about me, fact or fiction, they don’t care.”

There was a hint of pride in the creature’s voice now. “It starts off as a mild interest, sparked off by simply hearing the merest syllable spoken by me. It starts with something that simple, don’t ask me how, but I have the ability to hide deliciously subversive, subliminal messages, thoughts really within the words I speak. Nothing more than suggestion at this stage, but with the latent potential for so much more. And so it builds, as they come to every show, read every article. I can feel them, even when I’m in slumber. They don’t meet in groups, they don’t defend my authenticity over the world wide web. They just *know*. They just know I am real, and you know why? Do you know why they feel so special, so connected to me? Because they are.”

Minx tapped its temple again. “Down through these hideous months I have been planting seeds. In my weakened state and with those fucking charms that is all I have been able to do, but still they are real enough. Little seeds of growing obsession with me. Did you know a man killed four people in this very house? That was because of me. Because of the residue I was able to leave here when I was out of my coffin. Little things left to twist a man’s mind. There have been more still throughout all this. Small things, here and there. But I was still lacking one real thing.”

Minx pointed to the charm on the floor. “Real power.”

“Hey, Davis,” Ross shouted. “You might want to get someone down here. I don’t know what he’s planning but he’s planning something.”

“I don’t know if this will work,” Minx said to Ross and then it grinned showing rotten jagged teeth that were made for nothing but mischief. “But I do know one thing... This is gonna hurt.”

Both Minx and Ross lunged simultaneously towards their weapon of choice. The priest flung himself across the floor and grabbed a hold of the chair leg. He turned towards the demon ready to strike just in time to see it grab a hold of the charm.

Minx screamed at the contact then much to Ross’ horror the creature slammed the charm against its forehead where it stuck.

The demon let out a horrific howl of pain. It was the worst thing anyone within earshot, regardless of geography had ever heard. It was a sound that would haunt thousands for years to come, so raw and powerful if felt like a physical blow.

High up in the production office, the sound engineer screamed in pain and tore off his headphones. He fell back out of his chair and began writhing on the floor in pain. Hands clutched to his bleeding ears.

“Jesus!” Tiff shouted and a couple of the others ran over to him, trying in vain to calm the man as he started fitting.

“Nico...” Davis uttered numbly but the Russian was already out the door speaking remarkably calmly in Russian into his radio.

Down below, three of his security team sprinted out from under the main stand, guns drawn aiming at the house. They stopped when they got to the stage. It was impressively efficient but did little to allay Davis’ growing fear.

“Keep filming, keep filming!” Miller shouted and a Steadicam operator came jogging out and over to film the security guards as if it was just another cop show she was working on.

“What’s going on in there?” Davis said, the fear clear in his trembling voice. He looked at the monitor showing the shot of the living room door in the house. And was thankful it was still closed.

All the whilst Minx's scream continued through the massive PA system assaulting the senses of the audience and crew alike.

THIRTY-SEVEN

It took Ross a good few seconds to realise he was now flat on his back staring up at the ceiling. He had no recollection of being thrown back but there he was. He sat up gingerly half expecting his entire skeleton to be shattered but apart from the ringing in his ears he seemed unharmed.

He gasped, Minx was still on its knees where it had been, still howling in pain, but Ross himself had been flung back across the room perhaps ten feet or so. He scooped up the chair leg which was close by and dragged himself to his feet.

He staggered across the room to the creature and swung the makeshift bludgeon as hard as he could into Minx's contorted face. It was as much to silence the thing as to incapacitate it.

Minx's head snapped back so far from the impact that the back of its head actually hit between its shoulder blades and the demon fell silent. The charm was dislodged and spun away through the air and clattered to the floor boards in the corner of the room where it laid smoking.

Ross hit Minx in the face again, even harder this time and the demon flew back. It hit the ground hard and was about to try to rise when Ross put his foot on its sunken chest and pinned it to the floor. He swung the leg again hitting Minx between the eyes and its face crumpled in on itself. He hit it again and again until there was little left of its features but a bloody mess.

Then he staggered back, panting at the sheer effort of the assault, he felt suddenly repulsed not only at the gory sight but at his own ability to inflict such carnage on another 'living' creature.

“Oh, Christ,” he uttered and dropped the leg as if it were white hot. He looked down in horror as Minx began to quiver. Despite its ruined face Ross could hear a nauseating hacking sound as the creature tried to breathe whilst choking on its own viscous blood.

Its body began to convulse now as bloody bile bubbled up through its lips and seeped down its smashed chin.

Then the breath caught in Ross’ throat as a sickening realization hit him. Minx wasn’t choking. It was laughing.

“Jesus, Christ.” Ross said and covered his ears in a vain attempt to block out the sound which was somehow worse than the screaming.

“Bring... Him... To... Me...” Minx gargled.

“What did he just say?” Michael Davis whispered. His throat was so dry it came out in rasping paper thin syllables.

Then there was the longest pause, everyone in the production office was frozen to the spot with fear and indecision. It was Jeff Miller the director who was so intent on getting the next shot who spoke next as he glanced frantically from one monitor to the next.

“Shit, where the fuck did everybody go?”

Davis looked over at the director. “Huh?”

Miller hit a button on his keyboard and a shot of the main stand came up on the monitor. Moments before it had been packed with hundreds of rabid fans. Now it was over half empty.

The crowd were leaving the stands in droves, but this was no ordinary exodus for the exits, quite the opposite. Well over a hundred of them were flooding onto the field, heading for the stage.

“Can I get some fucking crowd control down there for fuck’s sake?” Miller barked into his headset.

Davis felt a sudden jolt of utter terror. ‘*I have an army*,’ Minx had said.

A dozen stewards in yellow high-viz jackets tried in vain to stop the flow of people but they were swept aside in an instant.

A moment later Nico Gorodetsky came bursting back into the production office. He shut the door behind him and locked it.

"Nico?" Davis said.

The Russian turned and they locked eyes and Davis saw something in them that was far worse even than that creature's amplified cackle. Fear.

"They've gone fucking crazy," Gorodetsky said. He reached inside his jacket and pulled out a pistol.

"This is fucking madness," Davis told him.

"Exactly," Gorodetsky replied.

Madness on an industrial scale.

"Keep filming, damn you, keep filming!" Miller screamed into his headset as one my one the cameras down below cut to static as its operator was overwhelmed by the human tide.

Davis laughed despite himself. Laughed at the sheer lunacy of it all.

Suddenly a cry went up as the whole production office shuddered violently on its scaffold foundations. Everyone grabbed a hold of something to stop themselves being flung to the floor and for a moment the whole production office seemed to teeter on the brink of pitching forwards towards the ground.

"What the hell's going on?" Tiff sobbed. She was clinging desperately to a desk which itself was threatening to slide off through the main observation window.

"They're trying to bring the whole thing down," Nico said. "There's dozens of them down there. It's the most fucked up thing I ever saw. Christ, I had to fight my way through six of them on the stairs just to get up here. They've all gone fucking crazy!"

“It’s Minx!” Tiff shouted. “He’s done this! That twisted fucking thing!” She turned to Davis who was trying desperately to keep his balance. “Kill that monster!!” She screamed all thought of protocol long since gone.

“I can’t,” Davis said softly to himself. Those two words hit him like a freight train. ‘*I can’t*.’

“That thing,” Tiff said, bracing herself against the desk as the office lurched forwards again, it was like being in the middle of an earthquake. “That thing in your pocket! Put the bastard to sleep.”

Of course, in all the panic Davis had forgotten about the sleep spell. Too little too late?

He was about to take out the box when an unholy shriek came up from the crowd below. Davis froze, had Minx gotten out? He spun around to look out of the now cracked observation window as the whole structure shuddered violently again.

Down below Dex Dexter was being borne aloft the now two hundred strong crowd who were still flooding down onto the field, like a reluctant crowd surfer.

“Help me!” He screamed. His face contorted in terror as the crowd began to tear at his gaudy over-priced clothes.

“Minx, Minx, Minx!” The crowd chanted over and over but whereas before that had been music to Davis’ ears, now it filled him with nothing but dread.

This was as stranger mob of zealots as you could ever hope to find, young and old alike. Young mothers shoulder to shoulder with accountants and bakers. Teenagers and pensioners their faces were all a mask of utter bliss. It was just like Minx had said, none of them knew why, and certainly afterwards none could articulate what had motivated such actions. But in that moment it made perfect sense. All of those months of growing obsession with the strange creature in the house. Of that odd feeling of affinity they had with it, now they knew why.

It just made perfect sense, triggered by an almost physical flicking of a switch in their brains the moment Minx had screamed, fuelled as he was by the charm that was intended to keep him down. Not as it turned out, rise him up and set him free.

THIRTY-EIGHT

Father Ross could hear Dex Dexter screaming in protested even from inside the house and that ominous chant of the creature's name.

Minx rolled onto its side and propped itself up on its bony elbow and looked at the priest through a mask of dripping gore. Even now its face was beginning to reform before Ross' sickened gaze. Shattered bone and muscle shifting back into place accompanied by the sound of nauseating pops and cracks.

The creature smiled and it looked for a moment like the whole bottom half of its face would fall away the maw was so wide. Again it chuckled wetly clearly enjoying this new turn of events.

"Minx..." Ross was cut off by three rapid shots from outside.

He backed away towards the living room door as Minx slowly pushed itself up until it was on its hands and knees. Another two muffled shots rang out.

"Do you know the last rites, Father?" Minx gurgled.

Ross' back hit the door, he reached behind him and fumbled blindly for the door handle, never daring to take his eyes off Minx, who was now slowly crawling towards him.

"Minx, stop this," Ross pleaded.

“Stop what?” The demon slurred with all the innocence of a child killer. “It’s my fans,” it added. “Not me.”

As if hearing this, the crowd outside began chanting its name louder still. Another shot followed by raised voices in Russian.

“Take a look,” Minx said crawling closer still.

Ross found the door handle and flung open the door. He staggered down the hallway and over to the front door. He was about to reach for the handle but suddenly thought better of it. He glanced behind him as Minx appeared in the living room doorway and using the door, it pulled itself unsteadily to its feet. Where it waited leaning against the door for support.

Ross knelt down and pulled open the letter box so that he could peer outside.

“Christ,” he uttered. The crowd were massed just in front of the stage. Dozens upon dozens of them blended into one writhing mass. Three men whom the priest assumed were security men stood on the low stage with their guns thankfully pointed into the air.

Again each of them fired once into the night sky but the crowd didn’t so much as flinch. They could have quite easily rushed the three men and trampled them to death, but they waited, not out of fear, but as if they had been instructed to do so.

Dex Dexter was being held helplessly above them, they tossed and flung the beleaguered host about like a rag doll. He was naked now and his pasty body was battered and bloody. “Help me, help me!” He screamed in vain as he tumbled from hand to hand.

Finally the crowd rushed forwards like a tidal wave and the three security men were swallowed up in their midst. A moment later they too were raised up but unlike the unfortunately host they were handed almost gently towards the back of the crowd where they disappeared out of sight.

Then the mass of people moved back to the front of the stage once more like a single entity made up of hundreds of mismatched unrelated moving parts. And then an eerie silence fell over them.

“Minx,” Ross pleaded. “Let Dexter go,” he tore his eyes away from the surreal gathering and peered off through the letterbox to the side of the arena, where he could just see the main production office some way off, high up on a grid of scaffolding.

Perhaps a hundred more people were gathered around the bottom of it, pushing and pulling at the base of the structure which was swaying alarmingly.

“What?” Minx said from the room behind him. “And deny him his farewell performance?”

A scream of utter terror dragged Ross’ horrified gaze back to the host who was still aloft the crowd. Dexter was tumbling over and over, faster and faster as he was roughly past from one person to the next. Some would merely pass him on as if he were painful to the touch. Others were clawing and punching at him as he passed.

“Please...” Was all Ross could muster at the pitiful sight. Then Dexter suddenly disappeared as he fell into the throng.

Ross heard Minx draw in a long painful rasping breath. The priest closed his eyes for a moment in anticipation of what was to come.

“Tear him apart,” Minx hissed.

Despite his revulsion, Ross couldn’t help but look back out of the letterbox once more as Dexter’s high pitched shriek cut through him like a knife. All he could see now was the crowd fighting rabidly amongst themselves to get at the naked man. Each as eager as the next to obey their demonic obsession’s request. And he was damn glad that was all he could see.

High up in the production office Michael Davis and the others, all clinging onto anything solid as the whole structure threatened to topple over, weren’t so lucky.

They had literally a bird’s eye view of the slaughter of Dex Dexter.

Dozens of willing hands tore and gouged at the host as he fell amongst them. His pale skin burst and ripped open under the assault showering those

attackers closest to him in thick dark blood, and they revelled in it with an almost orgasmic glee, rubbing it all over their writhing bodies. Some were so intent on rendering Dexter apart that they used their teeth to rip into his flesh.

It was a feeding frenzy that would have put a pack of wild dogs to shame with its ferocity. Made all the more horrific by the banality of the attackers appearances. Normal everyday looking people driven to an act of unspeakable violence.

"They are going to kill us all!!" Someone screamed from somewhere just behind Davis who had wedged himself between a computer hard drive stack and the director's control desk to avoid being flung around like a rag doll. But it may just as well have been from a million miles away for all his terror addled brain could register it.

"No," he muttered as the realisation of his predicament finally forced its way through the fog of fear and into his consciousness. "Just me."

He reached for the small box holding the charm which he kept in his inside jacket pocket. "Fuck no!" The whole left hand side of his jacket had a long jagged rip in it and the pocket was gone. His hand came away bloody from a wound on his side he hadn't even noticed taking whilst being flung around the room. Bloody and empty.

The prefabricated structure shuddered violently again, at first he barely registered it but then gradually he became vaguely away of the sound of violent hammering from outside the door. The mob were just outside now, Minx's army come to deliver him into the wizened hands of their new God.

At least Dexter had stopped screaming he thought absently. He let his gaze fall through the cracked Perspex window and down to what was left of Dexter's body. The crowd had literally torn him limb from limb and worst still they were throwing his arms, legs and what must have been his crushed head into the air, passing them from one to another like an obscene game of human volleyball.

A fate he was sure to follow, or worse still when he was at the mercy of the creature he himself had tortured so unsparingly these long months. Unless.

Davis turned to take in the room around him which was in chaos. Miller the director was sprawled unconscious or dead on the floor half crushed by his beloved bank of large monitors. Many of the others were clinging onto anything they could to stop themselves being pitched forwards into the rapidly weakening observation window.

Davis didn't care about any of them, Christ he could hardly remember half their names. He didn't even flinch when he saw Tiff his long suffering assistant laid awkwardly amongst the debris covered in blood. No, it was the figure leant over her trying in vain to stem the flow of blood from what he could now see was a vicious looking wound on her neck that he needed.

He needed Nico Gorodetsky, he needed the Russian and not because the big man had sworn to protect him. The producer knew it was too late for that now. No, it was because Nico had a gun.

He staggered over to him twice nearly falling as he tripped over a body here a piece of smashed electronics there. "Nico!" He shouted above the din coming from just outside.

"Nico," he said again and half knelt half fell next to him.

The Russian had his hands clasped over Tiff's throat, thick blood was seeping through his fingers, and his face was set in grin determination as he tried to keep the young woman alive.

"Nico, I need your gun," he said softly.

Nico barely glanced at him. "You're not shooting anyone Davis," he said through gritted teeth. "It's too late for that now. These people, these people cannot help what they are doing."

"I know that," Davis replied as a strange sense of calm came over him. "And I don't want to shoot just anyone... Just me."

Gorodetsky looked at him in disbelief.

"If that creature gets a hold of me..." His voice trailed off as he contemplated that nightmare scenario.

The two men held each other's gaze for the longest moment and after an age the Russian's face softened in realization. He gave a slight nod of the head and motioned to his side.

Davis reached into Gorodetsky's jacket and pulled out the small pistol. And despite the sweltering atmosphere it felt ice cold in his hand.

THIRTY-NINE

Father Ross turned away from the scene of horror outside and slumped down with his back against the door. The crowd had taken to throwing Dexter's dismembered limbs, entrails and God only knew what else, onto the stage as if in offering to the demon, and he didn't need to see that.

The object of their devotion was still in the living room doorway. It's once ruined face now almost back to 'normal' if still covered in its dark viscous blood. The creature straightened seeing the young priest's deflated expression. Its cat like eyes shining brighter still in the gloom.

"It was no more than that parasite deserved," Minx said in anticipation of the accusation to come.

"Please, stop this," Ross said close to total despair. "Those poor people out there. How will they live with themselves?"

"Some won't," Minx replied with a little mischief in its strange voice.

So many ruined lives, Ross thought with dejection. Of all the possible scenarios of how he had imagined tonight playing out. This was not one of them. This was a waking nightmare and he wondered as he sat there if he was to suffer the same fate as the hapless Dex Dexter.

"I'm a demon," Minx suddenly said as if in way of explanation. But then it paused for a moment as it studied the defeated priest. "But I mean you no

harm holy man. You have been the one human I have encountered that has shown me anything other than hate, scorn or like those outside, blind uncomprehending obedience. You tried to help end my suffering and not for your own altruistic reasons. And despite yourself I believe you have finally helped end it."

"You are not what I expected at all," Ross told it and could feel the first chill of shock begin take hold.

"Nor you I," Minx replied. "Know that none of this was your fault, just as none of it was mine. We are just pawns in some great sick game. But it is a game I will now gladly end."

Michael Davis turned the pistol over in his hands. It was the first time he had actually held one that was not a child's plaything and it felt alien to the touch. Death in a metal and plastic casing. He cocked back the hammer with a quiet almost serene sense of calm. Suicide, although it was not his style at all was far more preferable to the horrors Minx would visit upon him if it could.

It would be a victory of sorts he mused. To rob the little shit of its one and only reason for being.

He glanced from the pistol to the door, although it was shaking violently from the onslaught from those outside it was holding firm, for now. More than enough time to end it all...

Then the world literally turned upside down as the whole structure pitched forwards with the sound of harsh screeching metal. Davis was sent tumbling through the air as the scaffolding legs at the front of the prefabricated office buckled and the building came crashing down.

The whole front crumpled in on itself as it hit the ground with a deafening explosion as the structure shattered on impact.

Davis was flung through the already half shattered perplex observation window and fell hard amongst the jagged debris which spilled out onto the field crushing many of those who had helped pull the building down. He saw stars and bells rang as something struck him on the side of the head.

A moment later blood was pouring down his face and into his eyes blinding him, he tried to cry out but got a mouthful of blood which made him choke and vomit. He turned onto his side and was rewarded with the pain of half a dozen white hot knives in his chest and ribs.

He forced himself through the pain to get onto all fours so the blood, which was still pumping from the wound on his head, was no longer running into his eyes or down his throat.

He spat up an alarming amount of it and thankfully gulped in a lungful of much needed copper tinged oxygen as his airway cleared somewhat.

He could hear screaming and shouting through the ringing in his ears, and he somehow managed to sit down awkwardly and tilting his head to one side so the blood didn't go into his eyes again, he took in in his surroundings, and it was like being in the middle of a bloody medieval battle.

There was pandemonium all around him, the broken and ruined bodies of the crowd and his team alike were strewn as far as he could see amongst the smashed building.

And worse still, several were still crawling towards him, despite horrendous injuries clawing at the ground dragging themselves through the mayhem. Still intent on carrying out their master's command. '*Bring him to me...*'

Davis screamed and tried in vain to back away. He desperately searched around him but the gun was lost. He kicked out as a young man tried to grab a hold of his legs. His lacerated face set in a grim determination and seemed oblivious to the fact that the reason he couldn't get a good hold of Davis' trouser leg was due to the fact that he was missing several fingers on both hands.

Davis' heel caught his would be attacker hard in the bridge of his already broken nose snapping his head back, he slumped forwards but still his ruined hands clawed blindly on.

"Christ, Christ!" Davis cried out and shuffled backwards as best he could. There were many, many shadowy, ragged figures looming over him

now, fighting amongst themselves arms outstretched, grasping claw-like fingers eager to get at him. He let out a shriek of terror as he was set upon from behind. Hands pulling at his clothes and grabbing violently at his hair.

The frenzied mob had him by the arms and legs now and he was hoisted high above their heads. And just like Dexter before him they passed the helpless man from one to another eager to offer him up for execution. Some holding him lost their footing as they surged on and were trampled underfoot as he was carried onwards towards the house and the hell that awaited him there.

Mister Minx tilted its head to one side and let out a gasp of pure emotion. Its burning eyes welled with red tinted tears and it brought its hand up to its mouth almost in shock.

From the look of it Ross first thought that Davis had somehow gotten away or perhaps was already dead and thus denying the creature its much sought after revenge.

But this was a look of genuine joy, of a realization it could finally put an end to the torment. Or as much of such a look that its twisted face could portray.

It looked past Ross and to the door he was leant against as the sound of the approaching crowd grew in volume.

'Minx, Minx, Minx!' They chanted. Louder and louder. Ross could feel the door vibrate as they over ran the stage on mass and came up onto the porch just outside. Two hundred odd feet stomping on as one entity.

The young priest instinctively rolled out of the way and against the wall as the door rattled violently on its hinges then burst open hitting him hard on the legs and he just about managed to bring his arms up to protect his head as the door slammed against his side.

A battered and naked body was flung into the hallway. It lay only a few feet from him steaming in the night air. Ross could feel rather than see the seething mass of people outside. He could hear their hissing breath as they

waited just outside for further instruction. Or perhaps to best witness the unholy end of Michael Davis.

It took the dazed producer a few moments to realise where he was, he looked uncertainly at what looked like a priest sitting jammed with his knees up under his chin between the wall and the open door and the faceless mob gathered at the threshold.

He was in the house he realised with a jolt of terror. "Father?" He rasped. But all the priest could do was numbly shake his head.

Davis felt a chill on his sweat soaked naked back. Something was moving down the hallway towards him. He choked back a sob. This was it, the oft repeated nightmare of that fateful night in an anonymous hotel room where, by rights, he should have met his end in the most hideous of ways.

A fate he had thought he had not only escaped from, but profited from too. Then in the cold reality of an otherwise mild Spanish evening he knew all he had done, perhaps in truth had always known he had done, was simply to postpone the inevitable execution.

There was no German here to save him this time, just a terrified priest and a mindless mob. It was strange, as he turned to face the creature Michael Davis was hit with the overwhelming sense that the whole scene had a sweet inevitability about it.

"Hello Michael," Minx said as he turned stiffly to face the demon.

"Hello Minx," Davis replied with resignation.

Despite the new found acceptance of his fate, Davis fair yelped in terror as Minx leapt towards him. The creature seemed to double in size as it flew at him and he was hit with a jolt of sickening dark energy that radiated from the demon now that it was close. He felt the sweat on his naked flesh evaporate, then the skin itself began to burn as it slammed into him. He was sent sprawling onto his back and a moment later Minx was squatting on his chest. It leant down close to his face and said what they were both thinking.

"Déjà vu?"

Then the demon looked up at the priest, any hint of that meek and defeated creature he had first encountered was now gone. Minx was once again at the height of its full horrifying power. And it was terrifying.

"Get out," it hissed.

Ross didn't need to be told twice, there was nothing he could do here but get gone and let this play out the way it always should have, out of sight of the real world.

He scrambled to his feet and into the open doorway, he stumbled out onto the porch as the door slammed shut behind him.

He was met by a sea of grief stricken faces. Many of the crowd, especially those at the front seemed to finally snap out of their collective fugue as if the door shutting had somehow broken off the psychic hold Minx had on them.

Suddenly one by one they realized where they were, who they were and worse still, what they had done. A chorus of wails and cries of utter lamentation followed as that wave of realization washed over them all.

Some fell to their knees screaming and pulled at their hair in horror, others began beating their heads on the ground as if trying to dislodge the memory of their part in the slaughter.

Most ran, anywhere, everywhere just to get away from the scene of the crime, shrieking as they went.

As the crowd cleared, Ross finally began to see the full extent of the devastation. The dead and dying were laid all around the field, dozens of them. To his right the collapsed observation office had caught fire and was now slowly being engulfed in flames.

It was like a scene out of Dante, a little slice of hell spewed up from the pit in stark contrast to the surrounding Spanish countryside.

Then Ross was suddenly pitched forwards as the porch seemed to ripple under his feet. He fell next to a young woman on her knees who was screaming and clawing at her bloody face in blind lunacy. The priest was about to go to

her and make an attempt to stop her self-assault when the sound of ear shattering screeching metal and splintering wood came from the house at his back.

The whole theatrically wrought building was collapsing in on itself, like a child's doll house made of cardboard being crushed by some massive invisible hand.

As the roof caved in the whole front of the house split open and for the briefest of moments Ross caught sight of the demon inside as it tore into the prone producer. Its face was a picture of twisted bliss until finally the walls came down obscuring the scene of execution from view.

Moments later the once impressive house was little more than a smouldering heap of twisted rubble. Then finally that too was crushed smaller still until little remained but a deep smouldering hole in the ground, its occupants supernatural and all too human alike were gone. One to a blessed release the other to God only knew what hell.

FORTY

Father Ross sat in shock with his knees tucked up under his chin as he watched the destruction come to an end. Time was a nonsense as he sat there for what could have been seconds or hours for all his shocked brain could comprehend.

Although the house, Minx and Davis were gone from sight he was sure he could still hear the producer screaming and that sickening cackling laugh from the creature. Gradually the voices faded at last as did the searing heat from the hole that had claimed them. And Ross thanked Christ for it.

"Father!" A woman's voice shouted over the sound of a distant gunning diesel engine.

At first Ross thought it was the crazed woman at his side, but when he turned she was gone. He looked around in a daze through the thick acrid smoke that was now engulfing the whole sorry scene, until he saw a large tour bus with tinted windows pull up alongside the half demolished grandstand at the perimeter of the clearing.

Of all things, a zombie appeared to be hanging out of the bus's side door waving at him from across the chaos and for a moment Ross thought that maybe this whole damned event had actually sparked off the apocalypse.

"Father," the zombie woman shouted. "Father, come on!"

Ross got unsteadily to his feet and made his way numbly through the surreal scene around him in a stupor, barely registering the nightmare he was walking through. Those able to run, walk or crawl away had long since vacated the field leaving only the twisted dead and dying behind as a testament to the horrors they had caused.

As he approached the bus he realised the zombie was in fact one of the show's demonettes, the girl who had led him to the stage, what seemed like a lifetime ago now.

"Canadian, not American," he said hoarsely, which won a smile from the cheerleader.

"That's right, Father! Come on get in, we need to get the hell out of here. The cops and probably the whole Spanish army are on their way."

She held out a hand and as Ross took it she pulled him inside.

The doors hissed shut behind him and the bus lurched off, winding its way through the mayhem.

"Sit down before you fall down, Father," the girl told him and he slumped down into a seat next to her. "Thought you were dead in there," she said and hugged his arm.

"Me too," Ross said vacantly. He took in the other passengers on the bus. He recognised the driver straight away. It was his Russian minder from the

hotel, Rubin if he remembered correctly. The big man's face was set in grim concentration as he drove.

He counted five other Demonettes huddled together near the back of the bus. Several others, production staff he assumed were sitting either in groups or on their own, some staring blankly out of the tinted windows half catatonic with shock like refuges from a war zone.

What looked like a small triage area had been set up by the bus's kitchen. Where Ross could see a large man tending to a young woman who from where he was sat seemed to have what looked like a bloody towel wrapped around her neck.

She was pale but conscious, nodding gently to whatever her saviour was saying to her. He shouted something in what sounded like Russian down to the driver who nodded and shouted back in the same language.

"I'm glad you're okay," Ross said to the Canadian as his gaze came to rest on her. She laid her head on his shoulder.

"Craziest thing I ever fucking saw," she said.

"Amen," Ross replied and was actually touched when he saw her smile at this. "What's going to happen to all those poor people back there?" He added suddenly remembering the dead and injured he had just sleepwalked passed. "We have to help them."

"Don't worry, we called the cops the moment it all kicked off." Her face took on a haunted look. "A lot of people died here tonight."

He nodded and put a comforting arm around the girl. It was true, a lot of people where dead. And those many more who had survived would be scarred both mentally and physically for life.

He had come here tonight to end demon time, and more by luck than judgement he had done so, or at least played an unwitting part in its destruction. But at what cost? Just as Minx had said, none of it was his fault, but still so many lives either cut short or damaged forever because of his being here.

The road they were on seemed to smooth out and the bus picked up speed.

“Guess I’m out of a job,” the Canadian girl said after a while.

“Guess so.” Ross replied. And as they drove on in silence the young priest contemplated on what was next for him. Could he really go back to his normal life after what he had witnessed here tonight? Not to mention his encounter with Hauser and the dead creature in the box back in Mexico.

No, that old life of ignorance was over now. For better or for worse. Suddenly that small village so many hundreds of miles away came into his mind’s eye. They were so much a like now that place, its inhabitants, and he. All touched by a darkness that had threatened to engulf them forever, yet they had survived, either directly by or just by mere mention of his name, thanks to a cantankerous old German.

Hauser. Thought of the old man made Ross smile despite himself. Although he had only known the man briefly, he had felt, perhaps even more so now, an affinity with him. After all who in this world knew better than they what lurks within the periphery of the worlds gaze? Kindred spirits now more than ever.

“What are you smiling at Father?” The Canadian girl said from beside him.

Ross turned to look at her. She was an old soul in a young body who, in her own way, and like everybody else present here tonight had been touched a little by the supernatural.

“I’m Shane,” he said.

“Mika,” the girl replied.

“Have you ever been to Mexico, Mika?” He asked. It was out of the blue but seemed perfect all the same.

She looked taken a back for a split second then smiled. “No,” she replied. “But I don’t have a passport either.” She added. “I think it’s burning up back there somewhere.”

“Don’t worry,” Ross said thinking of Mendez and his resources, after all that man owed him a lot. “I know a guy.”

FORTY-ONE

The official inquiry into the horrendous events of that night confirmed that all told, the death toll from the last ever episode of demon time was thirty seven, with a further seventy three injured.

It was easy for a world not yet ready to accept the supernatural to believe the official statement (heavily edited on the quiet by a Vatican priest by the name of Father Mendez) that the whole horrific nightmare had been sparked off not by demonic influence, but by hallucinogens put into the free water handed out before the show by the production under the instructions of the show’s producer Michael Davis to help maintain the show’s illusion. A stunt that had gone horrendously wrong, resulting in such death, mayhem and murder.

The fact that Davis himself had now disappeared added fuel to this as did the reported missing hundreds of thousands of Euros that had disappeared from the production company’s bank account at the same time. (These funds had actually been frozen and seized by Interpol, but that was on a need to know basis, which it was concluded, again on consultation with the Vatican. The public did not need to know.

And thus, those who had survived that nightmare and may have ‘allegedly’ taken part in the slaughter could not themselves be held accountable for their actions. And so, despite the great loss of life no charges would be brought against any of the protagonists, who it was decided were as much victims of the whole sorry debacle as the dead or maimed.

No, the only person held directly responsible for the horrific events of that night was Michael Davis. Davis’s name was added to the Interpol most

wanted list, but so far it was as if he had completely disappeared off the face of the earth. As if the ground had just opened up and swallowed him if you would.

The demon time website was shut down soon after, but as with most things on the internet, ripped copies of the previous shows, and some tantalizing saved footage from the last, were available for those web surfers interested, or ghoulish enough to seek them out.

It wasn't long before the show and its contentious 'star' became the stuff of internet myth. As the years went on, you would even find caricatures of the creature popping up in memes and e-cards particularly around Halloween time.

The strange thing was though, after that last doomed show, those around the world who had once been positively obsessed with the so-called real demon but had never had the chance to see the show live, suddenly found themselves completely disinterested in the whole affair afterwards.

And if you were to ask them now what had fuelled their almost rabid devotion to a clearly fictional creation. They would not have been able to tell you. 'Guess it was just a faze,' many might say with an embarrassed reddening of the cheeks, just like an adolescent teenage pop sensation crush.

Although deep down they knew it was much, much more than that. It had been an addiction of sorts, and one they had now gladly kicked.

FORTY-TWO

The efficiency with which the Vatican had dealt with the murderous aftermath of demon time had left Father Shane Ross with the rather disturbing impression that they had dealt with similar events before, and as such were now well practiced in the art of the supernatural cover up.

If Ross had been somewhat surprised at the Vatican's talent for putting out misinformation regarding the occult. There was one thing that did not come as a shock. Their aptitude for inquisition.

Following his escape from the carnage of the show, Ross had found himself whisked away to the holy city itself. Where he had endured four full days of medical tests and questions about what he had seen, heard, felt even smelt in his short time in the presence of the creature.

There were times when he felt like the only survivor of an Ebola outbreak. He was constantly checked for fever, nausea and any adverse side effects. A stern looking nun took so many blood samples from him that Ross seriously began to wonder if in fact the woman was a vampire.

A team of doctors prodded and poked him looking for any sign that he may have somehow been 'infected' by Minx. But infected with what he was never sure, neither he came to suspect were his examiners.

Then came the questions. What did the creature look like up close? (Fucking horrible.) What were the effects of its strange voice on the young priest? (Fucking horrible.)

They even rolled in a police style sketch artist who he gave a vivid description to of what Minx looked like as best he could remember, as he could never actually bring himself to look at the demon for more than a fleeting moment. Still, his response was the same. (Fucking horrible.)

Finally at the end of the fourth gruelling day they left him alone. He had been sitting on his bed, contemplating how he might escape when an old, yet robust looking Hispanic priest knocked then came quietly into the room.

"Now what?" Ross asked wearily.

The old priest smiled and although he had never met him before, Ross instantly knew who he was.

"Where the fucking hell have you been?"

"I see you lost your swear filter since last we spoke," Father Mendez said.

"Four days of this shit would do that to Mother Teresa!"

“Fair enough,” Mendez relented.

Before he realised what he was going, Ross was on his feet and hugging the old man.

“I’m so sorry I couldn’t get in to see you sooner. They have had the whole place on lock down since they brought you here.” Mendez said, nearly squeezing the life out of Ross.

The man might be old Ross thought as he finally released him. But he was far from frail. “So, am I a prisoner here or what?” Ross asked.

Mendez looked at him for a moment not understanding, then he looked around the room and laughed. “No, Lord no. I’m here to get you out.”

“I’m free to go?” Ross asked not quite believing the priest.

“Quite free,” Mendez replied. “Everything is arranged as you asked,” he added. “Before all this of course.”

Mexico.

Ross had called Mendez the first chance he got after the bus carrying the bedraggled survivors had stopped at a hospital to drop off the wounded.

Most of the crew had chosen to scatter then, conscious of the fact that the police would soon be scouring half the country looking for anyone involved. They hadn’t known then of the Vatican brokered general amnesty that was to follow in the days to come.

Mika, for her part had decided to stay with Ross and he was secretly glad of it. Not just for her company and the fast formed bond they now had between them, but also as a reminder that everything that had happened there was not some strange fever dream. Or later as the Vatican put it, an acid trip gone horribly wrong.

He had promised to take Mika with him to Mexico once they had been picked up by the Vatican but hadn’t seen her since.

“Where’s Mika?” Ross asked.

“Oh, she’s a piece of work that one,” Mendez said with a knowing smile. “She threatened to break in here single handed and to ‘bust you out’, as she put it.”

“She’s okay?”

“She’s fine. I managed to convince her we weren’t going to make you disappear or have you locked away in some Vatican vault. She is in a hotel not far from here.”

“Good,” Ross said relived.

“Shall we, Shane?” Mendez gestured to the open door and Ross was more than happy to follow the old priest as he left the room and walked out into a brightly lit Vatican hospital corridor.

“I’m not going to miss this place,” Ross said as they walked.

“Again, I’m sorry about all this, Shane. To be honest we all panicked after what happened. We didn’t know what to expect when we picked you up. We weren’t sure what had truly happened that night.”

“All hell broke loose, that’s what happened.” Ross said.

“I know, I read the transcripts of your interviews, not to mention the show itself before the live feed went down.”

“Interviews? Well I suppose that’s one word for it. That whole acid in the water routine was quite a trick.”

“That was my idea,” Mendez said with a shake of the head, his face grew darker. “Thing is, I think even our own people are starting to believe it.”

“What? They think the whole thing was a hoax, even after what they saw, after what happened to all those people?”

“It’s easier than the truth, Shane. It’s more that they want to believe it was only a fiction. It’s easier that way. Perhaps in the end even for the better.”

“That’s insane,” Ross said in disbelief.

“That’s human nature,” Mendez replied.

“That’s bullshit.”

“True, but the main thing is that you are okay. The creature is gone and that ghastly show is finished. In the end that’s more than I could ever have hoped for.” Mendez paused for a moment as they reached the hospital’s open reception area, due to the late hour it was all but deserted.

“Father?” Ross gently touched the old priest’s arm.

“So many dead,” Mendez said, his voice a whisper his face grave.

“I know. I’ve thought about little else since. But you know what? It’s not your fault, just as I know it’s not mine. Michael Davis killed all those people with his greed.”

Mendez nodded. “Well he certainly reaped the whirlwind for it.”

“Yes he did,” Ross replied.

“Still it’s a shame you couldn’t have retrieved any of those charms Hauser gave Davis.” Mendez said a little forlornly. “We checked the whole area after the clean-up. There was nothing left but a hole in the ground.”

“I was a little distracted,” Ross said in way of reply.

“I know, I’m sorry, it’s just they would have been very useful.” Mendez said.

“The whole thing is best left alone,” Ross could see a taxi parked outside. The driver got out seeing them enter the reception area. “That my ride?” He said gesturing to the taxi.

Mendez nodded. “It will take you to the hotel, Mika is there. The manager has a case for you. It has everything you need, passports, money and the like. Take it with our thanks.”

“You not coming?”

“No, I have much to do here. Those demons won’t fight themselves you know?”

“There’s more?” Ross asked feeling the pit of his stomach drop into his boots.

“No,” Mendez laughed heartily and it warmed Ross’ whole being. “We’ll, not that we know about for sure,” he winked and held out his hand. “There’s not many who have seen what you have seen and come out of it at the end, Shane. With body and soul intact that is.”

Ross patted himself down. “I think I’ve still got both,” he replied.

“How about sanity?”

“That comes and goes,” Ross said playfully.

“So, nothing new there then.”

Ross ignored Mendez outstretched hand and hugged the man again. “Keep fighting the good fight, Father.”

“I will,” Mendez replied his voice think with emotion. He released his hold on Ross and stepped back. “And say Hi to Hauser for me.”

Ross began to make his way over to the automatic sliding doors leading outside. He paused for a moment and turned back to see Mendez still stood there watching him. He could have sworn the old priest had tears in his eyes.

“I’ll see you again, Father,” Ross told him. Suddenly feeing emotional himself. Like he was leaving an old friend behind whom he may not actually see again.

Mendez nodded. “And under better circumstances I hope.”

“Amen to that.”

“Amen indeed,” Mendez echoed.

And with that Father Shane Ross ended is one and only visit to the Vatican. He wouldn’t miss it.

FORTY-THREE

When Father Ross had first entered the village of Santuario, he had been met with suspicion and fear. Due in no small part of course to the fact that he was a priest. He had gone there in the hope of finding some way to fight a creature that at the time he did not even believe was real.

But instead he had found so much more than he could ever have expected. He had found a village touched by evil but one that whilst never forgetting the awful events that had befallen it, had nevertheless refused to be bowed by such horrors. And Ross had taken strength from that collective fortitude with him into the house of the demon Minx.

Back then, although it seemed impossible to him now that it was only a few weeks ago. The mere sight of Ross' dog collar had sent the children of the village running in fright. So much so that he had been obliged to remove it for fear of offending the more inebriated locals.

He had felt like what he was, an unwanted guest from an organisation hated by their beloved saviour. Now he felt like one of them.

"Place is kinda quaint," Mika said as she steered their hire car through the narrow dirt road which ran through the centre of Santuario. She had insisted on driving after they collected the car from the airport. 'As you Brits drive on the wrong side of the road to the rest of the civilized world.' And Ross had been more than happy to let her.

"Yes it is," Ross agreed as he stared wistfully out of the side window at the buildings passing by. Although he had only spent a few days in the village it was small enough for him to know that as they approached a fork in the road, if they turned right the road would lead up past the houses and end outside the church. Well, what was left of the building anyway.

He and Hauser had walked up it at the very end of his first night here. And it had marked the end of his ignorance in all matters supernatural, and with it his innocence too.

“Which way?” Mika asked as the fork in the road became visible through the dust kicked up by the vehicle as they drove . She glanced at the sat nav but it had failed them half a dozen times already since reaching the village.

“Left,” he replied with a shiver. “Definitely left.”

Mika glanced right then gunned the engine and sung the car left and onto the road which Ross knew would lead them down a steep winding road which weaved through the main centre of the village and into the large square which Hauser’s villa overlooked.

“Careful, it gets a little steep down here,” Ross warned.

“Shit, we ain’t seen another car since we got here,” Mika said. “Have you seen the way people have been staring at us since we arrived? I don’t think they’ve seen a modern car in years.”

They passed a small café with three elderly men sitting around a table outside, the trio all stopped their animated conversation and stared at the car as it drove on. Ross noticed that one of the men picked up a mobile phone.

Mika apparently noticed this too. “Weird,” she said. “You see that old dude? That’s at least the third time someone has gone straight to their phone when they saw us.”

“Yeah,”

“Whadda ya think, Mexican C.I.A?” Mika said with a chuckle.

“No,” Ross replied with a smile of his own. “Not Mexican, Hauser’s.”

As they reached the bottom of the steep hill the road veered off sharply to the left, Mika slowed the car as they approached and took the corner at a safe pace. The road levelled out ahead of them now and the view either side opened up to reveal the entrance to the village’s large central square.

“Shit! Would you look at that?” Mika exclaimed.

The road leading into the square was lined either side with dozens upon dozens of villagers. A cheer went up as they drove passed them and reached the square itself. People began running alongside the car as it pulled into the open area. Whooping and hollering.

“I think we were expected,” Ross said with no little surprise.

“I thought you said your reception last time was... How’d you put it?”

“Luke warm,” Ross replied.

Mika had to slow the car as they drove to avoid hitting anyone as they swarmed around them, a sea of excited faces peering in through the windows at the duo. She finally brought the vehicle to a halt and turned off the engine.

“After you, padre.” Mika smirked eyeing the crowd. “If this turns into a lynching I want you as a distraction so I can get the hell out of here.”

“Cheers,” Ross replied. He moved to open his door, but someone from the crowd opened it for him.

He was immediately hit by the heat as he got out. Although it was only mid-morning the contrast to the air conditioned interior of the car nearly knocked him back into his seat again.

People in the crowd parted to allow him out. Many grabbing his hand, one after the other shaking it vigorously. He was nearly winded not only by the heat but by the over enthusiastic back slapping he received as he moved very slowly through the throng.

“Thank you, cheers, thanks,” Ross felt like a movie star meeting and greeting his fans at a premier. Here and there, he recognised some of the villagers gathered around him and gave them a nod as he passed. He even gave a hi-five to one of the children he had sent running in terror upon his first visit.

He absently checked his dog collar, no it was still there. Although he had left under better circumstances than he had arrived last time he had not expected this.

He glanced back over to the car, Mika was making her way through the crowd now. Someone thrust a bottle of tequila into her hand and she took a swig.

“I like it here!” She shouted over the hubbub whilst wincing at the liquor.

Ross was about to shout back about the fact it was still way before noon for a drink when he barged into someone. He turned about to apologise when he realised it was no accidental collision. It was a full on embrace.

"Oh, Padre. Estês bien? Le hizo dâno? Terrible, horrible criatura!" It was Gabriela, Hauser's housekeeper and all round conscience, her voice was wracked with emotion as she hugged the breath right out of him.

"Gabriela, I'm fine, I'm fine," Ross said returning her embrace.

She pulled away and looked up at him with tears in her deep brown eyes. She held his face in her hands. "Dear, dear boy," she said in broken English.

"I'm okay," he assured her softly. "Honestly."

"Christ Woman! Give the man some air. He didn't come all this way to be suffocated by your bosom."

Hauser.

Although Ross couldn't yet see the German he shouted above the noise of the crowd. "I could think of worse ways to go."

Gabriela for her part looked at him a little confused and the priest was glad her English was at best limited. Still he blushed and gave her an apologetic shrug.

Mika, still clutching the bottle struggled over to Ross' side. She offered him the tequila.

"No thanks," he said. His head was already swimming from the heat.

Finally the crowd parted to reveal Hauser sitting at a large picnic table flanked by Rosa and her daughter Alicia.

"Hauser I presume," Mika said and took a swig of tequila.

"Who else?" Ross said and moved forwards away from Mika and the crowd, who all instinctively kept a respectful distance, and over to the table. He

nodded and gave Alicia and Rosa a wave and they nodded back, smiling warmly.

Hauser began to get to his feet, wincing at the effort so the two woman rose with him and each took an elbow to help him up.

"They saw the show?" Ross asked in disbelief and gestured around him.

"Lord no," Hauser said as Rosa and Alicia guided him around the table and over to Ross. "Well some did."

"Did you?"

The German nodded and took a couple of steps away from his two helpers. "I did." He said firmly.

Hauser stopped as he reached Ross and studied the priest for the longest time, and the crowd fell silent. He frowned and looked right into Ross' eyes as if looking for something, some sign of what he had been through. Perhaps, Ross mused looking for something the German recognised in his own eyes.

"I told them all what you did," Hauser said, still scrutinising him.

"Not sure what I did," Ross conceded and averted his eyes from the German.

"Hey," Hauser said putting his hand under Ross' chin and raising his head back up. "You survived, and that's a damn sight more than I thought you would. And you helped bring down that travesty."

"Yeah," Ross said awkwardly.

Hauser suddenly grabbed a hold of Ross' shirt and pulled him close and into an embrace. "Welcome home, Shane."

This won a cheer from the gathered masses and from Mika who clearly couldn't help herself. She raised the bottle and took a hit before passing it to an old man next to her who gratefully grabbed it and snapped it up to his lips with all the practiced movement of a seasoned drinker.

Hauser finally released Ross and patted him on both shoulders. "You know what this place needs don't you, my boy? A new priest."

This started a ripple of whispers within the crowd as those who spoke English translated for the others. Then once the message had filtered through another cheer of approval went up.

"You know of anyone?" Hauser added.

Ross paused to collect himself. "Oh, I'm sure I can think of someone," Ross said, his voice cracking a little, completely humbled by the offer and the response from the villagers.

He turned to Mika who was now arm in arm with her new drinking buddy. Her face was bright red from both the heat and alcohol.

"This is Mika," he said. "She's a good friend of mine, she was at the show, helped get me out."

Mika saluted the crowd and Hauser with the bottle. "He's a priest," she said loudly. "But I sure ain't no nun!"

Hauser laughed and eyed her freshly dyed blue spikey hair. "I gathered that," he said. "And that makes you doubly welcome."

Again the crowd cheered after a slight delay for interpretation.

Alicia came over to Ross and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "The children will have to come up with a new show," she said brightly. "One with a happy ending this time."

"I can do the choreography!" Mika offered and pirouetted on the spot to prove her credentials. Which won a round of applause from those around her.

Hauser put his arm around Ross' shoulder. "Let's get you into the shade, padre, you look fit to drop."

"Good idea," Ross agreed. And they set off towards the cool interior of a nearby tavern.

"We've a lot to talk about," Hauser whispered to him as they walked. "I want you to tell me everything about the creature."

"There's not much to tell," Ross said. "In the end all it wanted to do was die."

“I should have killed the thing,” Hauser replied with an edge of sorrow in his voice.

“You weren’t to know,” Ross told him as they entered the wonderfully air conditioned tavern. “Besides, in the end it got what it wanted, Michael Davis and oblivion. And I’ve got a new lease of life.”

“And a new family,” Hauser said and motioned towards a table.

Both men sat down, Ross looked through the open door to see Mika slumping down at a table outside with Alicia and several of the locals. It warmed his heart.

A barman approached and placed two glasses of ice cold water in front of the two men. Ross studied his glass intently, thinking of all those who died at the show.

“Hey,” Hauser said reading his thoughts. “It’s over, time for a new start. Time enough here for you to heal, and also help all of us heal.”

Ross brightened at this. He hadn’t thought of it like that. This wasn’t just an escape from what had happened. This was indeed a new start, a time to heal as Hauser had said not only himself but Mika and the whole village of Santuario as well.

All of them touched by evil, but had lived to tell the tale. He decided then and there that he would no longer dwell on the past, after all there was nothing he could do to change what had happened and he sure couldn’t bring back any of the dead of demon time.

A new play for the kids to learn, one of hope not morbid remembrance. He smiled to himself as he imagined one of the children, perhaps even one of those he had scared half out of their wits when he had first arrived, playing him in the show.

A show Mika would fuss and stress over no doubt. It would do them all good to let the past go but without ever forgetting.

“A priest needs a church,” Ross said and took a sip of cool water.

Hauser looked up at him surprised for a moment then his face softened. He nodded. “That is a perfect place to start.”

END

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