

## 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.

"Yeeeeessss," 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...

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