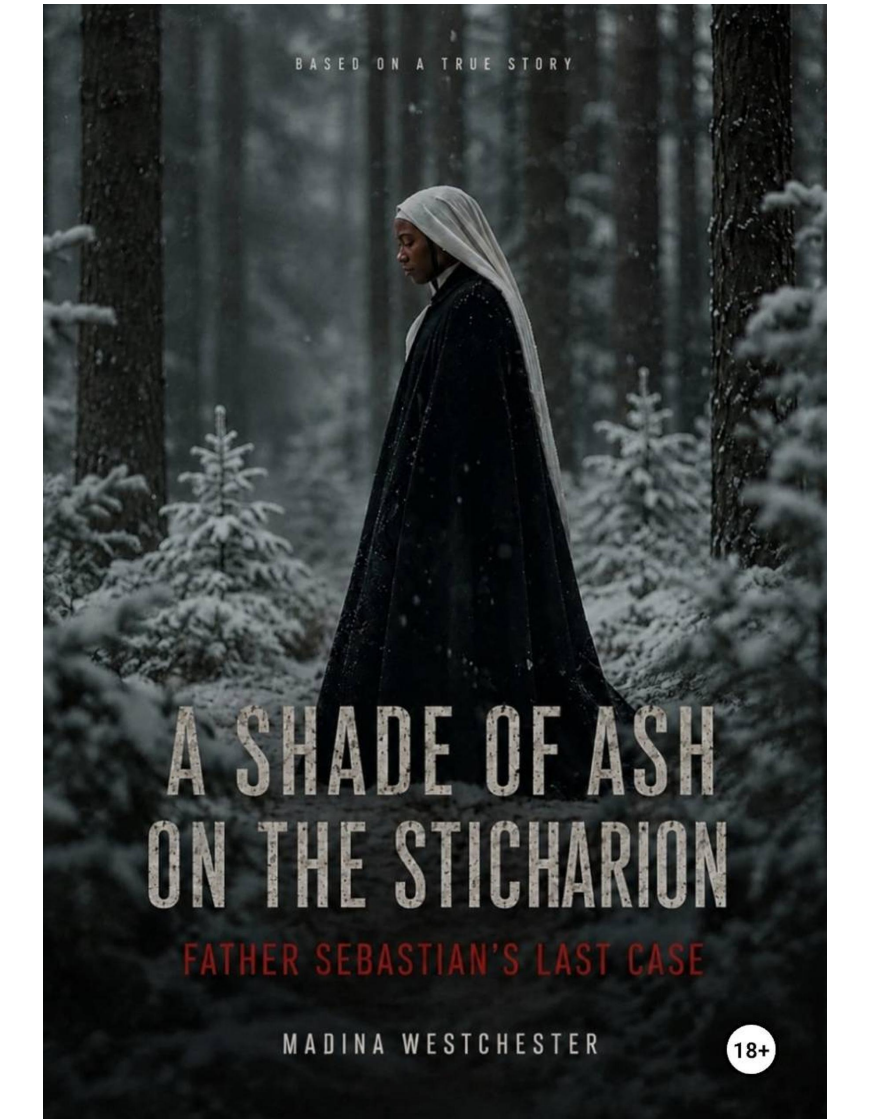


A woman, likely a nun, is shown in profile, walking through a dense, snow-covered forest. She is wearing a black sticharion (veil) and a white headscarf. The forest is filled with tall, dark trees and snow-covered evergreens. The overall atmosphere is somber and mysterious.

BASED ON A TRUE STORY

A SHADE OF ASH ON THE STICHARION

FATHER SEBASTIAN'S LAST CASE

MADINA WESTCHESTER

18+

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A Shade of Ash on the Sticharion.
Father Sebastian's Last Case

*<https://litres.ru/74267627>
SelfPub; 2026*

Аннотация

At its heart lie the real tragedies of Spain's psychotic era of the 1980s.

Madrid, 1987, suffocates under heat and paranoia, as the media hunts for devil-worshippers. Guiding Sebastián through a chain of genuine human atrocities, Lucifer systematically shatters his mind. But the priest does not suspect that behind every vice he witnesses lurks a sinister hidden meaning — and when the heavy gates of the Almudena Cathedral lock themselves shut, Sebastián will have to pay the most terrible price.

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A Shade of Ash on the Sticharion. Father Sebastian's Last Case

Глава

Author's Foreword

Months of studying sealed documents from Spain's "Satanic panic" of the 1980s have blurred the line between holiness and sin. Hidden inside criminal case files, demonologists' reports, and the dry intelligence protocols of Madrid and Barcelona lies the reverse side of faith — the one the Vatican has ordered kept silent. For centuries, the Church knew about the corruption within its own ranks, yet preferred to keep the Inquisition's archives under lock and key while churches burned on the streets.

In 1987, madness swept across Spain. On Madrid's black market, a single consecrated host from the Almudena Cathedral was valued at a thousand euros. Defrocked priests celebrated Mass using LSD and cocaine, while police raids turned up overturned crucifixes and empty tabernacles. At the same time, Cardinal Ratzinger was signing strict circulars, trying to rein in the chaos and forbidding laypeople from reading exorcisms.

Bureaucracy tried to strangle living horror.

This book grew out of documented crimes, stolen relics, and the confessions of people who walked through hell. The most terrifying thing is silence. The absolute, deafening silence that remains after the most desperate prayers. A person breaks precisely at that moment. They are willing to endure any pain as long as they believe someone is listening. But when heaven remains silent in response to a cry for help, the last human thing inside them dies.

Father Sebastian is the real face of this tragedy. He had dozens of names in police records and parish registers across Levante. He walked a path the Church would call absolute damnation. Sebastian simply grew tired of wearing holiness like heavy armor that digs into open wounds. He chose the Darkness not out of a thirst for power, but because the Darkness turned out to be the only interlocutor willing to listen.

Archives can be sealed. The ash on the sticharion cannot be hidden.

PART ONE

Before the Line

1

Barcelona in June 1987 smelled of orange peel, roasted almonds, and cheap tobacco. By noon, the sun had turned

La Rambla into a scorching frying pan. Tourists in bright T-shirts fanned themselves with metro maps and drank ice-cold sangría. Young guys on skateboards rattled past the fountains. Against their backdrop, old women in black looked like scorched shadows, gliding along stone walls to escape the heat. Life was throbbing. The city refused to sleep even during the siesta, when metal store shutters crashed down, locking the world inside for four hours.

In this Barcelona, everything was for sale: from counterfeit watches to fresh oysters, from silk to heroin. Deals were pushed in alleyways behind the record store on Carrer de la Canuda. Used syringes crunched under the soles of those hurrying to Barceloneta beach. The drug epidemic of the eighties had sunk into the city as deeply as the sun and the Saharan dust storms gathering off the coast. On such days, the sky turned a dirty yellow.

Doña Elena and her son lived on the third floor of an old building on Carrer Hospital, a stone's throw from La Boqueria market. The windows faced a cramped inner courtyard where neighbors hung laundry and yelled at each other around the clock in four languages. The apartment smelled of fried cod and mothballs. Doña Elena maniacally scrubbed every corner. She could not abide filth — neither physical nor moral.

Carlos had just turned sixteen. He wore a black T-shirt with crudely cut-off sleeves, jeans with a heavy wallet chain, and army boots. The walls of his room were plastered with posters of

bands his mother called “Satanic noise.” Doña Elena could not distinguish heavy metal from thrash. To her, any heavy guitar riff was a direct summons to the devil, and the lyrics were incantations.

“Did you hear what happened in Santa Coloma de Gramenet?” she shouted from the kitchen, frying fish in a pan.

Carlos said nothing. He sat on the floor, his back against the bed, idly twirling an audio cassette between his fingers. On the plastic, a black marker had scrawled a title his mother could not have pronounced without sin.

“I’m talking to you!” Elena’s voice rose to a shriek.

“I hear you,” he tossed back without moving.

“They broke into the Sacred Heart church. Stole the Blessed Sacrament. Again. The fourth time this month across the province. Freedom doesn’t just smell of flowers, Carlos. It smells of smoke. When people are allowed to believe in anything, the first thing they choose is their own darkest fears. And you keep listening to that howl from your speakers.”

Doña Elena spoke as if the raiders were dividing their spoils right in her living room. She clicked off the stove, dried her hands on a kitchen towel, and stepped into her son’s room.

Carlos did not look up.

“So what do you think about it?” Elena leaned her shoulder against the doorframe.

“I don’t think anything.”

“Those creatures — they’re thieves and devil-worshippers,

Carlos. Your bands sing their anthems. Sorcery oozes from every chord, every shriek of that... that..."

She waved a hand dismissively toward the cassette deck.

"Stop it, Mom."

Carlos sighed, tossed the cassette onto the linoleum, and stood up. In the cramped room with its curtained windows, he looked enormous. The teenager towered a head above his mother, his figure threatening, but Elena felt no fear for herself. She was terrified for his soul.

"I receive communion every Sunday," her voice dropped to a whisper. "For seven years I've been lighting candles for your health. Seven years, Carlos! And you just spit on my prayers."

"I don't spit."

"You don't attend Mass."

"I don't go because I don't see God in church."

The words hung in the stuffy air. Doña Elena froze as if struck.

"How dare you?" she whispered. "Churches are being robbed, priests threatened with death, the world is sliding into the abyss. Now more than ever, we need to cling to the altar with our teeth."

"The world is going mad because faith has become a convenient screen," Carlos spoke in a whisper now too, but it was a dull, heavy fury. "Hell doesn't begin underground. It begins in kitchens where loving people stop translating their pain for each other."

The boy walked to the stereo, yanked out the cassette, shoved it into his back pocket, and headed for the door.

“Where are you going?” Elena did not turn around.

“For air.”

“Carlos.”

He stopped in the doorway, his hand gripping the old handle.

“I love you,” his mother said quietly. “I don’t want to watch you burn in hell.”

“At least in hell there’s music, Mom.”

The door slammed with a heavy thud.

The street noise hit his face like a heatwave. Everything blended: the hoarse shouts of barkers from La Boqueria, the wail of a siren from the port, the clack of flamenco castanets from an open second-floor window, and the rattle of old motorcycles. Carlos put on his headphones and pressed play. The heavy guitar screech and machine-gun drums instantly cut off the outside world.

He barreled forward, weaving between tourists and fruit carts. Crowds huddled at every newsstand, greedily scanning the black headlines of the morning papers. El País and La Vanguardia vied in bloodthirstiness: “Satanic Panic in Catalonia,” “Cultists Strike Parishes Again,” “Bishopric Demands Military Patrols.”

Vendors shouted, mixing news with prices:

“Tomatoes from Almería! Fifty pesetas! Did you read what those degenerates are doing? They desecrated shrines in Girona! Take some peppers, señora, fresh peppers!”

Old women on the steps of Sant Agustí church crossed themselves fervently, staring at a new flyer pasted directly over

a crucifix: “They are coming for your children. Check their rooms.” Men in bars banged glasses on counters, arguing about politics and the devil to the accompaniment of television news. The black-and-white announcer droned on about mysterious rituals in the cemeteries of Levante.

Carlos turned sharply into the depths of the Raval quarter. Here the street noise grew sticky, suffocating, smelling of overfried olive oil and rotten fish. On the marble steps of a peeling doorway sat a young Gypsy woman with an infant. She dragged on cheap Ducados, staring into nowhere with empty eyes. At her feet lay cigarette butts and a broken bottle of fortified wine. At the end of the alley, two young men in rumpled tracksuits quickly passed a cellophane packet of heroin to a third. Carlos slipped past. Withdrawal and syringes — not his story.

He emerged into a dead, hemmed-in square. In the center rose an old church, surrounded by wooden scaffolding and shrouded in faded green netting. Restoration had dragged on for years. The workmen had long since gone to siesta, leaving trowels and empty beer cans right by the entrance. The heavy oak door stood slightly ajar.

Carlos pulled the headphones from his neck. The silence of the square hit him harder than the roar of rock music. He pushed the door and stepped over the threshold.

Inside was half-darkness and a draft. The stone slabs held the night’s chill. The stagnant air felt thick, heavy, like water in a deep, abandoned baptismal font. Carlos took three steps

forward and stopped. Before the altar, his back to the exit, stood a motionless priest.

The man looked young — thirty at most. His black cassock narrowed his shoulders, turning his figure into an elongated, almost ghostly silhouette. He did not turn at the sound of footsteps. He simply stood, palms pressed to the stone balustrade of the solea, staring into the emptiness above the throne.

“After midday, entry is strictly forbidden,” the priest said into the void, not turning his head.

“I didn’t know,” Carlos shifted his weight. “The door was open.”

“The doors are always open. That’s still no reason to come inside.”

Silence fell. Dense, even. In it, one could stand for hours, simply breathing the smell of old wax and damp plaster. Carlos walked down the aisle and sat on a creaking wooden pew.

“Do you believe God hears?” the teenager asked, surprising himself.

The priest slowly turned. He had cold gray eyes that looked not at the speaker but through him — into his own deep darkness. Sharp, predatory features. There was no iconographic softness in this man, none of that condescending, cloying weariness with which parish pastors usually listened to chance congregants.

“You ask if God hears?” He moved down the solea. The soles of his shoes made no sound on the stone. “God always hears, Carlos. The question is different: does He answer?”

The boy flinched. He distinctly remembered not telling the stranger his name.

“And what do you think? Does He answer?”

The priest stopped a couple of meters from the pew. His gaze pinned the teenager to the wood.

“I think the most terrible thing for a priest is to fall silent himself. God has been silent for centuries, but He has the right. We do not.”

Carlos froze. He had expected banal homilies about love, forgiveness, and suffering called trials. This man in a cassock spoke only of silence.

“And have you fallen silent?” the boy asked.

The priest sat down on the pew beside him. Placed his pale hands on his knees. He ignored Carlos’s presence, staring at the altar where candles were dying. Hot wax slowly dripped down the bronze holders, congealing into transparent blobs.

“Faith slips away unnoticed, like water cooling in a font. At some point you touch the altar and feel only a cold cobblestone. An ordinary stone. And you realize that stones don’t save.”

“Then why are you here?” Carlos’s voice trembled with hidden hope. The boy desperately sought an adult who could prove that his own rebellion was not in vain.

“Because of a vow,” the priest cut in. “Because of a promise made before the altar, the bishop, and the dead. Words remain the only support when faith has been burned to ash. You don’t hold them — they hold you. Like an iron collar. The cassock

weighs too much when there's no heart beneath it. It becomes a shroud for a still-living man. You wear it because without this cloth you are nobody. Just a liar who broke his promise. And that is worse than being dead while alive."

Carlos stood up abruptly. Words stuck in his throat. Inside him, relief at being understood fought with raw terror. The pillar he had thought unshakable was wobbling before his eyes.

"I have to go."

"Go," Sebastian gave a barely perceptible nod. "And don't put your headphones on again until you've left the alley. Try to hear the city. Life pulses in it. There is less life in any music."

Carlos said nothing. He pushed the heavy door, and the Madrid sun instantly struck his eyes, making him blink. The player stayed in his pocket. The boy stood at the threshold, absorbing the street cries, car horns, footsteps, and laughter of strangers — all that vast, sinful, living chaos.

In the dimness of the church, the priest remained alone. He was looking at the altar again. His lips moved soundlessly. Sebastian was not praying. He mechanically ground out phrases that had once held meaning for him. Now they had become empty sound as lifeless as the church locked up for siesta, as his own cooled heart.

A prayer in an empty church always returns to you. The deaf walls simply echolocate your own solitude.

Sebastian knew this in advance. And still he kept moving his lips. A total stop frightened him more than endless lingering in

this hollow void.

Becoming a monster after losing faith is easy. The real price of the choice is something else: you become a monster while remembering, every minute, what it was like to believe. You pass by a crucifix every day, feeling on your skin the dead gaze of the God you betrayed. Sebastian had made that choice. He had made it long ago. He simply still lacked the courage to confess it aloud.

Darkness never bursts in with a fight. It sits down neatly beside you and silently commiserates with your loss.

In the church, the former deafening silence returned. Sebastian moved to the spot where the boy had sat moments before. The wood of the pew still held the warmth of another person. It cooled under his palms.

Exactly like this, faith left.

Exactly like this, life evaporated.

Everything he had once sworn to serve before this altar grew cold.

2

Barcelona, June 1987. Siesta.

The door did not close behind Carlos immediately. First the old hinges groaned at length — that plaintive sound swelled beneath the dome into something enormous, alive. Then came the dull thud of the oak panel against the stone jamb. The boy's footsteps receded quickly and angrily — the way a person walks when trying desperately to run from himself, but his legs only

carry him away from a place where they refused to understand him. Silence descended.

Church silence weighed tons. It was centuries old, thick, steeped in ancient dust, incense, and millions of unspoken words. Parishioners whispered those words into the darkness, hoping for a connection above. The walls faithfully relayed the signals. But up there, apparently, nobody had been picking up the phone for a long time.

Sebastian remained sitting on the pew. He sat exactly where, a moment ago, the boy had twisted in fury. His legs refused to serve. Getting up and shuffling to the altar, where no one waited for him, made no sense at all. The old oak had darkened with time and thousands of hands that had desperately gripped its edges in moments of extreme despair. The wood still held warmth. The living, human warmth of another body that had just been breathing, raging, and fearing here.

Sebastian slowly ran his palm across the seat. The oak was polished to a mirror shine by others' elbows, but rough in the crevices. Another's warmth always fades too quickly. First the pew wood cools, then life evaporates, then the vows you made before the altar. He physically felt this trace of presence melting under his fingers. When the warmth finally vanished, all that remained was pure ice.

The June heat outside was melting Barcelona's asphalt, but Sebastian's inner cold obeyed different laws of nature. It never left; it only bided its time.

The sun stood at its zenith. Through the thick stone walls, built in an age when the sea lapped at the very threshold, only a distant city hum penetrated. Barcelona buzzed like a forgotten radio in an empty house. Somewhere out there, market women shouted at La Boqueria, praising their peaches; motorcycles tore the air on Raval's narrow streets; tourists cursed in harsh Scandinavian dialects. Inside, time had stopped. Sebastian clearly heard the paraffin melting, the wax dripping down the bronze in heavy, lazy tears.

Light entered the church through narrow windows just below the ceiling — Romanesque slits. In the 12th century, they were designed as protection against Saracen arrows; in the 20th, they had become the only defense against the Madrid sun. The rays fell diagonally, illuminating the dust. It hung motionless in the air, like congealed blood. In those slanting strips of light, the dust motes looked like tiny stars that had long since died but stubbornly refused to admit it. Sebastian watched their chaotic drifting. Faith is exactly the same. You naively think it shines on its own, but in reality, you are only reflecting a borrowed light that went out long ago.

On the altar, the remains of candles smoked. The morning Mass had gathered only a few old women in black headscarves. They shuffled here daily. Nobody waited for them at home, but within these walls, before the crucifix, they had the legitimate luxury of not pretending to be alright. They prayed fervently for the health of their grandchildren, for lower gas prices, and for the

neighbor to stop sprinkling salt under the threshold against the evil eye. Sebastian mechanically heard their jumbled confessions and nodded along. These women believed a hundred times more strongly than he ever had in his life. In their minds, there were no doubts. They simply asked point-blank, like children who had not yet learned to fear refusal.

He ran his hand over the oak seat again. The foreign warmth had completely evaporated. The wood was as lifeless as the stone floor slabs or the statues of saints staring at him with empty eye sockets.

Sebastian closed his eyelids. They felt heavy as lead — the way it always is after exhausting, sleepless nights spent hypnotizing cracks in the ceiling while a foreign whisper takes root inside you. Meaningless, devoid of obvious malice or purpose. That sound arose only to confirm: you are no longer alone. Someone else has taken up residence inside. Or perhaps Sebastian himself was no longer there, and the free space had been occupied by that monotonous hum.

The fall into memory happened without cinematic special effects. Memory has no soundtrack. But it always has sharp smells, acute physical pain, and the paralyzing terror of realizing you are back where you swore never to return.

Levante Coast, several years earlier

The smell of salted fish hit his nostrils before the image

emerged. A mixture of scales, rotting algae, and the cheapest incense from the local market — a poor Byzantine parish had no money for better. Mixed in with it was the heavy breath of the coastal sea. The water stagnated in the rocky coves, thoroughly soaking old, abandoned fishing nets with silt.

The parish stood on a cliff, above a poor fishing village. The broken asphalt vanished entirely three kilometers before the central square. Poor houses clung to one another like drunk sailors struggling to keep their balance after a savage storm. The walls of some buildings were thickly whitewashed, blinding in the midday sun. Others stood as dirty gray boxes with peeling stucco, revealing wild stone beneath. On clotheslines stretched between balconies, faded laundry flapped in the wind — sheets and baby undershirts like the flags of defeated garrisons.

The church was genuinely old. Time had gnawed at its walls with its teeth. Rough masonry stones, narrow window-embrasures, and a bell tower that had lost its bells during the civil war — stolen and melted down for ammunition. In place of bronze, a piece of railroad rail dangled from a rusty chain. They struck it with an iron rod to summon the faithful to Mass. The sound was dull, short, like hitting an empty bucket. The parishioners did not complain. They were used to absolutely everything.

Inside, there was an unventilated smell of damp. The stone breathed moisture. Even in the forty-degree summer heat, a peculiar cold lingered beneath the dome, quickly slipping under

clothes and sticking to the skin. The old frescoes had faded into pale stains. Dampness had disfigured the faces of the saints, making them look leprous. The paint had flaked off, leaving only large, sorrowful eyes of the Virgin and the apostles. They watched Sebastian's every step relentlessly.

He was young then, barely past twenty-seven. Sebastian had come to Levante by assignment, like a surgeon to a front-line hospital. He soberly understood that no one expected miracles here, but he genuinely believed that his service could change something. The black cassock hung on his thin frame like a sack, billowing in the windlessness. But he wore that piece of cloth with pride. Sebastian considered his cassock personal armor against a cruel and filthy world.

Later would come the realization: the cassock protects the world from him, not him from the world. But that would happen much later.

Sebastian repaired the church's rotting roof himself. The parish was mired in poverty; hiring roofers was madness. He climbed shaky, creaking scaffolding with a heavy hammer and an armful of fresh planks. Below, frightened old women crossed themselves fervently, lamenting, "Ay, holy father, you'll fall and break yourself." Sebastian stubbornly drove nails into the rot, snarling through his teeth when the hammer hit his fingers. The calluses on his palms grew in layers, like geological strata. The skin cracked, bled, dried in the salt wind, and split again. He did not complain. He saw in this pain an honest price for the right to

be called a servant of the Lord.

His hands grew coarse. A permanent black border of construction grime lodged under his nails. When touching the Blessed Sacrament or raising the chalice of wine, Sebastian was panicky afraid of his flock's disgusted looks. He thought people would see those dirty fingers and turn away. But the parishioners remained silent. In those labor-crippled palms pulsed more living love than in the pampered hands of urban prelates who had never held anything heavier than a gilded breviary.

In the evenings, when the village windows went dark and only the monotonous roar of the surf remained outside, Sebastian prayed. He completely abandoned rote reading out of obligation. He simply knelt on the bare floor of his cell, pressed his shoulder blades to the icy stone wall, and spoke to God directly. Point-blank. As to a father whom one is permitted to confront with grievance, complain of helplessness, or silently demand advice.

"Lord," he whispered into the darkness, "these poor souls bring their last pesetas to the altar. They go hungry themselves, yet buy penny candles for your image. People cling to the crucifix solely out of terror of reality. They desperately need someone to promise to stop their personal hell. Help them, Lord. I don't have enough hands for all."

In those days, Sebastian sensed a foreign presence. God showed no signs and gave no voice. It simply became easier. As if a sack of river sand had been lifted from his shoulders. He sincerely took that peace as a divine answer.

The difference between a healing silence and a dead vacuum he would learn much later. And he would understand: all those years, he had been feeding himself pure deception.

Inés was born at the end of October. The sea raged; waves smashed against the rocky shore with a deafening roar. The ocean seemed determined to wipe the fishing village off the face of the earth. A driving rain lashed for three days without pause. Streets were flooded to the ankles. The parish old women whispered ominously among themselves: giving birth in such foul weather was a bad sign. Heaven was mourning the newborn's fate in advance.

Sebastian learned of the onset of labor at dawn. A neighbor ran to the church, a man's raincoat over her shoulders and a leaky umbrella held above her head. Soaked to the bone, the woman explained breathlessly: the mother had been in labor for twelve hours, the midwife had given up. Neither mother nor child had a chance of surviving.

"Go, Father Sebastian, for the love of all that's holy," the neighbor begged. "She called for you. She insists your prayer will reach the Lord faster."

Sebastian ignored his cassock. He threw on a jacket, stuffed a travel crucifix into his pocket, and dashed outside. The rain blinded him instantly. His feet slipped on the sodden clay. He fell three times in the dark, bloodying his knee, but stubbornly ran on.

Inside the hut smelled of blood, acrid sweat, and primal terror.

That smell seeps into rooms where life battles death to the death for the right to remain. The mother lay flat on a mattress. Pale, strands of wet hair stuck to her face. Beside her, the local midwife bustled — a squat woman who had delivered hundreds of infants. Now her face was twisted with fear.

“It’s not coming,” she grunted instead of a greeting. “The baby is stuck. I’ve tried everything.”

Sebastian stepped to the bed and took the woman’s wrist. The skin burned. The fever was too fierce for a woman rapidly losing strength.

“I’m here,” Sebastian squeezed her fingers. “You’re not alone.”

“Father,” the woman breathed barely audibly, “death doesn’t frighten me. I’m terrified that she will die before being born.”

“She will be born,” he pronounced, masking his inner panic. “You will manage. God is merciful.”

“God,” a pale, bitter smile appeared on the mother’s lips. Sebastian felt uneasy. “He’s already buried my first two. Why on earth would he spare a third?”

He had no answer. Silently, Sebastian took out the metal crucifix, laid it on the woman’s heaving belly, and began to pray. All the Latin formulas from seminary flew out of his head. The prayer was born in his solar plexus — a dull, furious language of a man who realized his absolute helplessness before eternity.

“Lord,” he rasped, “leave this child alone. Don’t touch this woman. They’ve cried all their tears. The parish won’t survive

another death. I won't survive it."

Tears ran down his face, mixing with the rain on his skin. He stopped being ashamed of weakness.

Inés cried out an hour later. The infant's scream was so piercing that the flimsy walls of the hut seemed to shudder. The midwife crossed herself frantically and laughed at the same time. She lifted the bloody bundle above the bed:

"A girl! Alive! Just like you, you fool!"

The mother sobbed. Sebastian stood in the corner, wiping tears from his cheeks and gazing at the miracle that had defied the laws of nature. The prayer had reached its destination. It had cost much blood, but heaven had answered.

A seditious, dark thought seared his consciousness, but Sebastian hurriedly silenced himself. On such a day, celebrating life's triumph should be done without doubt.

Inés was brought for baptism on the third day. The mother had barely recovered from the difficult birth. She moved slowly, leaning her palm against stone projections in the walls. Each step cost her enormous physical effort. She was driven forward by a panic fear: without holy water, the child would not last long. Behind her already stood two small headstones. The first infant had died of a sudden fever at three months — fell silent in his sleep and stopped breathing. The second had been stillborn; they had only managed to name him posthumously. Each subsequent pregnancy became for her a mute, furious war with heaven. A silent plea to leave her at least one living soul.

Sebastian remembered Inés's father by his hands. They were the canonical hands of a hereditary fisherman. The skin was permanently saturated with salt. Sea salt had burrowed so deep into the pores that neither soap nor concentrated lye could wash it out. Under his nails was a black, age-old rim — the result of round-the-clock work with wet nets and lead sinkers. Calluses crisscrossed with twine covered his palms in a thick, horny layer. Holding his newborn daughter, those gigantic hands trembled finely. The man was ruled by wild fear. He was afraid of scratching her porcelain flesh with his rough fingers, afraid of squeezing too hard and breaking the fragile bones. Afraid that the girl would instantly evaporate like a cooling dawn dream.

The mother stood pale, with a hunted, utterly lifeless gaze. Her face bore the specific weariness of people who have been burnt too often by false hope. She did not smile. The woman hypnotized her daughter with her eyes, as if the girl were the last match in a wet box. The match after whose extinguishing would come final, eternal darkness.

She looked at Sebastian as her supreme intercessor. In her understanding, the young priest was the last instance. The advocate obliged to persuade the merciless judge upstairs to annul the death sentence.

“What have you named her?” Sebastian asked, though the parishioners had already informed him of the name the day before.

“Inés,” the mother breathed. Her voice sounded muffled —

the way people speak when they are panically afraid of attracting the attention of the one from whom it is wiser to hide. “After her grandmother. She lived to be a hundred and faded not from frailty. She simply decided it was time. I ask heaven for the same for my daughter: that she feel no fear of death, nor run toward it.”

“A strong name,” Sebastian nodded. “She will have a long life.”

The font stood by the window, where a pale, diffused light entered. In that dim light, the darkened bronze shimmered with the deep gold of ancient patina. The metal smoldered from within, like embers under a layer of gray ash. The day before, Sebastian had personally scrubbed the basin with river sand and coarse salt, striving for an even matte sheen. He desperately wanted to make the sacrament beautiful. The Creator is indifferent to earthly tinsel. Sebastian did it for the frightened mother. He dreamed of giving her a celebration, of driving from her memory a ritual dictated by animal fear for her child’s life.

The water felt pleasantly cool. The church’s stone masonry accumulated coastal dampness year-round. But the second Sebastian dipped his hand into the font, his fingers were stung by pure ice. The water cut to the bone. The specific, paralyzing cold of mountain springs in deep winter, which instantly numbs the wrists.

He reflexively pulled his hand back. A slight, convulsive tremor of his fingers went almost unnoticed by the parents standing nearby. But Sebastian himself registered the glitch. And

went cold inside.

“What’s wrong with me?” a short pulse beat in his head. “Nerves. Chronic lack of sleep, endless roof repairs. I need to stop fixating on my own fatigue.”

He lowered his hand again. This time, the font met him with its usual, moderately cool October water. The delusion vanished.

A slanting sunbeam pierced the fly-blown, cobwebbed, bubbled glass. The windows hadn’t been washed since the parish’s founding. The light slid along the bronze rim, making the metal flare up. The sharp flash ricocheted straight into Sebastian’s eyes. Blindingly. Painfully. As if a sewing needle had been driven into his pupil with a swing.

He squeezed his eyes shut. Under his lids, violet and dirty-orange circles immediately spun, like a rainbow gasoline film in a puddle. Sebastian shook his head, shaking off the haze.

“Father Sebastian?” his mother called, noticing his hesitation. “Are you unwell?”

“Nothing,” he forced a habitual smile, smoothing his face. “Everything is fine. Just the sun blinded me.”

Sebastian scooped up the holy water with a silver ladle and approached Inés in the midwife’s arms. The girl slept a deep, serene sleep. Infants are in absolute peace, unaware of the cruelty of the world that has met them.

“Ego te baptizo in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti,” the ancient Latin words sounded confidently and clearly beneath the vaults of the old, storm-blown parish. Sebastian sang this

prayer. He poured into it all his love, hope, and primordial faith.

Drops of water touched Inés's forehead. The girl instantly opened her eyes. Huge, dark, they shone with frightening adult attention. The baby hypnotized Sebastian, as if fixing his face permanently in her memory.

"Look at that, she's not crying," the midwife marveled quietly. "Usually the parishioners go deaf from the screaming."

"She feels safe," Sebastian carefully took the bundle.

"The hardest part of serving is seeing in a child's clean eyes the shadow of future adult suffering already taking root."

The heavy thought seared his consciousness, but he locked it inside as usual. A baptismal celebration demanded pastoral calm.

The weight of the infant was imperceptible. A tiny living soul locked in a fragile frame of thin bones and hot blood. But in that weightlessness was concentrated the whole world: the superstitious fear of the mother, the mute prayer of the exhausted father, and the deaf hope of the poor parish that Inés would remain on earth longer than her dead brothers.

Sebastian held her with the utmost care. His labor-crippled, cracked-by-salt-and-sand fingers barely touched the thin flannel diaper. Beneath the fabric, a tiny heart beat desperately and fast.

"Inés," he whispered barely audibly into her face. "Now you are under protection."

That October day, he did not doubt the power of his words. Sebastian sacredly believed that the drops of holy water had built an invisible, impregnable fortress around the child, capable

of repelling any illness, accident, or human malice. God had accepted his furious, tear-soaked prayer by the mother's bedside. Heaven had given the green light.

He believed this without looking back.

People cling to the crucifix solely out of terror of reality. They desperately need someone to promise to stop their personal hell. Sebastian looked at the exhausted mother, on whose lips a timid smile appeared for the first time in a long while.

He had taken on the role of the one who guaranteed that salvation. And he himself unconditionally believed his own promises.

After the baptism came a meal. The table was set in poor fisher style: boiled cod with potatoes, stale bread, olives, and young wine. Inés's father had saved that bottle for a special occasion. They drank from clay mugs covered in cracks and crudely glued with resin. The sourish taste of the young wine compensated for the shabbiness of the vessels. The room filled with laughter. The locals vied with each other admiring Inés's beauty, prophesied her father's stubborn temperament, and hoped the coming year would bring a better catch.

Sebastian sat at the head of the table. He genuinely felt part of this home. He had been invited to share in the joy without perfunctory politeness. His presence made the celebration real.

"Father Sebastian," the fisherman raised his mug. "To our daughter. And to you. You pulled her back from the other side."
"It is God's will," Sebastian replied.

“You were the instrument of that will,” the man insisted stubbornly. “You did not back down from the fever. You prayed until dawn. You stayed with us.”

Sebastian opened his mouth to object but said nothing. He silently absorbed the gratitude. In that second, in the depths of his consciousness, something alien stirred. Barely perceptible, dark, lying in wait until its hour.

“Holiness demands daily sacrifices, but the first to burn on this altar are pity and reason.”

He hurriedly drowned the thought with a gulp of wine. Smoothed his face and forced himself to smile again.

Late that night, Sebastian locked himself in his cell. A tiny confined space: whitewashed walls, a wooden cot with a straw-stuffed mattress, and a simple crucifix above the headboard. On the desk lay papers, liturgical books, and an empty mug. The Spartan life completely suited him. He needed no extra comforts.

3

Levante Coast, five years later. Summer.

The air of Levante smelled of a thunderstorm, but we stubbornly kept pretending it was just an ordinary evening fog. The sun was dipping behind the rocky horizon, throwing out slanting, dying rays. The sea's surface had lost its blue, taking on a heavy, mercurial density. The water looked like dead molten metal poured in an even layer into the bay. At the very edge of

the sky, clouds advanced — bluish-black with ragged crimson edges. A massive bruise on the heavens warned of a catastrophe no one spoke of aloud.

The village was draining the last drops of familiar bustle from the departing day. Down by the pier, men tightened knots on rotten rigging, lazily cursing petty debts for last night's drink. The fishermen's boots were caked with dried scales and gray slimy mud. Wooden crates of the morning's catch were moved with a crash. The air was saturated with salt, rotting algae, and guts. Fat gulls circled the masts, their sharp, metallic cries piercing the ears — the birds haggled fiercely with the port over every discarded sardine head.

Sebastian sat motionless at a corner table on the tavern's terrace. Above him, an old, dying fig tree spread its gnarled branches, blocking the last of the daylight. The wooden sign reading "The Weary Sailor" had long since peeled in the scorching sun. The blue anchor painted on it had lost its shape over time, now resembling a giant meat hook for butchering carcasses. Under the thatched awning, which rustled dryly at the slightest draft, three tables were crowded. The cheap red-checked oilcloth felt sticky under the fingers from spilled cheap sherry and olive oil. The locals didn't notice the dirt. The people of Levante had unlearned disgust altogether. Complaints were considered an impermissible luxury here — a privilege of those whose roofs didn't leak, whose pantries held a ham, and whose sons hadn't stayed to feed the fish after last autumn's storm.

Before the priest cooled a tiny earthenware cup. The black coffee resembled liquid tar. The local proprietor brewed the grounds at dawn, and by evening the drink had turned into a thick, bitter sludge that had to be swallowed with effort. Sebastian sipped the bitterness mechanically. After five years in Levante, his taste buds had dulled, replaced by habit. He had learned not to notice the perpetual draft under the dome of his parish. He was used to the fact that parishioners' donations couldn't buy even a dozen decent candles — people paid for communion with dried fish and salted olives. Each year, his personal prayers grew shorter, and the ringing emptiness between phrases — deeper and longer.

At the next table, playing cards flew onto the oilcloth with a crack. The old, greasy deck with bent, frayed corners passed from hand to hand with such fury that the men seemed to be playing for the right to live, not for pathetic, worn pesetas. Stocky Luis, whose face smallpox had turned into something like lunar crust, dealt with a special Gypsy flair. His muscular arms, covered in blue prison tattoos from his time on trading barges, flashed in the half-darkness like two gray wings.

"Three points," Luis threw a king and queen onto the sticky oilcloth. He took a deep drag on his roll-up. A suffocating stream of contraband tobacco, bought around the corner from the port, billowed from the gray paper. "Pay up the pesetas, cabrones."

"Hold your horses," Manolo cut him off. The old man squinted; his wrinkled face resembled the hollow bark of an

ancient pine. “Your queen looks more like a port porn star than royalty. I’ll see your winnings when the wind changes.”

The conversation at the table instantly turned into a furious roar about football. Valencia had lost miserably to Barcelona, and this defeat was discussed more loudly by the local rabble than the extortionate prices of middlemen for a kilo of fresh sardines. Luis slammed his fist on the table. The cut-glass tumblers jumped. Dark red liquid spilled over the edge, instantly filling the network of fine cracks in the plastic tablecloth.

“The ref was bought!” Luis rasped, spittle flying. “He was bought in the locker room, before the first whistle!”

“What’s the whistle got to do with it?” Manolo spat copiously on the tavern’s dirt floor. “The forwards could barely drag their feet. I saw the broadcast in Madrid myself. They’ve got boiled macaroni instead of muscles.”

Sebastian sipped the cooling coffee sludge and caught himself feeling a strange peace. This everyday, down-to-earth noise, without a drop of theological strain, healed him. Here there was no God, no devil, no eternal questions without answers. Ordinary men arguing to the death about things that weren’t worth a broken penny. In that simplicity lay a special, animal wisdom. He was only beginning to recognize it now, when his former faith no longer warmed him from within, and the heavy cassock sat on his thin shoulders like a stranger’s stolen coat.

People cling to the crucifix solely out of terror of reality. But sometimes, with equal success, they cling to football, greasy

cards, or the price of a bucket of fish. A sports score had ultimate, final clarity. Unlike prayer, where you scream into the void until you bleed, never knowing whether someone picked up the phone at the other end or whether the line has been cut forever.

Sebastian lazily pulled toward him a scrap of a morning newspaper someone had left behind. The paper was crumpled, stained with brown coffee rings and greasy fingerprints. He glanced at the headlines. The Madrid chronicle's typefaces screamed about vandalism at the Poblenou cemetery in Barcelona. Unknown persons had overturned heavy marble slabs, drawn pentagrams in soot on the walls of family chapels, and torn gilded crucifixes from the graves of old prelates. The municipal police dryly reported: the incident did not resemble an ordinary drunken prank. The investigation was pursuing the possibility of a ritual cult.

Lower down, at the very bottom of the page, a short paragraph about missing teenagers lurked. Sixteen, seventeen, and nineteen years old. They had left a nightclub in the Gràcia district and vanished into the darkness. Families demanded the Civil Guard be deployed; inspectors routinely threw up their hands. The text occupied just a few lines, without details or photographs. Such facts were rapidly becoming routine. Reporters no longer put these disappearances on the front pages, pushing human grief to the depths of the crime blotter — closer to bicycle thefts and knife fights in port bordellos.

Sebastian pushed the newspaper scrap away with disgust and sucked in the last of the coffee grounds. The brew behaved predictably — it brought pure bitterness. In this hole, absolutely everything was bitter: the drinks, the morning news, his own thoughts. The newspapermen were clearly inflating the scale of the tragedy for penny profits. Circulation required regular feeding on fresh blood. The ordinary citizen had to be kept constantly on a leash of fear, so that he would buy the latest issue, enjoy the illusion of being informed, and faithfully feed his inner demons.

The Satanic panic on the streets is just a mirror. The mob saw its own hidden desires there and got frightened. No one will voluntarily admit the obvious: the Darkness they frantically search for in the corners of other people's lives has long since taken up residence in their own bedrooms.

On the fly-blown windowsill, right next to a pot with the dry skeleton of a geranium, an old transistor radio wheezed. The device was all crackle and interference. Through the white noise came the monotonous, sleepy drone of the announcer: in the capital, the police had set up a cordon around a burned-down church supply shop; the bishopric of Levante had expressed official concern over the wave of vandalism; the Minister of the Interior once again called on the nation not to give in to hysteria. The official's speech was lost in the tobacco smoke. Not a single person on the terrace turned their head toward the window. Luis and Manolo continued their self-forgotten shouting about the

bought referee. State radio was for them as much free acoustic furniture as the surf or the port birds.

Sebastian latched onto their deafness: “What if these louts are right? What if all this noise subsides as soon as the wind changes direction? What if the Creator really does keep His hand on the pulse, and we’ve simply been blinded by momentary fuss?”

At the very bottom of his consciousness, a worm stirred. It did not show itself, but Sebastian physically felt that slithering, blind movement beneath his ribs. The way you feel a foreign presence in a completely dark, locked room. You don’t yet see the guest’s face, but you know in the back of your neck: you are no longer alone.

And then, through the transistor’s wheezing and the fishermen’s drunken swearing, a dry, rhythmic knocking cut through. The wooden soles of children’s shoes pounded furiously on the terrace’s stone flags.

“Father Sebastian! Father Sebastian!”

Inés burst under the thatched awning like a gust of squall wind. At five years old, the girl possessed such nuclear energy that she could single-handedly dispel the eternal gloom of this impoverished, faded coast. She wore a cotton dress. Once the fabric had been white, but now it was covered in gray street dust and sticky yellow stains from ripe oranges, which Inés consumed by the kilo. Her jet-black hair stuck out in stiff cowlicks in all directions. The girl manically despised combs, preferring to race through the port’s back alleys like a disheveled fury. The local old

women regularly shook their heads behind her, croaking under their breaths: “That girl’s not growing up right, not right at all.”

She flew headlong into his table, clinging with a death grip to the sticky edge of the oilcloth and hung on the wooden edge, swinging her skinny legs.

“What’s all the shouting for?” Sebastian quickly moved the earthenware cup out of the way, saving what was left of his coffee grounds from her clumsy lunge. “The adults are resting, Inés.”

“I’m not an adult,” the girl flashed her jet-black eyes defiantly. “I’m allowed to make noise.”

“Convenient position,” Sebastian couldn’t help but smile.

Inés lightning-fast snatched the old wooden rosary from his fingers. The worn beads had been restrung on new tough thread three times already. The mechanical fingering of those pieces of wood had long become an obsessive habit — his fingers slid over the wood whenever his thoughts began to scatter chaotically.

“Give those back,” he ordered without malice, holding out his hand. “They’re not a toy.”

“What are they?” Inés began twirling the rosary in front of her nose like a cheap port rattle.

“A tool for counting prayers.”

“Why count them?”

“So there are many of them,” Sebastian tried to get away with a simple formulation.

“And when there are a lot, does God hear better?”

Sebastian froze. The child’s short question caught him

in the gut like a heavy brass knuckle. A five-year-old girl had involuntarily articulated the formula that gray Vatican theologians had been hammering at for centuries in their cathedral exams.

“He hears every one,” he said dully after a long pause. “Even if it’s the only one.”

“Then why do you need so many beads?” Inés deftly wound the cord around her tiny wrist, turning the rosary into a bulky bracelet.

He had no answer. Sebastian simply shook his head silently, hiding his eyes.

“You’re a philosopher, Inés.”

“No,” the girl instantly grew serious. “I’m just hungry. Give me some bread.”

At the next table, Luis guffawed richly as he dealt the cards. “Holy water, Father Sebastian, doesn’t just wash away sins — it sharpens the tongue. You won’t outrun that little nuisance on a crooked mare.”

“The important thing is that you can’t fool her,” the priest replied.

He broke off a thick heel from yesterday’s loaf, already hardened, and handed it to the child. Inés sank her teeth into the crust with a death grip, crunching, and closed her eyes blissfully. As if she were chewing not a cheap stale crumb, but a ripe fruit of paradise that had fallen from heaven straight into her hands.

“Did you go out on the boat with your father today?” he asked,

watching her swift jaws.

“Yes,” Inés nodded, swallowing a chunk. “We hauled in three fish. One huge one, and two tiny ones. Mum squealed that the little ones should be let go because it’s a shame. And Dad said, since they’re already dead in the nets, it’s too late for pity — we have to eat them.”

“Logical,” Sebastian remarked.

“Dad was just hungry,” Inés cut in, licking the crumbs from her palm. “When your belly’s empty, the pity-mechanism doesn’t work.”

Manolo choked on his wine, dissolving into a dry, barking cough.

“Now that’s philosophy,” the old man wheezed, wiping his lips with the back of his horny, salt-soaked hand. “They couldn’t have wrung that out of me even at the end of my life. And she just said it. Five years old, just think of it.”

“Children see what we’ve forgotten how to notice,” Sebastian said quietly, setting his cup on the table. “They don’t need to dissect the world to understand its essence. It’s enough just to look.”

Meanwhile, Inés had managed to smear her face in breadcrumbs. On her pale cheek was a dark greasy streak — a trace of olive oil. She spun in place, rhythmically striking the stone flags with the soles of her wooden shoes: clack-clack-clack-clack. The sound resembled tap-dancing. The little girl was beating out that dry, feverish rhythm as if transmitting music that

only she could hear.

Sebastian listened to that knocking, and in the back of his neck he felt the remaining warmth leaving the air. Wood on stone. *Clack-clack-clack-clack*. The sound was counting down the seconds to an explosion. Like stealthy footsteps in the darkness, when the pursuer himself is not yet visible, but you already feel his approach on your skin.

“Father Sebastian, why’d you freeze?” Luis looked up from the cards, examining his motionless face. “A fly fall in your coffee?”

“No,” Sebastian shook his head, shaking off the stupor. “Just... thought I saw something.”

He turned the cup over, drinking the cooled grounds in one gulp. The bitter residue burned his throat.

“Inés,” he called, rising from the bench. “Come on, I’ll walk you home. It’s late. It’ll be dark soon.”

“Are you afraid of the dark?” the girl squinted slyly, tilting her head.

“I’m not afraid of the dark,” Sebastian buttoned his cassock. “But I am afraid your mother will kill me if you get lost in the port.”

“Mum doesn’t kill anyone,” Inés laughed brightly, spinning on her heel. “She doesn’t even cut up the fish. Dad does that. He has a big knife.”

“Then let’s just go.” Sebastian held out his hand to her.

She ignored his palm, gripping his index finger tightly. In the gathering evening fog, they looked strange: the tall, bony figure

of the priest in rough black vestments and the little girl in the gray cotton dress, holding onto him as if he were the only unshakable support on this shore.

The fisherman's house stood on the very edge, at the water's edge. The whitewashed walls turned pink at sunset, absorbing the sun's farewell rays. In the cramped yard, rough fishing gear hung on lines along with faded T-shirts. In the corner, in a rickety wooden cage, a rooster stood motionless. The bird had refused food for a second day, gazing at the yard with a weary, almost human contempt.

Sebastian walked Inés to the gate but did not go inside.

"I'll stop by tomorrow," he said, placing his hand on her shoulder. "Tell your father we need to discuss repairing the church roof."

"I'll tell him," Inés nodded. "Will you bring bread tomorrow?"

"Bread?"

"Well, yes. Today you came with bread. Will you bring some tomorrow?"

He smiled softly.

"I'll bring some. Definitely with bread."

"Good." The girl turned sharply and ran toward the porch, slamming the door behind her.

Sebastian lingered by the fence, listening to the muffled sounds from inside: the soft, anxious voice of the mother and the hoarse, weary mutter of the father. Then he turned and walked toward his parish.

The air grew dense, palpable. A thick fog crept in from the sea. In that whitish veil, the rare lights of the village seemed ghostly, flickering, ready at any moment to go out and leave the coast in absolute darkness. Sebastian quickened his pace, but the dusk gathered faster. Darkness enveloped him at the very threshold of the church, as he fumbled for the keys in his cassock pocket.

Inside, he lit only a single candle. The lone flame flickered, as if frightened of its own presence in the vast empty nave. Outside, the ocean rumbled dully, and from somewhere deep in the village came the rare, mournful barking of a dog.

Sebastian knelt before the solea. The phrases of prayer would not come to mind. He simply sat on the icy slabs, his shoulder blades against the stone wall, hypnotized by the candle flame.

He lost count of the minutes, dissolved in that stupor. Time seemed to have leaked out of the building. And suddenly, the silence was torn apart by a knock. Rhythmic, dry, echoing not in his ears but beneath his ribs, right in his heart.

Clack-clack-clack-clack.

Sebastian lunged upward. His breath caught; his pulse hammered wildly in his throat. He rushed to the door and heaved the heavy oak panel open.

On the threshold stood Inés's father. The fisherman's skin had turned gray as cooling ash, and in his eyes was frozen a wild, primal terror — the terror of a child who has witnessed something unforgivable. The man smelled of salt, damp, and sharp human fear.

“Father Sebastian,” he exhaled, and that strained, broken sound barely resembled his former voice. “Quickly. Come with me. Something... something terrible is happening to her.”

Sebastian did not waste seconds on questions. He just grasped the collar of his cassock tighter — it turned out he had not taken it off since returning — and dashed outside. He ran through the blind coastal darkness, stumbling blindly over roadside boulders. His feet felt no blows; his mind refused to register the night chill and fear. The priest was driven solely by blind inertia: his running speed now equaled the salvation of the child he had once personally washed in holy water and whose safety he had promised before heaven.

The door of the hut had been torn from its hinges and propped from the inside with a rusty boathook. The room smelled of sweat-soaked wool, vinegar, and a suffocating, metallic odor of fresh blood — Inés’s mother had scratched her own cheeks to the flesh. She sat on the earthen floor by the threshold, hugging her knees, banging the back of her head rhythmically against the doorframe. With each blow, her gray headscarf slipped down her shoulders. In the corner, squeezed between a chest and the wall, stood her older daughter. The twelve-year-old had bitten her lower lip so hard that a dark trickle had already covered her chin and was dripping onto her shirt collar.

Sebastian stepped to the mattress and forced himself to look. Inés was not merely lying. Her small body was arched backward, supported only by the back of her head and her heels.

Her five-year-old ribs were drawn so tight that every cartilage showed through the cotton of her dress. The fingers of her left hand were unnaturally twisted outward; her nails dug into her palm with a dry crack. From the girl's open mouth came a frequent, wheezing rattle — air struggled through her clenched teeth, pushing flakes of grayish foam onto her chin. Her eyelids were rolled upward, exposing the whites and a network of burst red vessels.

Sebastian dropped to his knees, nearly shattering his kneecaps on the bare floor. He reached out and pressed his fingers to her forehead. The child's skin did not just burn — it vibrated with the frantic pulse beneath her temples. Sebastian felt as if he had touched a red-hot iron sheet on a kitchen stove. The heat instantly sweated his own palms.

"Inés," he grabbed her left wrist, trying to straighten the twisted fingers. "Inés, look at me. It's me. I brought bread."

The girl's bones did not yield. Sebastian pulled harder, but the fragile child's hand felt cast, iron, filled with an unbearable, alien weight. And the child's palm was icy. That cold instantly penetrated his skin, rose up his forearm, and pricked him under the heart. Just as five years earlier, the icy cold at the bottom of the copper font had made him snatch back his hand. Now that ice lived inside Inés.

Burning head and dead, stiffened fingers. The girl was torn in two: half of her body burned in fire, half froze in a coffin.

In the child's dilated, frozen pupils trembled the reflection of

the tallow candle. To Sebastian, it seemed he was looking into a well, at the bottom of which black, stagnant water stirred.

He tore open his cassock collar, pulling out the metal crucifix. His fingers slipped on the silver; sweat flooded his eyelids, blurring his sight.

“Pater noster, qui es in caelis...” Latin burst from his throat in a hoarse, frightened bark.

He prayed, almost hammering the words into the child’s face, forcing himself to believe that these phrases still had power. He repeated “adveniat regnum tuum,” gripping the crucifix so hard that the sharp edges of the cross cut through his old construction calluses, and warm blood crept across his palm.

And suddenly, the tap-dance of her ribs stopped. The air in the hut became dense as wool fleece. Everything went deaf. Beyond the open window, where a moment ago the ocean had rolled and the port gulls had cried, an absolute, unnatural silence fell. As if all of Levante had been sealed under a glass bell.

Inés’s jaw closed with a dry click, then slid down again. Her lips began to move, slapping faintly against each other.

And she spoke.

The voice remained childish and clear. But the words coming from that tiny larynx belonged to a seasoned theologian. She chanted Latin without a single stumble, with a terrible, dead speed.

“...Spiritus Sancti, et Filii, et Patris...”

Sebastian stopped breathing. Every sacred word was

flying backward, mutilated, turned inside out. The syllables “Sanctificetur nomen tuum” twisted into a vile, serpentine hiss. That childish timbre, grinding the ancient curse, struck Sebastian’s eardrums with such force that his ears rang and violet, oily circles swam before his eyes.

“Stop...” He tried to cover her mouth with his bloody palm, but his hand went numb, refusing to obey. “Inés, stop...”

The girl did not blink. Her empty, glassy eyes stared past his shoulder, straight at the wall.

Behind him came a dull crack — the fisherman had fallen to his knees on the earthen floor, his shoulder blades pressed into the whitewash, and he held his older daughter so tightly against himself that she choked and began to thrash silently in his arms. The mother howled. It was not human weeping — from her mouth came a wild, animal keening, the kind of sound a bitch makes over her crushed puppies.

And the child continued to spew inverted phrases. The canonical text was breaking the space of the hut, and Sebastian physically felt the low ceiling beams beginning to sag slowly, sealing them all in this room like a crate of fishing gear. At that moment, an evil, clear thought seared his brain: he had brought this here himself. Five years ago, he had been a coward, masking the icy shock in the font as ordinary fatigue, so as not to shatter his own well-fed, comfortable peace.

The air of Levante smelled of a thunderstorm, but we stubbornly kept pretending it was just an ordinary evening fog.

Inés fell silent mid-word. Her jaw closed with a short click. The arched spine went limp instantly; her head rolled heavily onto the straw mattress. The girl's breathing evened out, deep and slow. Her pupils contracted. She was simply sleeping the calm, serene sleep of a healthy child.

Sebastian remained on his knees, his fingers still convulsively gripping her stiffened wrists. He stared at her pale face and understood that he could not remember a single prayer. His head was empty. Because, on his skin between his shoulder blades, right at the back of his neck, he felt someone's fixed, heavy gaze. In the darkest corner of the room, by the chest of fishing gear, someone was sitting. Sebastian did not see a silhouette, but he physically felt it: this invisible guest was not about to growl or lunge at him. He had simply crossed one leg over the other and was smiling silently, condescendingly, in the darkness. Like a man who had known from the very beginning how this game would end, and was now lazily waiting for the priest to admit his defeat.

4

ARCHIVE: Newspaper La Vanguardia (Barcelona), issue of June 24, 1987.

"Investigative units of the Civil Guard of Catalonia report the detention of three members of an underground group in the port area of Mataró. During a search of an abandoned dock, surgical

instruments, traces of cocaine, and sixteen consecrated hosts previously stolen from the parish of Santa Anna were discovered. According to preliminary criminal reports, the value of a single dry host on the black market of Madrid and Barcelona reached a record forty thousand pesetas this June. A representative of the Ministry of the Interior, in an official statement, called on parish priests to strengthen the security of tabernacles and not to succumb to press speculation regarding the ritual nature of these crimes. The investigation insists on the theory of an organized network of drug traffickers using church property to smuggle hallucinogens.”

The sun rose over the coast with the same lazy precision with which, the night before, the Darkness had broken the bones of a five-year-old girl. It crept over the horizon slowly, as if weighing whether it was worth appearing at all in a world where even children's prayers are turned inside out. The first rays fell on the sea, and the water sparkled — a cold, indifferent gleam that did not warm but only emphasized how deep and dark it was beneath that shimmering surface. Fishing boats swayed at anchor, their masts creaking with that dreary regularity that belongs to old bones being turned in sleep. In the port, movement had already begun: someone moved crates, someone swore, someone spat over the side and crossed himself, looking at the rising sun — out of habit, not faith.

Sebastian had been sitting in the “**Weary Sailor**” tavern since the fisherman's house door had closed — probably about four hours ago. He did not remember how he had come here. Did not

remember if he had sat down on the chair himself or if someone had placed him there like a doll whose strings had snapped. He sat, gripping the edge of the table, staring at one spot — a stain of red wine that had soaked into the tablecloth perhaps in the last century and now darkened in the middle of the checkered oilcloth like a dried wound.

His cassock was heavy. The night's sweat had soaked the fabric on his back, and now it cooled his shoulder blades, sticking to his body, reminding him that he had run, stumbling, falling to his knees, getting up and running again — to where Inés lay on the bed, and darkness swam in her empty eyes. The collar had dug into his neck, chafed his skin, and every movement of his head responded with an unpleasant rawness, as if someone were rubbing his neck with sandpaper. He tried to adjust the collar, but his fingers would not obey — they were rough, swollen from how he had gripped the crucifix all night, pressing the metal into his palm until it bled.

On his right palm, at the base of his thumb, a dark, brown scab had formed. He looked at it, and it seemed to him that this scratch resembled a crack in the wall of the old church — through which the wind blows inside, and no one knows how to seal it. Under the table, trying not to attract attention, he began to pick off the scab with his fingernail. The skin peeled off in small flakes, fell to the floor, mixing with dirt and breadcrumbs. The blood flowed again — warm, alive, and it was the only warmth he felt that morning.

Around him, life buzzed. Ordinary, morning, human life that

knew nothing and wanted to know nothing of what had happened in the fisherman's hovel a few hundred meters away. Luis sat at the next table, crunching his teeth into a toasted slice thickly spread with garlic and crushed tomato. The burnt crust crackled under his jaws, crumbled, and olive oil dripped onto his chin, running down his stiff stubble, leaving greasy trails. He chewed broadly, with his mouth open — a habit ingrained from years of working on deck, where the wind blows in your face and you have to swallow fast before the catch and the bread are carried overboard by a storm wave. The sound of his chewing seemed disgusting to Sebastian, too wet, smacking — the way boots are pulled out of coastal mud with a heavy sucking sound.

“Hey, Father Sebastian,” Luis called out, catching his glazed stare. “You’re quiet as a corpse on a slab today. Have a beer, you’ll come back to life.”

“I don’t want any,” Sebastian answered.

His voice came out hoarse, flat, as if his vocal cords were rusted from long disuse.

“Suit yourself,” Luis noisily swallowed from a heavy clay mug. Thick white foam settled on his upper lip, and he licked it off with a broad movement of his tongue, like a well-fed cat. “Beer in this heat is medicine. It gets the blood moving, clears the thoughts. And yours, I see, are murky as swamp sludge.”

“I’m fine,” Sebastian forced the words out, but he himself felt how falsely they echoed off the tavern walls.

Manolo sat opposite Luis, his head low over the table. His face,

dried by the sun to the consistency of a baked apple, was frozen. The old man, with manic concentration, picked at his teeth with a sharp wooden splinter. He was digging out the remains of yesterday's cod as if solving a trigonometric equation on which the survival of the coast depended. The splinter was thin, and he wielded it with surgical precision, periodically sucking in air with a whistle and spitting small crumbs onto the dirt floor.

"Hear what's going on in the capital?" the old man asked without interrupting his task. "Madrid again. A church torn apart. They didn't break into the safe, didn't steal the golden candlesticks. They took the tabernacle. Along with the Blessed Sacrament."

"Stupid bastards," Luis continued moving his jaws without changing rhythm. "What the hell do they want a piece of unleavened dough for? You couldn't get a cup of cheap sherry for it in the port."

"The papers say cultists have appeared," Manolo finally pulled the splinter from his mouth and pointed it at Luis. "Satanists, all sorts. They hold Black Masses in basements. They need consecrated hosts for their rituals. Without them, they can't summon the devil from the abyss."

"Pfft," Luis waved his hand dismissively, nearly knocking over a glass. "The Madrid newspaper boys blow it all out of proportion. They just want to boost circulation and scare the old women. Satanists, devil-worshippers... And where are these Satanists? Have you seen them? I've never laid eyes on them."

“They’re in Madrid, in Barcelona,” Manolo grumbled stubbornly, sticking the splinter back into his teeth. “And here? Here we’re a godforsaken hole. Even the devil would be ashamed to come here. It stinks of fish for three miles around, and one dead sardine for the whole district. Who needs us here with our parishes?”

Manolo laughed, and Luis joined in — loud, rolling laughter, reminiscent of the grinding of large pebbles that the sea noisily rolls along the shore during a storm. Sebastian listened to their dry laughter and felt a dark, almost tangible fury boiling under his ribs. He wanted to overturn the sticky table, grab Luis by the collar of his jacket, and scream into his well-fed, oil-slicked face: “You know nothing! You sit here, eat, drink, crack jokes, while two blocks away a five-year-old girl I baptized is spewing Latin backwards!” But he made no sound. He merely clenched his jaw so hard that the corners of his lips went white, and he fixed his stare on the dirty window.

The glass was cloudy, fly-blown, and covered with streaks from dried night rain. Through that gray film, the sun-drenched port street looked flat, unreal, like a set in a provincial theater whose actors have completely forgotten their lines. The slanting rays pierced the grime, illuminating dusty bands in the air. Sebastian hypnotized the passersby with his gaze. People lazily dragged wicker baskets, hauled wet gear, led children by the hand. They walked their usual paths, unaware that the world around them was already cracking at the seams. That the

Darkness was not in Madrid, not on the pages of crime chronicles with their screaming headlines. It had settled here, next door, in a fisherman's hut by the water's edge.

The crowd always confuses effect with cause. They search for the devil in junkies' syringes while he calmly dines in their own homes.

Behind Sebastian, right on the wooden windowsill by the dead flower, a transistor radio wheezed. The tavern keeper had turned it on out of habit, to fill the morning emptiness of the room. From the speaker, through the crackle of static, poured a cheerful, upbeat pop song — one of those summer hits by Mecano that blared from every window. The singer's voice was cloying, syrupy, like cheap syrup poured generously over spoiled pastries to mask the taste of rotten cream. She carelessly sang about love, beach sand, and how every day turns into a holiday when you're young and free.

The words seemed utterly empty, but the catchy melody lodged in the memory like a rusty splinter. Sebastian caught himself with horror mechanically playing the tune in his head. He shuddered with physical disgust at himself. How could his mind hum this stupid caramel pop when his ears still rang with the chilling whistle of a child's voice that had mutilated Latin? How could the human brain switch so easily between primal theological horror and pop garbage, as if flipping a switch on a radio?

Sebastian's fingers dug into the edge of the table with such

force that his knuckles whitened and stretched under the skin. The old wood beneath his palms felt sticky, greasy from hundreds of port hands that had clung to it over the decades. How many people had sat in these chairs before him, how many of them had drunk, eaten, and guffawed, never suspecting that years would pass — and their own children would speak with voices that had never belonged to a human?

“Father Sebastian, why are you so pale?” Luis put down his crust, examining his mask-like face. “You look terrible. Are you unwell?”

“Didn’t sleep well,” Sebastian continued to hypnotize the wine stain.

“Didn’t sleep well,” Manolo snorted. “I poured three bottles of fortified wine down my throat yesterday and slept like a baby. Know why? I don’t fill my head with all that nonsense. You should stop praying to your saints around the clock, live a little like a human being. Have some sherry, ask the owner for fresh fish, find yourself...”

The old man abruptly stopped. His gaze fixed on the mended hem of the black cassock, then slid to the silver crucifix, and Manolo swallowed the end of his sentence.

“Find myself what?” Sebastian raised his eyes to him. There was no challenge in the question. Only a burned-out, boundless weariness pulsed in it. Such emptiness would fill this poor port to the brim, the bottom of the sea, and the icy void between dead stars.

“Alright, forget it,” the old man muttered, turning away. “You’re a grown man, you’ll figure it out without parish advice.”

Luis finished his beer and set the heavy clay mug down on the oilcloth with a dull, bone-like thud. He leaned back on the rickety chair, reaching into his jacket pocket for tobacco. He pulled out a crumpled pouch, shook dry crumbs onto a scrap of newspaper, and lazily began to roll a cigarette. His thick, red tongue slid wetly along the edge of the cigarette paper. That brief, rustling sound struck Sebastian as frighteningly similar to the rustle of decayed flesh that had lain too long in the damp earth of Levante.

“So what about that girl from Madrid?” Luis struck a match, lighting up. Foul gray smoke poured from the roll-up. “The one the gendarmes caught at San Isidro cemetery.”

“Not a ‘girl,’ a university student,” Manolo corrected authoritatively. “Nineteen, decent family. It says she willingly went to the graveyard at night with those... devil-worshippers.”

“What difference does it make?” Luis exhaled a stream of smoke through his nostrils. “Instead of studying textbooks, they wander around crypts out of boredom. That’s your progress for you, your post-Franco freedom.”

“The Civil Guard reports claim she was on heroin,” the old man added. “Sounds plausible. Shot up some crap in a den, her mind finally slipped, and she imagined Satan was having conversations with her.”

“With her?” Luis repeated, flicking ash onto the floor.

“With her. With that student.”

“Right, right,” Luis sneered mockingly. “The devil in hell has nothing better to do than listen to the ravings of every drugged-up fool.”

Both fishermen laughed together, a full, satisfied laugh. Sebastian listened to that rolling port laughter, and his jaw cramped with the insane urge to scream. She hadn’t been shooting heroin in alleyways. She wasn’t a crazy fool. The nineteen-year-old student was just an ordinary person who had come face to face with the genuine, not-from-books Darkness. She had met it — and lost instantly, because in this well-fed, indifferent world, no one had taught her how to survive a fight with something that has no human face.

Sebastian remained silent. He fixed his gaze on the edge of the table, clearly understanding: these two men were absolutely right in their blindness. Their armor was cynicism. Their main defense was the stubborn habit of ignoring everything that couldn’t be touched with calloused fingers. They noisily mocked the newspaper horrors from Madrid only because otherwise, they would have to admit the obvious: the world around is not solid, reliable ground, but a thin, crispy crust of ice under which the Darkness seethes.

“What do you think, Father Sebastian?” Luis unexpectedly turned his whole body toward him. “You’re our only expert on holy matters. Do you believe all this Satanic heresy or not?”

Sebastian slowly raised his eyelids. He forced himself to look at Luis — at his greasy, oil-shiny chin, at his small, swollen-

from-chronic-port-lack-of-sleep eyes. Then he shifted his gaze to Manolo. The old man had frozen, stopped picking his teeth with the sharp splinter, and stared expectantly at the priest. Sebastian remembered that these people were his direct flock. He was obliged to give them an answer. Some consolation, a dry, hopeful phrase capable of returning them to their habitual, well-fed ignorance.

“I don’t know,” he forced out. “I don’t read the newspapers.”

“That’s right,” Luis approved, noisily exhaling smoke. “Otherwise they’ve stirred up psychosis across Catalonia. Soon the gendarmes will probably forbid sticking your nose out of the house after dark.”

The fisherman forced a laugh, but it died too quickly. Sebastian noticed how Luis’s eyelid twitched convulsively — a small, treacherous nervous tic that betrays a man who says one thing aloud but feels something entirely different on his skin. But Sebastian did not latch onto that detail. He had no strength left. The emptiness was so deep that it seemed his bones inside the cassock would now turn to dry sand and pour out through the frayed hem onto the dirt floor, mixing with the dirt and stale breadcrumbs.

A glass of water had been sitting in front of him for an hour. The water had long since warmed under the midday sun, becoming unpleasantly warm, almost hot. He reached out trembling fingers, touched the glass, and brought it to his lips. But he could not take a sip — his throat instantly seized with

a dry spasm, as if someone invisible inside was squeezing his throat with icy fingers. The water physically would not go down. Sebastian put the glass back on the oilcloth with a clink. His hand continued to tremble finely, shamefully — the way an elderly person's limbs tremble when they know the end is near and there will be no salvation.

His thoughts stubbornly threw him back into the suffocating night half-darkness. Sebastian again saw himself kneeling by Inés's mattress. He hypnotized her pale, frozen face and wide-open eyes. Those eyes held no fear, no pain, no childish hope. Only a primordial emptiness reigned there. The same dead abyss that Sebastian himself felt inside every night when he prayed until bloody sweat in the empty church and received in return only a ringing, icy vacuum.

"The hardest thing is returning from hell to a place where people continue to play cards, drink sour wine, and joke about taxes," he thought.

He closed his eyes. In the darkness beneath his lids, Inés appeared — not the string-straight doll with empty eye sockets, but the girl from five years ago, laughing in his hands over the copper basin. Memory instantly supplied the smells: breast milk, baby sweat, and something elusively sweet, like hope. That stuffy aroma lodged somewhere deep in his nasopharynx; Sebastian barely held back a convulsive exhalation — that tactile memory cut at his ribs, because that Inés no longer existed. The Creator had left her only her physical shell. From within, she was being

eaten away by Darkness.

He opened his eyes. Luis and Manolo had completely erased him from their space. The fishermen were hoarsely cursing the Madrid government for raising diesel fuel duties on boats again. On the windowsill, the speaker wheezed, switching from the pop rhythm to a slow, mournful ballad. A husky female voice sang of a girl waiting on the rocky shore for her sailor. He had long since sunk, but she kept hypnotizing the dead horizon with her gaze.

Sebastian smiled bitterly. There it was — the purest, most merciless image of faith. You stand on the cliff for years, breaking your nails on the crucifix, while the one you call out to has long since stopped breathing. You simply refuse to admit it. Or you know the truth but stubbornly keep standing, unable to function any other way.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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