

The Man in the Chair

He stumbled through the doorway looking like the world had already finished with him. One eye swollen shut. Dried blood at the corner of his mouth. His left arm hung awkwardly, like it no longer belonged to him.

He lowered himself into the chair across from her with a wince.

"C... can we talk, please," he said, voice shaking, "before you kill me again?"

She didn't answer.

She didn't move.

After a moment, she calmly placed the gun on the small metal table beside her—close enough to reach without effort, far enough to remind him it was never really out of play.

The man swallowed.

"I'm sorry," he began. "For whatever I did. For whatever version of me brought us here. I know I must have earned this... somehow."

His hands trembled as he clasped them together.

"Life wasn't fair to me," he said, the words spilling out like a confession he'd rehearsed across a thousand deaths. "Not from the start. My son died when he was five. Cancer. Watched him disappear a little more every day while I stood there useless, pretending hope meant something."

Her head tilted slightly.

"My wife..." He laughed weakly. "She didn't even get a goodbye. Wrong place. Wrong time. They never caught who did it. I identified what was left."

Silence pressed in around them.

"I lost my home after that. Fire. Everything gone. Photos. Notes. His drawings. All of it."

He breathed in sharply.

"But I didn't stop," he said. "I couldn't. I went back to school with nothing but grief and debt and rage. Got my doctorate. Then my master's in quantum physics. I became someone people respected. Trusted."

His voice steadied.

"I discovered something new. A quantum equation no one else saw. Proof that reality isn't linear. That cause and consequence can fold back on themselves."

Her head tilted a little more.

"I survived impossible odds," he said quietly. "I rebuilt myself from ashes."

He looked at her then. Really looked.

"I know this is my last death," he said. "I can feel it. And I won't beg. I won't run. I won't fight anymore."

His voice cracked.

"But please... the only thing I ask—don't forget me. After everything I've been through, I don't want to vanish like I never mattered."

She stood.

Picked up the gun.

One shot ended the conversation.

As she walked away, blood pooling beneath the chair, the light caught the crest stitched onto her jacket sleeve.

IDFA

Inter-Dimensional Frogging Agency

Another loop closed.

Another correction complete.

The Priestess Who Believed in Devils

Sister Elowen believed in God with her whole heart.

That was why she believed in devils even more.

While other priestesses spoke of mercy and forgiveness, Elowen studied the cracks in people's voices when they confessed. She listened for pauses that lingered too long, for prayers said like bargains instead of pleas. Evil, she knew, didn't announce itself with horns. It waited. It blended in. It learned to kneel.

When the village children began waking with bruises shaped like fingerprints, the elders blamed nightmares. When livestock were found skinned but untouched by teeth, they blamed wolves. Elowen said nothing—only watched the townsfolk as they prayed.

The devil was already inside the chapel.

She felt it most strongly during confession, when a man named Father Corbin sat behind the screen and whispered absolution. His words were perfect. Too perfect. His breathing never changed, even when sinners sobbed.

Elowen fasted for seven days. On the eighth, she prepared the ritual alone, etching sigils beneath the altar where no one ever looked. Devils hated being named. They hated being believed in.

During evening mass, she stepped forward.

"You wear holiness like skin," she said calmly.

Gasps rippled through the pews.

Father Corbin smiled. "Sister, you've lost your—"

The sigils burned white-hot.

The smile split his face open.

Something crawled out of him, black and wrong, screaming in a language older than sin. The congregation fled. The walls wept blood. Elowen stood firm as the thing thrashed and begged, promising miracles, promising mercy.

She crushed its skull with the iron cross.

Silence returned.

The elders called her a heretic. They dragged her outside and burned her before dawn.

As the flames took her, Elowen smiled.

Because faith that refuses to believe in devils leaves them free to wear saints like masks.

And someone had to remember the difference.