**Chapter Fourteen: The Cat**

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My earliest memories were that of hell. The days filled with misery and pain, the place where the bright dreams of children where ruthlessly smothered and their hearts wilted like flowers in the flames of despair, it was all deeply burned into my mind.

St. Mary’s orphanage was probably founded by good people with good intentions, but by the time I got there, all of the “good” had long since disappeared, and it had devolved into a pit of demons in wimples who tortured children under the guise of discipline. The so called nuns that ran the place where sanctimonious fiends who took every chance they had to spout passages of the bible in our faces to prove that God was on their side while committing heinous actions, things like beating a hungry two year old girl until she was black and blue just because she had asked for some bread or caning a three year old until her hands were bloody just because she accidentally broke a plate. They would even have a compassionate smile on their faces after their vile deeds, claiming to be instruments that moved by the will of God to guide us away from evil and towards redemption. They would constantly tell us that bad girls don’t get adopted, that they would never go to heaven, that their souls would rot in the depths of purgatory.

Was I a bad girl? Was that why I didn’t have a mommy and daddy? Was that why I was in this hell? Dark thoughts swirled in my young mind, casting shadows on my heart and draining all the hope I had left in me. My desire to escape was gradually replaced by a quiet resignation to bear the damnation that I had been born into. My prayers for a miracle stopped as my heart turned into a frozen wasteland devoid of any warmth.

I was six years old when I finally found out the truth about why I was consigned to a cursed life. Most of the other girls were in the orphanage because their parents where dead or destitute, but my parents were not dead, they weren’t too poor or in some situation that wouldn’t allow them to take care of me. No, the only reason I was cast away like trash was because of the woman who gave birth to me, a person who I refuse to call my mother.

The unfortunate chain of events that culminated into me ending up in St Mary started with my father, who was a soldier in the navy, getting deployed overseas a month before my birth. Because of his ill-timed deployment, he was absent when the despicable piece of shit that that gave birth to me decided that she didn’t want to be a mother and dumped me at a random orphanage in order to run away with my father’s degenerate brother, a deadbeat drug addict who was freeloading off of my father at the time. When my father found out about what had happened, he tried to leave the navy to hurry back, but he was unable to get permission from his unreasonable commanding officer. He ignored his orders and tried to leave anyways, but he was caught and court-martialed for insubordination as well as desertion, landing him in jail for five years. He tried to convince his relatives to find me and take me in but nobody was willing to answer his desperate pleas. By the time he was free and he made it to the orphanage, he found a sad little girl with empty eyes and a broken spirit, a gloomy six year old unable to understand why a strange man was hugging her and apologizing while tears ran down his face.

I had thought that I would be over the moon with happiness if I left the orphanage but when I searched my feelings for joy, all I found was numbness, like I had forgotten how to properly experience emotions. Even when my father took me home and did everything he could to give me everything I might ever need or want, I still couldn’t get myself to be happy. I smiled and went through the motions so that my father knew I appreciated his efforts but we both knew that it was superficial.

Don’t get me wrong, this didn’t mean that I did not love my father. On the contrary, watching his unflagging effort just to watch me exhibit a positive emotion, it was enough to evoke affection even from my shriveled up heart. The process was slow but eventually, he became the only person I could trust. As for my relationship with the rest of the world, it was a nonissue. I couldn’t make friends in school, something about me scared all the kids away. How could I be friends with naïve little children who had no idea about the true nature of the world when I have already witnessed the ugliness that is hidden below the surface? Even the teachers avoided looking into my eyes, like they were scared of what they would find there if they looked too long.

I wasn’t the only one who was disillusioned with the world. My father had also lost all the faith he had in his family, his friends, and human nature in general. He worked hard to earn money, but besides that, he didn’t have any social life. I was the only one he loved, and he was the only one capable of dragging out emotions that I thought I had lost forever. It was us against the world, and we were both just fine with that.

Nine years later, nothing had changed. I was still an anti-social recluse and my dad was still a single father who didn’t like unnecessary interactions with people. He still showered me with presents and I still treasured each one of them, even when they were unpractical and girly things, stuff I found so repulsive that it could almost be described as an allergy. One day, he came home with one of those girly presents that I was supposed to hate so much, a little cat with a bow wrapped around its neck. At first, I was skeptical about the whole thing. Could this even be considered a gift? Isn’t taking care of an animal more of a chore than a present? I hesitantly extended my hand to receive the cat when it flinched away from my touch and started to shiver in fear. I looked into its scared little eyes and I immediately knew that it used to be a stray. I was familiar with that scared and confused look in its eyes unique to those that had been thrown away, it was the same look that the girls who were new to St Mary had on their faces. At that point, something clicked and all of hesitation disappeared. I carefully picked up the poor little thing and gently rubbed its head until it stopped shivering. I decided to make sure that that look never appeared in its eyes again.

It started off innocently enough, an hour here and an hour there playing with the cat, but as the days passed by, that time kept growing and growing until I spent all of my free time with it. Eventually, I started skipping school just to spend more time with the cat. I even started collecting other stray cats off of the streets. I was like a drug addict who couldn’t kick his habit; my entire life was consumed by my obsession. It got so bad that I didn’t leave the house for weeks at a time, only going out to stock up on cat food and sardines. My father tried to reason with me but I barely paid attention to him. In the end, he was forced to bring a psychiatrist to help me. The so called Doctor turned out to be completely useless; he couldn’t even diagnose my problem properly, let alone treat me. He just mumbled some unintelligible medical mumbo jumbo before he recommended that the cats be forcibly taken away. My father hesitated to obey the psychiatrist who was obviously a quack, but he couldn’t bear to see me in such a mess. Left without any other choices, he tried to take the cats away.

One day, he went into my room which reeked of the acrid smell of cat urine and other repulsive odors and approached one of the sleeping cats with a resolute expression. He reached out to grab it when it suddenly woke up and started to bristle and spit angrily. When I heard the cat in distress, I snapped. Everything turned blurry and when I came to, I was choking my father. I held him against the wall and I had somehow lifted him off the ground. He dangler in the air, desperately struggling to pry my fingers open but having little luck since my left hand was tightly clamped around his neck. I had my other hand out, poised to strike down at any moment. When I looked up at my raised hand, I found that my fingernails had turned into claws.

It was like I was dowsed with freezing cold water; the haze that had clouded my thoughts melted away and I could think clearly for the first time in months. The realization of what I had almost done hit me like a punch to the gut. I quickly let go of my father like my hands were scalded and he slid down to the floor and fell down in a helpless heap, coughing and gasping. Full of dread, I slowly shifted my line of sight downwards until it landed on my hands only to see claws slowly retract into my fingers and turn into normal fingernails.

I stumbled backwards in shock, trying to run away from my own hands, but it was futile; they followed me no matter how much I tried to retreat from them. Finally, I raised my eyes from my hands and looked at my father who was sitting against the wall. Our eyes locked and I could clearly see the horror and fear when he looked at me. The dread I could sense from him made my heart feel painful. He was the only person who I loved and I couldn’t bear to see the way he was looking at me. I tried to explain what happened. I tried to say something to make things better, but I couldn’t find words to undo what had happened. What could I say? How could I explain something even I didn’t understand? What if this happened again and what if next time I couldn’t stop myself? I couldn’t allow my father’s life to be at risk by staying close to him. I realized that the best thing that I could do to keep safe was to put as much distance between us as possible. After making that decision, I immediately ran out from the room and left the house without waiting for my father to react.

The next time I calmed down enough to think again, I found that my feet had unconsciously carried me into a dark ally. All the fear, pain, terror and confusion that was bottled inside of me broke loose and I just crouched down on the spot and I broke down sobbing.

I was still crying when I heard the loud chirping of a cricket so clearly that I thought it was on my shoulder. I looked around for the annoying insect that wouldn’t let me grieve in peace, but I couldn’t find anything. To make things worse, the irritating chirp of the cricket was joined by the sound of water dripping from the roof gutters which was then followed by squeaks of rats stowed away in the various corners of the alley. The sounds that I could hear slowly started to increase until the once quiet alley turned into a cacophony of noise. One moment, my ears were ringing from the racket, the next moment, all of the sounds that threatened to overwhelm me vanished as suddenly as they had come and all that was left was the crisp sound of footsteps coming from behind me. Even though I knew that the footsteps weren’t really that loud, the tap tap from the heels colliding with the floor sounded almost deafening to my ears. I turned around to see who was behind me and I was surprised when I saw that the dark alley had turned as bright as a well lit room; I could clearly see everything clearly, including the person who was approaching me.

The person was clearly female. She was wearing a robe that was tight enough to accentuate curves that made it clear that there was no doubt of that fact. Half of her face was covered by a white butterfly mask decorated with delicate blue patterns, but the mask did not cover her lips which were curved up in a mocking smile.

“What do we have here? A newly born forgotten who is having trouble adjusting to her fragment? You must be scared and confused. It’s okay, I will take away all your pain.”

She took out a golden medallion from underneath her robe and pointed it at me. The medallion flashed blue for a second and a blue spear made entirely of ice materialized out of thin air. The spear just hung there in midair before it hurtled straight towards me.

I saw the point of the spear get bigger as it come directly at my face but before it could impale me, everything seemed to slow down until it almost came to a stop. Some unknown instinct started rising up in me and I jumped onto the dumpster next to me to avoid the icy spear. A second spear was created and came at me but I dodged this one by jumping to the opposite wall. I continued to jump from wall to wall, avoiding all the ice spears that kept being thrown at me, until I was nearly on top of the woman in the mask. With a final jump, I threw myself towards her and reached my hand out to her neck.

My jump took me past her and I landed behind her in a crouch. I turned around just in time to see the woman fall down to her knees while clutching her neck, desperately trying to stem the flow of the blood that was gushing out from it. She made a gurgling sound and fell down to the ground, with a confused look in her eyes which then turned glossy in death.

I looked at my hands and I saw the claws that I had seen before but this time the claws were covered in blood. I didn’t know which shocked me more, the fact that I had killed a person or the fact that I felt absolutely nothing about it. Who was that woman? How was she able to make those ice spears? How was I able to do the things I could do? Was I even human anymore? I just stood there lost in thought when I was snapped out of my trance by footsteps coming towards the alley. I knew that it would be stupid to stay there and be found with a dead body and that I should leave as quickly as possible. I hesitated for a moment but I still went back to rip the golden medallion from the dead woman’s neck before I run away as fast as I could.

For weeks after that incident, I slept on park benches and in homeless shelters, barely scraping up enough money to from menial jobs paying less than minimum wage. I had no choice since I didn’t want to reveal my real identity since every time I did so, people like that woman would come searching for me. If I wanted to evade their pursuit, I had to constantly move around which meant that I couldn’t get any long term jobs. The only people who were willing to hire me were greedy sharks that took advantage of individuals who didn’t have valid identification.

A few months later, I was mopping the floor at a convenience store when I was approached by a young man with a kind smile on his face. The “warm” smile on his face didn’t do much to decrease the caution that mounted the closer he got. If anything, it made me raise my guard even more. I had been through a lot in the past couple of months and I had learned from various encounters with friendly looking people that all sorts of wicked and dark thoughts might lurk beneath a pleasant and amiable veneer.

I surreptitiously observed him while I pretended to focus on moping the floor, getting ready to react at the first moment I notice any suspicious movements. “What do you want?”

He pretended not to hear the aggressiveness in my question and completely ignored my stand-offish attitude as he continued to smile. “There is no need to be alarmed. I just want to talk.”

“Why would you want to talk with me, a person that you have never met before? Better yet, why should I talk to you?”

“Oh, how rude of me. My name is Mathew. I am just a person who was wandering about when I spotted you. After seeing your current situation, I guessed that you didn’t choose your current occupation or lifestyle. Don’t get me wrong, I am not looking down on you, I just feel like you are wasting your potential.”

“Let me guess, you are here to offer me a job.”

“A job? Not quite. What I am offering you is some answers.”

“Answers? What answers?”

“Let me ask you some questions. Have you found yourself behaving in strange ways or feeling unexplainable emotions? Have you experienced blackouts where you don’t remember what happened for a certain period of time? Have you gained abilities that are beyond what is possible for a human being?”

I narrowed my eyes as I finally looked straight at him. “How did you know?”

“Relax, I’m not here to expose you or to take you to a lab to dissect you or something like that. You are different, but that doesn’t mean you have to hide from society and live your life in the margins. There are people like you all over the world and they form organizations that help keep them safe. I come here representing one of those organizations. But before I get to the nitty-gritty details, let us go to somewhere a little more private. This is not the kind of conversation we should be having out in the open.”

I hesitated to take his offer but his proposal was just too tempting to ignore. The caution that had been etched into my bones after weeks living in the streets struggled with a burning desire to get a chance at living a life that was more than simply surviving day to day. In the end, I was just too tired of the life I was living. I decided to take a leap of faith, even if there was a chance that it would lead to something bad happening to me.

After making my decision, I picked up the mop I was using and threw it at the shopkeeper’s face. I smiled at the surprised and angry look on his ugly face and said, “I quit.” I then turned towards the boy without caring about the shopkeeper’s curses and threats. “We should go out the back door. There are some things I need to take care of before I leave.”

Once we were in the small area behind the store, I secretly made my claws extend from my fingers before turning a full one eighty and using the momentum to shred the boy’s shirt into pieces. Understandably, he stumbled backwards in shock.

“Why the hell did you do that?”

I disregarded his anger and calmly retracted my claws. “I might have decided to believe you for now but I’m not stupid. What I just did serves two purposes. The first one is to give you a warning. If you do anything, and I mean anything, that makes me think that you want to hurt me, I will not stop with simply ripping your shirt apart.”

“And the second? You said that you had two reasons for doing this.”

“I was checking if you had one of these.” I rummaged into my pocket and threw out three golden medallions.

He looked at the medallions with astonishment. “Vultures? You took out three Vultures?”

“No.”

He sighed in relief and asked, “Then how did you get your hands on these without killing their owners?”

“So the owners of these medallions are called Vultures. By the way, I think you misunderstood what I meant when I said no. I wasn’t denying that I killed them, I was just saying that the number I killed is far more than just three. I sold most of the medallions to pawn shops for money.”

He gulped loudly and stuttered, “Far more than three…? Sold them at a pawn shop…?”

“Hey, are you alright? You seem a little pale.”

It took him a while but he managed to pull himself together enough to lead me to a nearby sushi restaurant and explain the facts of the supernatural world over a sumptuous feast of nigiri and unagi.

And just like that, I was inducted into the messy world of myths and legends, a world of magical creatures and horrifying monsters, a world of demons and gods.