

# You Are My Angel

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## Prologue :

There are encounters that overturn the course of centuries.

There are loves so pure that they defy death itself.

When Thomas de La Lys opened his eyes that night, he did not know whether he was returning from a dream or from a torment. The world around him felt foreign: the lights, the voices, the streets of a city he had never known. Yet deep within himself, he sensed the call of a mystery greater than he was.

It is said that God sometimes grants a second chance to lost souls. But such grace is never free: it demands an act of faith. Thomas, once a knight, still bore upon his flesh the mark of his past crimes. But in his heart, another imprint was beginning to form: that of a love he had never dared imagine.

For in the midst of the shadows of the modern city, a young woman awaited him. Fragile and marginalized, wounded yet radiant, she would become his trial and his salvation. She would be the angel who would show him that redemption is not taken by the sword, but received in the giving of oneself.

And thus begins the story of an impossible love, between a man returned from the past and a woman who still had all her future before her.

# Chapter I – The Road of Returns

In the year 2060, on National Road 5 from Uccle toward Waterloo in Belgium. A black sedan was rolling slowly over the saturated asphalt, trapped in an endless stream of vehicles. The lines stretched as far as the eye could see, under a low sky that promised nothing but rain and gloom. The windshield wipers set the pace of this mechanical procession, like the tired breathing of a city that could no longer catch its breath.

Behind the wheel, Chang Lee, fifty-five years old, concealed her wrinkles with carefully applied makeup. Her slender build, her impeccable bun, and her fitted suit reflected the rigor of a woman who left nothing to chance. Yet her hands, clenched around the steering wheel, betrayed a deep tension. On her pale neck, on the right side, a small mark shaped like a drop of water shone discreetly, like the indelible signature of a destiny she herself did not yet know.

The radio broadcasted a monotonous weather report, announcing more showers. Chang sighed and shook her head.

“Another rainy day... And to think they’ve been talking about global warming for years,” she muttered acidly.

Her gaze, hard and focused, remained fixed on the road. At every sudden stop in traffic, she struck her palms together, a nervous gesture punctuating her frustration.

“Damn traffic! Always the same thing... blocked since early morning,” she grumbled, as if trying to convince herself that her words might break through the shell of cars around her.

She breathed in deeply, trying to calm herself. But suddenly, her smartphone vibrated and lit up on the dashboard. The ringtone pierced the cabin, intrusive. Chang frowned, cast a wary glance at the screen, then pressed the button on the steering wheel.

“Hello, Murielle!” she said, her voice carrying both exasperation and fatigue. “Sorry... same old thing on the road. I’ll be late this morning. Don’t wait for me. Start the preparations and make sure the hotel is impeccable for the clients’ arrival.”

Her assistant’s voice, soft and composed, resonated through the car.

“Very well, Madam Director. I’ll take care of everything and welcome the clients in your absence. But please, don’t be reckless on the road.”

A sigh escaped Chang. She pressed her lips together, then managed a bitter smile.

“Don’t worry, Murielle. I’m barely driving ten kilometers an hour, so the danger is elsewhere... Thank you anyway.”

She ended the call with a touch of her thumb. Silence returned instantly, oppressive, broken only by the wipers and the hum of engines mired in their slow crawl. Her hands tightened again around the wheel. Her deep black eyes drifted for a moment into the thick gray of the sky.

An ordinary day seemed to be beginning. Yet nothing would be ordinary.

Chang inhaled deeply, as if to regain her composure. Rain beat against the body of the sedan, accompanying her like a muffled drumbeat. She tried to distract herself with softer thoughts, clinging to happier memories.

“I absolutely must remember to call the children late this morning,” she said aloud, as if the car itself needed to bear witness. “They should come to dinner this Sunday... Xia will burst out laughing when her big brother Ming tells her she’ll be an aunt to a baby girl for the second time.”

A smile lit her face, erasing for a moment the wrinkles and fatigue. Her eyes widened, filled with pride.

“Who would have believed it? Me, Chang Lee, and my husband Jaw-Long... grandparents for the second time.”

The certainty of a fulfilled life warmed her like an inner flame. She cast a tender glance at the headlights streaming in the opposite direction, drawing lines of light under the rain.

But suddenly, a sharp pain tore through her, brutal and merciless. Chang brought her right hand to her chest, her fingers tightening against her heart. Her face contracted in a grimace of suffering.

“Wha... what... what is happening?” she gasped, breathless. “No... not now!”

The black sedan swerved violently. It left its lane, struck the guardrail at the roadside. Horns blared, shrill and indignant, but the car finally came to a stop, engine still running, its blinkers fixed like two panicked eyes in the pounding rain.

Inside, Chang had collapsed halfway onto the passenger seat. Her breathing grew short, painful, each breath a struggle against the air. Her blurred eyes searched for something to cling to. Then she saw it: the keychain, hanging, swaying gently with the rhythm of her agony. A small pendant gleamed there, tiny yet heavy with meaning: a fingerprint engraved in metal, marked by a drop of ancient blood.

Her lips trembled. With a broken breath, she pronounced a single name:

“Thomas...”

Tears ran down her cheeks. Her vision blurred, the world faded. She closed her eyes, her breathing slowing inexorably. Darkness wrapped around her.

And suddenly, everything shifted.

Beginning of the flashback.

## Chapter II – The Encounter

Belgium. Municipality of Uccle. Monday, November 3rd, 2025.

The light chime of a radio filled the air, contrasting with the steady patter of rain against the windows. In the small grocery store, a young woman was busy at work.

Chang Lee was twenty years old. Her delicate, almost childlike features had already been hardened by long hours of labor. Tall, slender, of average height, she carried a natural grace. Her black hair, pulled into a perfect bun, highlighted the birthmark shaped like a drop of water on the right side of her neck, a discreet, mysterious, almost symbolic mark.

She struggled to lift a heavy crate of milk cartons. Her thin arms trembled slightly under the effort, but she managed to raise it to the top of a metal shelf. She took a deep breath, climbed down carefully from the step stool, then hurried back toward the register. Two customers were already waiting, visibly impatient.

The first, Marcel Poinpont, a small nervous man with a shaved head, slammed a bottle of whisky loudly onto the conveyor belt. His bearded face, carved with bitter wrinkles, carried the sourness of lives worn out too early. His gaze landed on Chang with a barely disguised glint of contempt.

The day had barely begun, and already a scent of tension drifted through the shop.

“About time!” Marcel growled, clicking his tongue. “I was about to leave and get one somewhere else with my buddy.”

His sharp tone made a few people in line glance up. Chang lowered her eyes, focusing on the keys of her register to avoid looking at the man. Marcel Poinpont was not reassuring: stocky, his face crossed by a wild beard, his shaved skull shining under the neon lights. In his eyes simmered the constant anger of men who feel cheated by the whole world.

Beside him, Jean Van Stell formed a strange contrast. Taller, clean-shaven, his light brown hair cut short according to the fashion of the moment. His appearance might have seemed tidy, almost elegant, if not for the military boots with undone laces that betrayed an unsettling carelessness. He had that icy calm of men confident in themselves, that way of staring that imposes itself without raising the voice.

Jean placed a hand on Marcel’s shoulder, as if to restrain him.

“Come now, Marcel, patience...” he said in a calm, almost paternal tone. “Look how lucky we are. This little Chinese girl is going to serve us.”

The words “little Chinese girl” struck like a slap. Chang felt her cheeks flush, but she didn’t dare raise her eyes. She focused on her work, scanned the whisky bottle with a trembling hand, then exhaled slowly. Her voice rose barely above a whisper, fragile:

“That will be twenty-nine euros, please.”

Marcel rolled his eyes with a contemptuous laugh. He shoved a fifty-euro bill from his pocket, crumpled and stained at the corners. With a brusque flick, he threw it onto the belt like someone tossing a bone to a dog.

“See that, Jean? Twenty-nine euros for a bottle of whisky! Worse than robbery.”

Chang picked up the bill, smoothing it gently between her fingers as though trying to erase the disdain it carried. She placed it in the cash register with precision, then prepared the change. Her hand moved timidly toward Marcel, the coins and bills resting on her open palm.

But Jean, who had not taken his eyes off Chang, pushed her hand aside lightly with the tip of his fingers. His gesture, falsely courteous, carried a cold condescension.

“Keep the change, girl,” he said in a tone both soft and cutting.

Then, turning to Marcel, he added with a complicit smile:

“You agree with me, my friend?”

For a moment, Marcel seemed taken aback, mouth slightly open. Then he burst out laughing, a greasy laughter, and nodded.

“If you say so!”

The laughter of the two men echoed strangely through the aisle of the store, mixing complicity with an unspoken threat.

Chang, uneasy, slipped the change into the pocket of her apron, unsure whether the gesture would be misinterpreted. She raised an uncertain glance toward Jean, hoping to find a spark of humanity in his clear eyes.

“Th... thank you,” she murmured, her voice barely audible.

But inside her, fear was already tightening her stomach.

Marcel burst out laughing again, the heavy sound ringing like something foul in the neon-lit air. Without any regard for the place or the people around him, he roughly twisted open the cap of the whisky bottle. The sharp smell of alcohol spread immediately. He raised the bottle to his lips and took a long swallow. The burning liquid drew a grimace of pleasure from him.

“Jean!” he chuckled, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “Looks like you caught the little one’s eye.”

Jean, who had stayed slightly behind, gave a cold smile. His gaze, calculating, slid once more toward the counter where Chang nervously tucked away the bills. His eyes gleamed with something Marcel took for camaraderie but it hid something more devious, almost ominous.

“Calm down, Marcel,” he replied, his voice low but firm. “Let’s go. The others are waiting for us at the café. We’ll have a drink, have some fun... and this evening will be memorable.”

He placed a firm hand on Marcel’s shoulder and led him toward the exit. Their heavy, confident steps echoed on the store tiles like a lingering threat. Within moments, they disappeared into the night, leaving behind a faint trail of alcohol and hostility.

Chang remained frozen for a few seconds, her hands gripping the cash drawer. She took a deep breath to regain composure, then closed the register with a sharp motion. Her heart was still beating too fast.

It was then that Luc, her employer, appeared from the back room. A stocky man in his fifties with a graying mustache, he wiped his hands on a stained cloth before addressing her.

“You can go home, Chang. I’ll close the store. But be here tomorrow morning at seven sharp to help unload the truck.”

Chang lifted her head, wiped her damp palms on her apron, and nodded politely.

“Tomorrow I’ll be here, without fail, Mister Luc. You can count on me.”

A faint smile crossed the man’s face, then he turned away. Chang picked up her bag and prepared to face the night.



## Chapter III – The Broken Night

Outside, the night was clear and cold. The sky, rid of its clouds, revealed a vault scattered with stars. Rouge Street ran along the Wolvendael Park, a vast stretch of dark trees rising like ghostly silhouettes.

Tired, Chang pedaled on her old bicycle. The dim headlight lit only a few meters ahead, but she didn't care. In her ears, the notes of an old song filled her heart.

*Laisse-moi t'aimer, toute une nuit...*

She sang at the top of her voice, carried by Mike Brant's warm tone. Her lips curled into a smile, her eyes gleaming. The icy air bit her cheeks, but she felt nothing. In that suspended moment, Chang felt light, alive, in love with a dream she barely dared to name.

A sudden burst of headlights flared behind her. A car appeared, its powerful engine rumbling across the road. It overtook her abruptly, the blast of air making her wobble.

*Une hirondelle fait mon printemps...*

She kept singing, even louder, as if challenging the night. But again, blinding headlights swallowed her from behind. This time, there was no escape.

The impact was brutal.

A metallic crash shattered the silence, her bicycle flung across the asphalt with a screech. Torn from her seat, Chang rolled violently along the ground, her music player shattering, the earphones ripped away. Her slim body lay motionless on the cold road.

The car screeched to a halt. The passenger door flew open. Marcel leapt out, his face flushed with alcohol, his eyes shining with a feverish excitement. He rushed toward Chang, grabbed her by the arms, and dragged her roughly. Her head hung limp, her black hair falling apart in loose strands.

"Hurry!" he shouted, breath tight with panic.

He threw her into the back seat like a burden. His eyes burned with a mix of fear and wild exhilaration.

At the front, Jean's voice cut through the night, icy and commanding.

"Marcel! Get in, now!"

"Move it, damn it!" Jean yelled, his voice slicing through the darkness.

Marcel slammed the door, red-faced, hands trembling, still clutching the whisky bottle. The car shot forward, tires screeching over the wet asphalt. It sped two hundred meters, then swerved sharply and plunged into the oppressive gloom of Wolvendael Park.

The headlights went off, swallowing the vehicle in darkness. The silence of the park closed in around them, broken only by the rustle of wind through branches and the crunch of dead leaves beneath their steps.

Farther ahead, at the edge of a small grove, the sedan stopped. The pale moon carved the trees into threatening silhouettes. Jean stepped out first, his boots sinking into the damp grass. He opened the rear door and dragged Chang out with a cold brutality. Her frail body slid from the seat like a rag doll.

Breathless, Jean pulled her a few meters before letting her fall onto the grass. His breath turned harsh, his eyes gleaming with a sick fervor. Straightening up, he barked:

“Damn it! Hurry, Marcel. And don’t forget the gasoline!”

The silence of the park, pierced by distant cries of night birds, made his words even heavier. The scent of damp earth thickened the looming dread.

Jean turned toward Chang. She was beginning to regain consciousness. Her moans grew louder, her breath trembling in the cold air.

“Pl... please,” she whispered weakly. “I’m hurt... help me...”

Her eyes pleaded, full of tears. But Jean saw only vulnerability to exploit. His smile twisted into something predatory, his posture leaning over her like a shadow preparing to strike.

“We’re not done here,” he murmured, his voice low and vicious. “Not by far.”

Chang, writhing in pain, frowned in confusion and terror.

“Wh... what are you doing...?” she breathed.

Marcel stumbled back into view, almost tripping, a jerrycan of gasoline in his hand. The metal container hit the ground with a dull thud. His blurry gaze fixed on Chang, pupils dilated with a frenzied gleam. He took another swig of whisky, the alcohol dripping from his chin.

“I told you, Jean,” he muttered with a twisted grin. “She’s perfect, this little Asian bitch...”

Chang cried again, fragile and desperate, her voice breaking the night:

“Please... someone help me...”

Jean snatched the bottle from Marcel, took a long swig, and burst into laughter an arrogant, cavernous laugh. He slammed a heavy hand onto Marcel’s shoulder.

“She’ll understand now!”

Around them, the park seemed to hold its breath. The air vibrated with a dark foreboding, as though nature itself sensed that tragedy was unfolding beneath its ancient trees.

Jean and Marcel exchanged a look of silent agreement, their grins spreading like the smiles of predators about to tear into a helpless prey.

Jean straightened, his expression contorted by triumphant hatred. He inhaled deeply, like a beast preparing to pounce.

“Let’s get to work,” he said, voice cold as stone.

His eyes burned with murderous frenzy. At his feet lay a large, heavy stone, dark and rough. He seized it, feeling its brutal weight in his hand. In one swift motion, he knelt beside Chang. His left hand grabbed her hair, yanking her head back. Then the stone came down.

The first blow. Her scream tore the night.

A second blow. Her arms, raised weakly in protection, bent under the impact.

And more followed, each strike echoing with his ragged breath and snarled fury.

Her long black hair spread across her face, blood matting the strands. Each strike resounded like a mournful bell, ringing through the night and against the trunks of the grove.

When he finally stopped, Jean hurled the bloodied stone aside. It rolled onto the grass, smeared with bits of flesh.

He leaned over her, voice dripping with cruelty:

“Shut up,” he hissed. “It’s not over yet.”

Marcel, emboldened by fear and intoxication, stepped forward, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. His grin trembled with madness.

“She’s finished,” he rasped. “Let’s burn her and be done with it.”

Above them, the sky opened wide like a silent stage. The stars glittered, countless and indifferent. But suddenly, one of them flickered. It grew brighter than all the others, swelling at an unnatural speed. Its glow, subtle at first, became a blazing radiance.

Jean, lost in his frenzy, didn’t notice.

He stepped closer, ready to end the horror.

Then the light exploded.

A violent flash consumed the grove, lighting every tree, every leaf, every inch of that nightmarish scene. Everything froze in a burst of white fire.

“Holy shit!” Marcel screamed, voice strangled. “Wh... what is happening?!”

He blinked wildly, tears spilling from his eyes. When he could finally see again, he froze.

Jean lay several meters away. His body had been hurled aside like a broken puppet. A massive branch had skewered him, impaling him brutally like some grotesque offering. His dead eyes stared at the sky, lips twisted in an expression of horror.

Marcel staggered back, hands trembling, breath stolen. His gaze searched frantically for a meaning. At the edge of the woods, a silhouette rose, emerging from the shadows.

A man, completely naked, was slowly rising to his feet. Tall, powerful, his muscles seemed forged by fire and the blood of battles that still marked his torso with ancient scars. His face remained hidden beneath the shadows of the branches, but everything about him radiated an otherworldly force.

Terror surged through Marcel, his knees threatening to collapse.

“Who... who the hell are you?!” he screamed, voice shattered.

In the returning silence, only the wind brushed the leaves, as though announcing that another destiny had entered the stage.

It was Thomas de La Lys.

## Chapter 4 – The Angel and the Blood

Thomas rose in the darkness, his bare chest scarred and catching the pale reflections of the moon. His lips parted in a guttural cry, almost a prayer:

“For God!”

The voice thundered through the heart of the woods.

Marcel froze, then stumbled back a step. His eyes widened, unable to withstand the supernatural presence of the man emerging from the night. His breath quickened. Panic seized him. He spun around and bolted. His legs hammered the ground, his footsteps echoing like those of hunted prey. He dove into the car, slammed the door, and without looking back, started the engine.

The headlights remained off. The shadow swallowed the sedan as it sped toward the park exit.

Thomas lowered his gaze. His fingers closed around the blood-stained stone, heavy relic of the violence inflicted. His muscles tightened. Then, in a sudden, explosive gesture, he hurled it.

The stone tore through the air with unnatural force. It shattered the rear window in a burst of glass, pierced the interior, and smashed through the front windshield. The car screeched to a halt after a few meters, its engine growling like a wounded beast.

Again, Thomas lifted his voice:

“For God!”

His bare feet stepped into the wet grass. With every stride, his wavy, shoulder-length hair lifted in the wind, slowly revealing his face. The beauty of his features contrasted sharply with the implacable power of his actions.

Thomas stopped, his gaze falling on Chang, lying on the ground. Her body writhed in pain, her groans tearing through the night.

He looked away and resumed walking. But her labored breathing grew louder, slicing through the air like a desperate plea. Thomas halted again. This time, he turned toward her. His eyes filled with fierce compassion, as though God Himself commanded his gesture.

At the edge of the woods

He knelt beside Chang. She lay in her own blood, her face marked by the stone, limbs broken, her trembling lips releasing a faint breath that resembled a prayer.

Thomas inhaled deeply, his eyes wide open. Then he leaned closer. Their lips barely brushed when a dense, golden glow flowed from his mouth. It slipped into Chang's like a living flame, warm and luminous.

Everything stopped.

The young woman's painful breathing softened. Her cries ceased. A crackling of bones echoed—sinister and miraculous all at once as her limbs knit back together, her wounded skin closed, her body reshaped under the invisible caress of the light. Her soul seemed to gather itself anew.

Thomas rose, impassive, his features fixed in an expression of eerie serenity. Before him, Chang slowly opened her eyes, her pupils wide with the shock of a miracle she could scarcely believe.

Thomas's gaze drifted away. Far ahead, Jean's impaled body still hung like a grim offering to the darkness. A breath of satisfaction brushed Thomas's lips. Then he started walking again, resolute, like a soldier risen from the grave.

At the entrance of the park

Moments later, he emerged at the entrance, now dressed in a military uniform, boots with loose laces the clothes of his enemy, taken straight from the corpse. In his arms, Chang rested, hastily dressed, her eyes half-closed.

With a trembling hand, she raised a finger toward the horizon. Her faint, nearly inaudible voice slipped through her lips:

"Please... take me to my apartment... over there... Rue de la Fauvette... number 272..."

Her breath faltered, her eyelids fell. She drifted into sleep, exhausted but alive.

Thomas tightened his hold on her. His heavy steps echoed on the ground steady, relentless. Without turning his eyes away, he walked toward the address she had whispered, carrying in his arms the woman he had saved, like an offering of love in the heart of the night.

## Chapter 5 – The Meeting of Souls

The building – late evening

Thomas's muddy boots struck the pavement with a heavy, dried-blood echo. Reaching number 272, he stopped, his breath steady. In his arms, Chang stirred slightly. He shook her gently, with an awkward softness, like waking a child worn out by exhaustion.

"Hey... Miss... we've arrived," he murmured.

Her eyelids opened slowly, revealing eyes still clouded by fatigue and trauma. Chang straightened up awkwardly and slipped out of his arms. Standing, she adjusted her wrinkled clothes, then nervously searched her pocket and pulled out a set of keys.

Unsteady, she moved toward the entrance door. Her hand trembled slightly as she inserted the key. A sharp click accompanied her gesture. She stepped inside, then stopped abruptly, as if seized by doubt.

She turned her head. Her eyes rested on Thomas, still standing in the shadows massive, yet marked by an unsettling serenity.

"I... I don't know who you are," she said softly, "but... if you wish, you may come in. Come to my apartment. I... I want to thank you. It's because of you that I'm still alive, and I'm infinitely grateful."

Her words trembled, but sincerity carried them. She lowered her head slightly, hiding the faint blush rising to her cheeks. Then, without waiting for his reply, she stepped inside and disappeared into the hall.

Thomas followed without a word. The door closed behind them with a dull thud, sealing their entry into a new world.

Chang's apartment – late evening

The small home opened into a dining room of nearly austere simplicity. On the walls, a few traditional Chinese decorations recalled her origins. At the far end of the room, a small Buddha statue rested in the shadows, silently watching over the place.

On the table, two porcelain cups released gently fragrant steam. Chang and Thomas sat facing each other. The contrast was striking: she, slight, fragile, her shoulders still trembling; he, massive, his fixed gaze carrying an almost supernatural intensity.

Outside, the neighbors' noise seeped through the thin walls voices, arguments, bursts of laughter. Inside, however, a dense silence wrapped around them, fragile and solemn.

Thomas set his cup down after a sip. His dark, deep eyes never left Chang. She lifted hers timidly but, overwhelmed by the weight of his stare, looked away and nervously brushed back her hair.

“Once again... thank you so much,” she stammered. “You saved me from those two bastards. I... I don’t understand how you happened to be there, but I’m alive because of you.”

Her voice cracked. She inhaled deeply, then continued, tears gathering at the corners of her eyes.

“You can’t imagine... how much I suffered under their blows. And then suddenly... a warmth, a strange well-being came over me. The pain disappeared. How... how is that possible?”

She stopped, took a sip of burning tea. Setting her cup down, she raised her chin slightly, as if trying to regain composure.

“My name is Chang Lee,” she said, more firmly. “I’m Belgian-Chinese. My parents returned to China three years ago, so I live alone... here, in this social apartment. I work in a grocery store, for lack of better options.”

Her tone fell back into shyness. Her hands tightened around her cup. Her large, dark eyes filled with curiosity and fear.

“But you... who are you? What happened back there, in that park? By what magic am I still alive?”

Thomas straightened slowly. His broad shoulders rose, his chest expanding. His burning gaze locked onto hers. Every word he was about to speak seemed to carry the weight of a thousand years.

Thomas turned his eyes away for a moment. His face tightened with deep discomfort.

“I am sorry you suffered,” he said in a low voice. “But I myself... do not understand why. Nor how I was able to save you... nor how your wounds closed beneath my hands.”

His fingers trembled slightly. He shook his head slowly, as though surrounded by an impenetrable fog.

“I am... lost,” he murmured. “Lost in this world.”

Struck by the intensity of his voice, Chang lifted her head suddenly. Her brows creased. She fixed her black eyes in his, with a hint of defiance.

“But... who are you?” she asked, her throat tight.

Then Thomas rose. His imposing stature suddenly filled the confined space. His chest lifted with a deep breath, and his voice grew grave, solemn, almost liturgical.



“I am Thomas de La Lys. Crusader knight, nineteen years of age, who served under his lord and commander, Godfrey of Bouillon, Duke of Lower Lotharingia, on the lands of France.”

He paused, his eyes fixed on an invisible memory, as though he could still see a banner whipping in the dust of an ancient battlefield.

“And I died... in the year of Our Lord 1099, in Jerusalem, during the bloody siege against the Saracens.”

His words crashed through the cramped apartment like thunder.

Chang froze, mouth slightly open. Her breath caught, her chest rising sharply. Instinctively, she lifted her hands toward the ceiling, as if trying to push away the idea itself.

“You’re insane!” she gasped. “This is a dream this isn’t possible!”

Her eyes blurred with tears, her body shaking. She stepped back, ready to flee.

Thomas, startled by her terror, raised his hands in appeasement. His features softened, trying to calm her.

“You must believe me,” he pleaded. “I speak the truth.”

But overwhelmed by panic, Chang stood abruptly. Her fingers intertwined, rigid as in a desperate prayer. Her voice burst out, sharp and trembling with fear.

“You’re a lunatic! You must have escaped from an asylum! Please just go! Don’t hurt me... This evening is already a nightmare, I can’t take any more!”

She trembled uncontrollably.

Thomas clenched his fists, jaw tight, fighting a rage he knew could be catastrophic. He breathed deeply, and his words, laden with solemn anguish, echoed through the room.

“Chang... I will never harm you. Believe me. I seek only to understand... why God has sent me back to this Earth.”

A heavy silence followed. The neighbors’ noise beyond the walls suddenly seemed distant, meaningless, compared to the colossal confession he had just spoken.

Chang, despite her terror, kept watching him. Her eyes shone with a troubled light—caught between fear and a fascination she didn’t dare acknowledge. Her lips trembled. A nervous, fragile smile appeared, forced.

“Then tell me... where were you before appearing in that park?”

The question rang like a challenge.

Thomas lowered his eyelids. His face twisted into a painful grimace. His hands pressed violently against his temples, as though holding back an unbearable memory. His voice, cracked, turned rough.

“I wandered... like a damned soul... in the depths of hell, at the gates of purgatory.”

His shoulders dropped heavily. He shook his head slowly, crushed by the weight of centuries. His words faltered.

“God... the one to whom I had given my life... left me in eternal suffering.”

Suddenly he raised his head. His gaze flared with strange conviction, burning with a near-fanatical glow.

“But I understand now! God commands me to take up the fight again. To raise the sword once more, in a crusade against His enemies. Then, perhaps, He will free me. Only then... will I enter paradise.”

His voice, lower now, broke again. He lowered his eyes, his posture folding inward.

“Otherwise... He will leave me in hell. And this time... for eternity.”

The silence that followed was icy.

Chang, petrified, shook her head violently. She stepped back, her face closed with fear and confusion.

“All of this is too much,” she said sharply. “I need rest.”

She turned abruptly, hands clenched in refusal, and walked quickly toward her bedroom. At the doorway, she turned back, her black eyes fixed on Thomas one last time.

“Listen to me carefully,” she said, her voice trembling but firm. “I don’t know why... but a small voice in me tells me not to throw you out. Probably because you saved me. So, Monsieur Thomas de La Lys... you may sleep on the couch, just for tonight. Tomorrow... you will leave. Understood?”

Her words cracked through the air like a verdict.

Thomas did not reply. His face remained impassive, but his fists tightened, betraying the storm inside him.

Chang turned the key in the lock. The door closed with a dry snap. The metallic click of the bolt echoed in the silent apartment like a hammer striking an anvil.

Thomas remained alone in the dining room, facing the immobile Buddha thoughtful, lost between two worlds.

## Chapter 6 – The Shadows of the Park

Wolvendael Park – night

Blue and red lights swept across the night, giving the park the appearance of a battlefield. Three federal police vans surrounded the edge of the woods. Around them, the silhouettes of officers moved briskly, yellow tape stretching across paths, camera flashes exploding, photographs capturing every fragment of the scene. The crackle of radios mixed with the low murmur of investigators.

At the center of this macabre ballet stood Louis Diallo. In his sixties, with a beige trench coat draped over his shoulders, the federal judicial inspector nervously pulled on a cigarette. His imposing silhouette, tired posture, and time-worn face marked by sleepless nights commanded as much respect as fear.

With a sharp gesture, he turned to his young colleague.

“Clara!” he barked, his thick Brussels accent cutting through the noise, his raspy voice tearing into the chaos. “Come on, give me a rundown. Photos, facts, before the pathologist and the coroner show up and screw up the whole scene. Move it!”

Clara hurried toward him, smartphone in hand. A woman in her thirties with blonde hair pulled back and a determined gaze still tinged with idealism, she positioned herself in front of him.

“Inspector Diallo,” she said firmly, though slightly out of breath, “we found an old bike completely wrecked two hundred meters away, on Rouge Street, right at the border of the park. Next to it, a broken MP3 player.”

Diallo exhaled a long cloud of smoke, squinting. His gaze slid toward his colleague, carrying both weariness and irony. He shrugged, a bitter grimace stretching his lips.

“So far away... Check if the bike has a name or number engraved. It should be registered with the Uccle municipality, as it should be. And the MP3... well, do your best.”

Clara nodded, but her gaze drifted toward the crime scene. Her lips trembled.

“Inspector...” she whispered, “it’s really strange. Did you see the car? The guy’s head inside... you can almost see through it. Like it was pulverized.”

Diallo stepped forward, his shoes sinking slightly into the damp grass. He crushed his cigarette under his heel, puffed out his cheeks, and exhaled heavily. His eagle-like eyes swept over the corpses.

“Yeah,” he muttered. “It took colossal force to do that. Not the kind of thing you see every day.”

He tilted his chin toward the naked body impaled on a massive branch, frozen in a grotesque posture. A bitter smile creased his face.

“And the other one... naked, skewered like a slab of cheap meat. As some would say: ‘he who thought he’d take got himself taken.’”

His tone mixed cynicism and dark humor, but his eyes glinted with genuine concern.

Clara turned to him sharply, eyes wide. Her breath caught, as though she suddenly realized this investigation was nothing like the others.

She frowned, her voice trembling with uneasy curiosity.

“Why do you say that, Inspector?”

Louis Diallo gave a thin smile, tinged with vanity, like a tired professor forced to restate the obvious. His reply came with bitter irony.

“Experience, dear Clara. Look around you clear as crystal. These two idiots wanted some ‘fun,’ thought they’d assault a defenseless woman. And that jerrycan lying there like a monument to stupidity makes their intentions obvious burn her alive, erase the evidence.”

He paused, his brow furrowing. His back slumped under the weight of that truth, his shoulders drooping as though carrying a burden repeated too many times.

“But then... something, or someone, ruined their little party.”

His words lingered in the cold air of the park.

Clara nodded slowly, a shiver running down her spine. She pointed hesitantly toward the ground.

“We did find a lot of blood... and this small pair of women’s underwear, just here.”

Diallo raised his head, nodding gravely. His body straightened with the effort of a man refusing to bend under exhaustion. His features, carved by sleepless nights, hardened further.

“Clara, run a DNA analysis immediately,” he ordered, his voice deep.

Then suddenly, his tone softened with fatigue.

“As for me, I’m going home. Jeanne’s waiting, and if I keep getting home at impossible hours, I’ll end up accused of adultery by omission... or worse: of being the author of my own divorce.”

Clara, touched by the mix of bitterness and humor, slipped her smartphone into the back pocket of her trousers.

“I wish you a good night, Inspector Diallo,” she said with a timid smile.

He was already walking away, his broad silhouette disappearing under his beige coat. With slow but determined steps, he headed toward the park entrance. Without turning back, he called out, his voice firm like a promise to himself as much as to his colleague:

“Thank you, Clara. But tomorrow morning, I want this file complete on my desk. We’re not letting this case slip away. I swear I’ll find him. This criminal won’t escape me.”

The young woman remained frozen, stunned by his unwavering resolve. Around her, the dark park closed in, its shadows seeming to guard jealously the secret of this blood-soaked night.

## Chapter 7 – The Dawn of Beliefs

The living room was still wrapped in shadows. The curtains let through only a thin line of grey light, the last trace of the fading night.

Thomas pushed himself up slowly from the couch where he had spent the night. His hair was tousled, his bare chest marked by war, his drawn features giving his face a strangely younger, almost fragile air. Shirt in hand, he crossed the room, his heavy footsteps sounding softly against the wooden floor.

In the dining room, an unexpected scene stopped him.

Chang, dressed in a simple black tracksuit, was kneeling before a small Buddha statue set on a low table. Her hair, pulled into a strict bun, left her neck exposed. Eyes closed, hands joined, lips barely moving... she was praying. A halo of calm seemed to surround her, as if the turmoil of the previous night had dissolved into this silent meditation.

Standing behind her, Thomas ran a tired hand over his face. But soon, his gaze fixed intensely on the golden statuette. A wary furrow creased his brow.

“What are you doing?” he asked sharply, almost against his will.

Chang slowly opened her eyes. Startled, she met his piercing stare, and a faint flush coloured her cheeks.

“Um... could you please put your shirt on?”

Thomas looked down, suddenly aware of his nakedness. Caught off guard, he hurried to pull on his shirt, visibly embarrassed.

“Sorry,” he muttered.

He sat down at the table, trying to dispel the awkwardness.

“You’re up early,” he observed, as if to steer the conversation elsewhere.

Chang rose smoothly, regaining her composure. Her face recovered its serenity. She walked lightly toward the kitchen.

“Would you like some coffee?” she asked in a soft, almost professional tone, as if to erase the strangeness of the moment.

Thomas followed her with his eyes, but his voice remained grave, tinged with suspicion.

“No, thank you. What I want... is to know what you were doing in front of that statue.”

His dark, burning gaze stayed fixed on the Buddha, as if this simple object concentrated all the mistrust of a crusader torn from his own time.

Chang came back from the kitchen with a steaming cup in her hands. She sat opposite Thomas, her fingers wrapped around the porcelain as though drawing courage from its warmth. Her eyes rested on him timidly, yet a flicker of defiance already glinted there.

“I was practising my religion,” she said clearly. “Buddhism. The one that seeks enlightenment... and the end of suffering.”

She held his gaze more firmly now, her features suddenly hardening. A sarcastic curl touched her lips.

“But you probably don’t know much about that. You were far too busy cutting down Muslims and Jews in Jerusalem, back in 1099.”

Her words landed like a slap.

Thomas frowned, but a faint smile softened his face, somewhere between amusement and pain.

“You seem to know that time quite well... and yet you still refuse to accept that I come from another age.”

Chang’s eyes widened. She lowered her head, troubled, and began stirring her coffee slowly. The gentle clink of the spoon filled the silence, like an escape route.

“True,” she said at last. “I did my homework before you woke up. The internet is a dangerous weapon, you know. And besides... the way you speak is strange. Not very convincing.”

She lifted her head, her eyes gleaming with open irony.

“I expected something more like: ‘Fair maiden, would you, forthwith, consent to share my humble platter.’”

Thomas blinked, thrown off, then let out a short, surprised laugh.

“What on earth are you talking about?”

Chang lifted her chin, her large eyes still locked on him.

“Your medieval talk. That’s what I imagined.”

Thomas sighed and let his head tilt slightly forward, as if weighed down by a truth he barely understood himself.

“Strangely... no. I can no longer speak that way. My words have changed. I speak as you do now... as if this world had already adopted me.”

He paused, his gaze darkening.

“And what’s more disturbing is that I feel your customs inside me, your culture, as if they had always been mine.”

His words hung in the room, heavy and mysterious. Despite herself, Chang felt a shiver run through her determination to remain sceptical.

Thomas raised his head. His gaze, dark and penetrating, locked onto hers.

“I know all this troubles you... but it is God’s will, I’m certain of it,” he whispered fervently. “He is infinitely powerful. My duty is clear: I must find my brothers-in-arms and take up the crusade again, before it is too late.”

A silence fell broken at once by a brief, theatrical laugh. Chang threw up her hands in an exaggerated gesture.

“And bang! That’s karma for you,” she said in a mocking tone.

Thomas, caught off guard, frowned.

“Kar... karma?”

Chang grew serious again. She lowered her head slightly, her voice turning calmer, more didactic.

“Yes. In Buddhism, the law of karma says that every action brings about a consequence. Cause leads to effect. You reap what you sow. No divine punishment, no divine pardon... only the inevitable chain of actions.”

Thomas listened, lips pressed together. Then a bitter smile pulled at his mouth. His fingers began tapping on the table, a stubborn rhythm echoing a growing doubt.

“I see... you’re still not ready to believe me.”

Chang lifted her eyes timidly to his. Her gaze faltered for a moment, but her words remained honest.

“Not yet,” she said quietly. “You see? Your words are beautiful, but they sound like stories. If you want me to believe your tale... I need proof.”

She paused, her gaze hardening briefly.

“And just so you know, we are in the year of our Lord two thousand and twenty-five.”

Thomas jolted. His eyes widened, his tapping finger suspended in mid-air.

“Two... thousand and twenty-five?” he repeated, tasting each syllable in disbelief.

He went on, more softly, almost to himself:



“I said earlier that I thought I understood your world... but hearing it like that, it’s like a sword driven straight into my heart.”

He raised his head again, his voice regaining strength.

“What do you want to know? Ask me anything.”

Chang took a small sip of coffee, searching for her words. She set down the cup carefully, then fixed Thomas with a look that hovered between challenge and curiosity.

Thomas sinks into his confession as one unrolls a tattered banner, each word stretching the past into the room. He speaks with the rough tongue of men shaped by earth and iron, and yet there is in his voice a surprising gentleness, as if the weight of centuries had polished it smooth.

“My name is Thomas de La Lys,” he said at last, his chest tight. “I was born in 1080, in Bouillon, in the land of the Franks. My father was a farmer; the farm opened onto ponds where, each summer, lilies raised their white crowns. There I learned to ride a horse, to know the taste of mud and the song of frogs. When I was old enough to be forged, they sent me to serve under Godfrey of Bouillon, descendant of Charlemagne, who trained me in the use of arms. On the day of my dubbing, he gave me my armour and my destrier. Then came... the crusade to Jerusalem. I died there, in 1099, in the midst of the clamour and the blood.”

For a few seconds, Chang was frozen, as if an ancient image had suddenly appeared in the middle of her modern living room: a muddy manor, armour, banners, the smell of burnt thyme on foreign soil. Thomas’s story, unbelievable at first hearing, had the precision of memories that do not belong to a liar; it was made of details no one invents lightly. But the irrational is a beast hard to tame: a sharp sound at the door snapped the thread hanging between them.

Chang jumped, straightened, and went to open. A frail silhouette framed itself in the doorway: Alice. Her hair, pinned up in crooked curlers, and her stooped gait betrayed a life of gossip and long days. She was the very image of the curious neighbor both tender and acerbic a woman with a thick file of stories just waiting to be chewed over.

“Good morning, Alice,” said Chang with a smile meant to hide her discomfort. “How are you?”

Alice inclined her head, narrowed her eyes in a protective little gesture, and let a motherly mischief flicker through her expression.

“Good morning, my girl. I see you’ve got a visitor... That’s a rare thing in your place.”

Blushing, Chang improvised an excuse.

“Alice, could you tell Luc I won’t be coming in to work today? Tell him I’ve caught a nasty flu.”

Alice looked at her, a little sceptical, then peered into the room with the eye of a benevolent critic. She laid a hand on her chest, as if testing the atmosphere of the home.

“All right, Chang. But he looks like a handsome young man,” she added, eyeing Thomas with a mix of approval and curiosity.

Chang instinctively stepped between Alice and Thomas, as if to shield a fragile secret.

“Thank you, Alice. I’ll make it up to you. When I’ve saved enough, I’ll buy myself a smartphone, I promise, and then I’ll finally be independent. But for now, I really have to go.”

Alice nodded, satisfied with a promise that could well wait. She didn’t press further; the small bargains of daily life always took precedence, for her, over great revelations. Before leaving, she cast one last glance at Thomas, as if to record this new presence in their little world of neighbours.

Thomas raised a hand in greeting, a shy, grateful smile on his lips. He was at once fallen knight and lost young man; the contradiction only made him more human. Alice moved off down the hall, trailing scraps of future gossip that would soon fade away.

Chang shut the door at once, cutting short Alice’s indiscreet comments. She joined Thomas in the dining room. Her gestures betrayed her nervousness: her fingers tangled in her hair, which she rubbed compulsively. Yet she dared raise her eyes to him.

“That was Alice, my neighbour,” she said, forcing a smile. “The building’s newspaper. She’s very old, but I get along really well with her.”

She inhaled, gathering her courage.

“I really need to go out and walk a bit. Will you come with me?”

Thomas, surprised, arched his brows.

“I thought you wanted me to leave...”

Chang lowered her head slightly, her hands clasped together like a silent prayer. Her voice turned soft, almost trembling.

“You saved me. And practising Buddhism means that too: showing compassion, understanding... accepting others.”

She lifted her gaze, still hesitant, and added in a breath:

“Even if I do find you... really very strange.”

A flash of intensity, hot and bright, passed through Thomas’s eyes.

“All right,” he conceded. “A bit of fresh air can only do us good.”

## Chapter 8 Rudy

In the building hallway

A few minutes later, their footsteps echoed on the cold tiles of the hallway. Chang walked quickly, almost relieved to escape the heaviness of her apartment. At her side, Thomas, upright and alert, observed every detail as if discovering a new world.

Suddenly, a bulky figure appeared at the far end: Rudy Malfroid, a heavysset man in his thirties, thick shoulders, protruding belly, his face stamped with coarseness. As he passed them, he deliberately bumped Chang with his shoulder. She staggered, startled. Rudy did not slow down.

A few steps farther, he stopped dead. Slowly, he turned, raised his greasy hands and pulled at the corners of his eyes to slant them. His smile twisted into a mask of hatred.

“Filthy Chinese!” he spat. “Rotten noodle-eater!”

The words cracked like a whip.

Chang froze, head dropping at once. Her body folded in on itself, her steps quickening as if she longed only to disappear through the exit door. But before she could flee, Thomas placed a firm hand on her arm, stopping her.

He plunged his eyes into hers. His voice rang low and grave, charged with indignation and raw sincerity.

“Why do you lower your head? Why are you afraid of the words of such a cowardly man?”

Breath short, Chang glanced around her like hunted prey. Her hands fluttered in a calming gesture. She shook her head, almost pleading.

“No!” cried Chang, tugging nervously at his arm. “Ignore him. Let’s just get out of here.”

But Thomas had already gone rigid. His jaw tightened, his muscles tensed. He looked at her, brows drawn together, as though he no longer heard her supplications.

“What?” he growled, breathing hard.

Chang persisted, desperate. She clutched his arm, trying to drag him toward the exit.

“That’s Rudy... He’s an alcoholic, a brawler. Everyone knows him here. He lives in apartment D, and everyone is afraid of his temper. He can be... very violent.”

Far from calming Thomas, her words seemed to pour oil on the fire of his anger. He leaned closer, his face inches from hers, his eyes blazing with a contained fury.

“You want to run? Run from this man out of fear? Out of submission?”

Chang, trembling, didn’t know what to say. She could feel the heat of his rage, like an ember against her skin.

Thomas pulled free with a sharp movement, veins bulging at his temples. His voice cracked like a military command:

“That’s enough!”

He spun around and strode straight toward Rudy.

“Hey, you!” he shouted. “I’ve got something to say to you.”

Rudy, who had turned with a smirk, met his challenger like a man welcoming a fight. His bulk and drunken bravado made him reckless. But he had never faced a man like Thomas.

In an instant, the knight was on him. His fists crashed down with the force of a hammer on an anvil. The first blow split his lip. A second, sharper, thudded into his ribs. A third hurled him against the hallway wall. Rudy reeled, his face flushed with blood.

Time seemed to hang suspended: ancient violence, the kind bred on battlefields, had crossed the centuries to explode in this narrow corridor. Dazed, Rudy tried to raise an arm in defence, but Thomas kept striking, relentless, until the man, dazed and broken, dropped to his knees, thick blood spilling from his mouth.

Only then did Rudy lift his hands in surrender, eyes wide with fear.

“Enough!” he gasped, voice shattered.

“Thomas!” screamed Chang. “Stop! I’m begging you!”

She threw herself between them, clutching his arms in a desperate attempt to hold back his fury. Her cry rang out like a mother’s plea.

The knight froze at once. His chest heaved wildly, but his dark, hard eyes stayed fixed on Rudy.

“The next time you speak to Chang,” he growled in a low voice, “you will speak with respect. Otherwise... I swear you won’t get back up.”

His words fell like an oath.

Then, turning his back on his adversary, Thomas took Chang’s trembling hand. Together, they headed for the exit, leaving behind them the taut silence of the corridor.

Rudy, his face swollen and bruised, hauled himself up with difficulty. Each movement tore a grimace from him. With a furious swipe, he wiped the blood from his mouth but in his eyes, a spark of rancour was already burning.

## Chapter 9 – The Bloodhound

Federal Judicial Police Headquarters – Brussels

The pale morning light filtered through the dusty blinds of Inspector Louis Diallo's office. The walls, yellowed by years of cigarette smoke and solved cases, seemed to bear the scars of his stubbornness. Sitting behind his cluttered desk, glasses sliding down the bridge of his broad nose, Diallo scrutinized the photos spread out before him.

The crime scene pictures lined up like silent witnesses: the shattered windshield of a car, a metallic carcass still steaming, and farther away, the grotesque image of an impaled body frozen in an unbearable posture.

Diallo frowned. His deep voice broke the heavy silence.

"Marcel Poinpont, that little thug... He surely didn't expect to end like this."

He lifted another photograph, holding it at the very edge, as if it were a filthy puzzle piece.

"And his accomplice, Jean Van Stell, that repeat offender and rapist... He must have been completely blindsided. Impaled on a branch... what a fate."

The inspector leaned back in his chair, grabbed his battered lighter, and lit a cigarette. A long drag filled his lungs. He exhaled the smoke in thin spirals, staring at the image of a pierced skull.

"But who... who could do something like this?" he muttered. "You'd need a herculean strength to throw a stone like that through a car... and shatter Marcel's head."

He moved on to another photo. His tired yet sharp eyes suddenly widened. He leaned in, nearly pressing his forehead to the image.

"There," he whispered. "The tracks."

Clearly visible were footprints of military boots pressed deep into the wet grass, marking a path that led toward the exit of the park. Diallo pursed his lips.

"Whoever did this carried the victim in their arms. Then walked away calmly. But... before the crime..."

He rolled his cigarette between his fingers.

"...he was naked. Barefoot, and naked as the day he was born."

Diallo exhaled another plume of smoke, his dark gaze deepening.

“Afterwards, he helped himself to the dead man’s wardrobe. He took the boots, the clothes of that bastard Van Stell... leaving him completely stripped, exposed like an animal.”

The inspector pulled himself from his thoughts. He removed his glasses, rubbed the bridge of his nose, inhaled deeply, and released a long cloud of smoke. His face, marked by violet circles of exhaustion, lit up with a spark of determination.

Then, in a booming voice, he barked:

“Clara!”

A few knocks struck the door before the tall silhouette of Clara appeared. Her hair, tied tightly in a ponytail, contrasted with the tense glow in her eyes. She carried a transparent plastic bag in her hand, which she set carefully on Diallo’s cluttered desk. Inside lay a small scuffed MP3 player, dusty, a fragile trace of a truth buried.

“Nothing on the bicycle frame,” she said, voice clear but restrained. “No registration at the commune. As for the MP3 player... see for yourself.”

She raised her eyes, seeking her superior’s approval.

Diallo stared at her for a long moment, then snapped sharply:

“Inspector Diallo!”

Clara furrowed her brow, taken aback.

“Sorry?”

He crushed his cigarette in an overflowing ashtray and leaned forward, his dark eyes filled with icy irony.

“Call me Inspector Diallo. Got it? We didn’t go to school together.”

A flush rose instantly to the young woman’s cheeks. She bit her lower lip and lowered her head.

“Sorry, Inspector Diallo.”

A satisfied smirk tugged at the man’s lips. He turned away at once, focusing again on the crime scene photos. His index finger tapped the glossy paper.

“All right... Clara, check the hospitals nearby. See if anyone showed up last night with injuries after a bicycle accident.”

He drew another drag of smoke, exhaling slowly, savoring each word.

“And while you’re at it, drop by the Manneken Pis. You know it? A tiny café in the neighborhood. Good reputation these days. Go there, listen carefully. You might learn a thing or two about our two thugs: Poinpont and Van Stell.”

Clara nodded, her features strained by fatigue as much as humiliation.

“Yes, Inspector.”

Without another word, she left the office. The door clicked softly behind her, leaving Diallo alone in a cloud of smoke.

He pulled the plastic bag toward him and removed the MP3 player with almost delicate gestures. The object seemed harmless, yet its silence betrayed a secret. Diallo pressed several buttons, hoping to coax out a note, a breath of voice. Nothing. He frowned and lifted the device closer to his eyes.

His index finger tapped the corner of his mouth a reflex of deep reflection.

Suddenly he snapped his fingers.

“My letter opener, quick!”

The old bloodhound was already bending forward, ready to force open the plastic shell and pry into the guts of the small device, convinced it held more than just a music file.

Louis Diallo, cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth, attacked the MP3 casing with his letter opener. His gestures had something frantic, almost furious. At last, with a faint click, the screen lit up. Characters appeared immediately.

“Well, well...” he murmured, raising his eyebrows. “Chang.”

A smile of satisfaction crept across his tired face.

“So that’s already a lead... a name, or rather a first name. Certainly Asian. Not bad for a start.”

He pulled from the drawer a pair of tangled earbuds. Greasy fingerprints still smudged their plastic. Diallo stared at them with disgust, wrinkled his nose, then wiped them vigorously with an old crumpled handkerchief. He shoved them into his ears, resigned.

A song burst forth at once, bright and outdated. Mike Brant sang “Laisse-moi t’aimer” at full volume. Diallo grimaced, squinted in irritation, and skipped to the next track. Another voice rose: Michel Sardou, deep and powerful, singing “Je vais t’aimer.”

The inspector yanked the earbuds out with a curse, throwing them on the desk as if they were burning.

“Damn it!” he growled. “That’s Jeanne’s favorite song...”

A puff of smoke escaped his mouth as he lit another cigarette almost mechanically. A brief, mocking laugh left him.

“Well, this Chang... she’s a woman. And a woman desperate for love, judging by those old tunes.”

He glanced up at the ceiling, his smile turning predatory.

“But who still listens to that stuff from the 70s... except my wife, obviously?”

Then he snapped back to seriousness, his fingers tapping nervously on the desk.

“Anyway... we need to find this Chang.”

He crushed his cigarette furiously in the ashtray, adding a new layer to the mountain of spent filters. His eyes drifted back to the macabre photos before him.

“Two corpses on my hands,” he muttered. “And the examining judge won’t take long to demand answers...”

The heavy silence of the office returned, punctuated only by the stubborn ticking of the wall clock.



## Chapter 10 – The Uncertain Steps

Uccle district – late morning

In the pale light bathing the streets of Uccle, Chang and Thomas walked side by side along the sidewalk. Their shadows stretched across the pavement, but their eyes kept drifting away from each other.

Chang's face was drawn, worn out by the previous night and by her own anxieties. Her dark, worried eyes would sometimes lift toward Thomas, searching for an answer in the silence he carried with him. Then her shoulders would sink again, as if all courage left her at once.

Beside her, Thomas kept his chin slightly lowered. His closed features and distant gaze betrayed a deep embarrassment, an inner struggle he would not confess.

Chang finally dared to break the silence. Her voice was soft, but it trembled faintly.

"Thomas..."

"Are... are you always obliged to be so violent?" she asked, her voice tired, almost pleading.

Thomas slowly lifted his eyes toward the grey sky, as if the clouds could offer him an answer. His features hardened, but his words carried the weight of a confession.

"I still have in my mind the cruel images of another age," he said in a low voice. "The mass killings committed by myself and my brothers-in-arms, the crusaders... We could not survive nor advance without unshakeable faith. Violence was necessary. We had to be merciless, convinced that we were God's armed hand to free the Holy Places."

He paused, and a shiver crossed his face.

"I suppose... that brutality remained carved into me."

Chang stopped short, stunned. She planted her dark eyes into Thomas's, incredulous.

"Shit... Are you serious? You really believe that God Himself ordered you to carry out those barbarities during the crusade?"

Thomas turned toward her, his back straight, his gaze proud. His voice resonated like an oath.

"Yes. And I acted also in the name of Christianity, to which I swore allegiance. You would do the same, if your God asked it of you."

Chang raised her hands sharply, as if pushing the idea away.

“Oh, I doubt that! My religion doesn’t seek to kill. It aims for enlightenment and the end of suffering. Not to feed it, and certainly not to glorify it.”

Her words cracked sharply through the air.

Thomas froze, then slowly inclined his head. His gaze softened.

“I am sorry, Chang,” he murmured sincerely. “I should not have looked down on you.”

They resumed walking in silence, their steps echoing on the damp sidewalk. Their shadows lengthened as they approached a small hot-dog stand set at the corner of the street. A warm, spicy smell floated in the air, comforting in contrast with the weight of their exchange.

Chang searched her bag and took out her wallet. Her gestures were shy, awkward, but her eyes sought a reconciliation.

“I’d like to make peace,” she said softly, “by inviting you to share a hot dog with me.”

A shy smile crossed her face. She shook her head, almost desperate at her own words.

“What am I even saying... of course you know this kind of food!”

Thomas opened his eyes wide, and a faint smile tugged at his lips.

“This food is not unfamiliar to me,” he said with a somewhat old-fashioned politeness. “I have never tasted it... but it feels familiar. Like this world around me: strange, disconcerting, and yet... not indifferent to me.”

Chang looked at him, taken aback, then shrugged in a nervous little laugh.

“Then let’s celebrate that.”

In front of the hot-dog stand

The greasy smoke of the grill floated through the air, mixing with the scent of mustard and caramelized onions. The vendor, busy behind his small window, handed them steaming buns filled with sausages. Chang and Thomas, standing side by side, bit into their food.

Thomas chewed with care, his features first perplexed, then lit with unexpected satisfaction.

“Strange texture,” he admitted after swallowing, “but pleasant on the tongue. And this mustard that stings my nose... I tasted worse during the crusade!”

Chang widened her eyes, stunned by the bizarre comparison.

“I... I don’t doubt that,” she murmured, half amused, half embarrassed.

Thomas devoured his meal with vigorous appetite. When he finished, he wiped his mouth with a confident gesture, his gaze settling on Chang with a singular intensity.

“I would like you to use ‘you’ informally with me from now on,” he said suddenly. “It will make our exchanges more... friendly.”

A light silence settled between them. Then he continued, softer:

“So you are Chinese... Tell me about your country. For I do not know it.”

More delicate, Chang finished her hot dog with elegance. She then took a sip of her drink, gathered her hair into a quick bun, and in doing so revealed the fine nape of her neck, where a birthmark shaped like a drop of blood shone.

“So you’re interested in my country now?” she teased lightly.

Thomas lowered his head, as if apologizing.

“Forgive me... we have spoken only of me since yesterday. I would not want to disrespect the one who offered me her trust.”

But his gaze had stopped elsewhere. Fixed, intense, it clung to that dark mark on Chang’s fair skin.

“You have a mark... a blood drop, there, on your neck,” he murmured, narrowing his eyes.

Chang immediately brought her hand to her neck. Her discomfort showed in her eyes.

“Yes,” she whispered. “I was born with it. I came into the world in China, on the banks of the Yangtze. My parents used to say this mark was unique, and that it would pass on to my descendants.”

She shrugged, a bitter smile on her lips.

“But I’ve never seen those descendants, obviously. Shortly after my birth, we left China for Belgium.”

A silence followed. Thomas stared at her with narrowed eyes, then smiled, almost tender.

“I believe your parents were right. It makes you... unique.”

Chang turned away, embarrassed. She bit her lip and pulled her collar over her neck to hide the mark.

“To keep it short,” she resumed more assertively, “China is immense. The fourth largest country in the world. Fourteen borders, dizzying mountains, deserts of sand, forests dense as night... It’s a land of contrasts, magnificent and harsh.”

Thomas listened, his gaze still fixed on her.

“There must be crowds there...”

A playful smile lit Chang’s face.

“You have no idea! But as I already said, I don’t want to go back there. Maybe someday on vacation... But Belgium is my adopted country. It’s here that I want to build my life. Whatever my parents say.”

Her words sounded with conviction, almost like a declaration of independence.

But Thomas’s brow suddenly furrowed. His eyes had turned away: two Muslim women were passing in front of them, each pushing a stroller where a child slept.

A hard gleam flashed through his gaze. His voice cracked, laden with distant fanaticism.

“We have been overrun by the Muslims!”

Chang jumped, then straightened, her face suddenly stern. She stepped forward and placed herself between Thomas and the passersby, as if to block his view and cut short his impulse.

“Thomas, that’s enough!” she said firmly.

She lifted her hand, her eyes blazing with indignation.

“You are not going to harm them!” she snapped. “Times have changed, brave crusader if you truly are what you claim. Today, multiculturalism is what prevails. We live together, in harmony, in this country. I am Chinese, Thomas! You seem to forget that.”

Her voice suddenly cracked. She grabbed her head in her hands, her eyes unfocused.

“What am I saying... I’m going crazy, aren’t I?”

Thomas stepped toward her, hands raised in appeasement.

“I’m sorry, Chang. Sorry to force you to believe my story. But I swear... it’s the truth. And I had no intention of attacking those two women.”

Chang stared at him, her eyebrows tight, her gaze sharp as a blade.

“Thomas, wake up! The Kingdom of Jerusalem no longer exists! Today, the Jews have their own state, Israel. They have an army, tanks, planes, highly trained soldiers. What could you possibly do against them?”

Thomas clenched his fists, his features hardening.

“If I have returned to the world of the living... it is to fight in His name. For God.”

Chang pointed her finger at him, her voice trembling with a mix of anger and fear.

“And you’re sure of that?”

The knight slowly lifted his face toward the grey sky, as if seeking an invisible answer.

“Otherwise... why would I be here?” he whispered.

Silence weighed heavily, broken only by the distant sound of a passing car. Chang stepped back, her lips trembling, torn between fear and an inexplicable attachment.

## Chapter 11 – The Wounded Crow

Under the harsh glare of the neon lights, Rudy Malfroid waited in front of the reception window. His swollen, bruised face striped with cuts and blotches testified to a brutal beating. His bloodshot eyes stared at the glass with feverish impatience.

At last, a uniformed officer, moving with a dragging step, appeared lazily behind the window. His badge hung crooked, and his shirt was unbuttoned at the collar, revealing the stuffy heat of the place.

"Hello, what can I do for you?" the officer asked, his voice sluggish.

"I'm here to file a complaint!" Rudy snapped, jaw clenched.

"All right... at least let me sit down, will you?" the officer answered, adjusting his chair behind the counter.

Rudy suddenly leaned forward, slamming his fists on the ledge. The plexiglass vibrated under the impact. His enraged eyes, wild and bloodshot, locked onto the officer's as if trying to drag him into his anger.

Startled, the officer frowned. His tone sharpened.

"Calm down, sir!"

Panting, Rudy pointed at his battered face, presenting his bruises like irrefutable evidence.

"Damn it! I just got my face smashed in by the guy of one of my neighbours! Her name's Chang... a real Asian bitch!"

A freezing silence. The officer stepped closer to the glass, his gaze suddenly serious.

"Sir, if you don't stay respectful, your complaint ends here. No slurs, no racism. Understood?"

The words hit Rudy like a slap. Taken aback, he stepped back, lowering his gaze while his jaw twitched.

"Fine... fine. But I want her to pay for my medical care! And her guy yeah, the one dressed like some kind of soldier I want him arrested for assault and battery."

The officer sighed deeply, leaned back in his chair, and rotated his computer monitor. His fingers hovered lazily over the keyboard.

"That is indeed a serious injury," he conceded. "All right. I'm listening. Tell me what happened. I'll type your statement. Start with your full name, please."

Rudy straightened up, fists clenching, shoulders lifting as if to look bigger than he was. His eyes burned with resentment and wounded pride.

"Rudy Malfroid," he said dryly.

Rudy took a breath filled with bitterness and alcohol searching his words like one probes a wound.

"My name is Rudy Malfroid," he repeated in a raspy voice. "I was just peacefully walking home this morning when... when that Asian girl no, that 'Asian' and her guy jumped me and I swear that..."

His sentence stumbled, tangled in shame and aggression. Behind the window, the officer exhaled, exhausted. He preferred stories with a beginning, middle, and end especially when they passed through his keyboard.

"First, your address, please," he said, his administrative tone laying a bandage over the bleeding story.

Rudy stammered a few numbers, fumbled for a street name in his patchy memory, and finally managed to provide enough to prove he still existed in this world of forms and reports. The mechanical rhythm of the counter resumed: the statement took shape, names aligned, injuries became straight lines on the screen. Rudy spoke with the desperation of someone trying to exist through his complaint; the officer recorded it with the cold precision of someone who knows the truth lies buried somewhere beneath the debris of the story.

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The evening light seeped through the window, still cool, while the radio murmured a contemporary song. In the small apartment, Chang and Thomas sat facing each other two silhouettes separated by a steaming cup of tea and a thousand years of mystery.

Chang's voice, low and free of pretence, dared to speak first:

"Thomas, I wanted to tell you that... even if it all seems insane, little by little, I'm starting to believe your story. You... you seem sincere."

Thomas stirred his spoon in the cup as though he were searching for meaning at the bottom of the porcelain. Gratitude passed over his face quiet, heavy, ancient.

"Thank you, Chang. I swear it's the truth. I feel that God has sent me back here to accomplish something... to fulfil a responsibility whose scope I still don't fully understand."

She lifted her shoulders, worried but pragmatic.

"What could you do, alone, against a whole people armed to the teeth?" she asked. "How do you fight centuries of weaponry, machines, and modern logic when all you've ever known is the sword and faith?"

Thomas lowered his gaze. His voice sharpened, burdened with images that still haunted him.

"I have faith," he said. "And I hope it will allow me to redeem myself. I believed, back then, that strength and justice were found in steel and in the war cry.

But in the purgatory... where I wandered... I learned otherwise."

He paused. The pain in his memory was like a blade he leaned on to find balance. His fingers clenched, as though grasping a memory too vivid.

"At the threshold of purgatory," he whispered, "my soul was crushed beneath a nameless torment. I wandered there, not as a victim... but as a butcher who saw the faces of the innocent and had to, again and again, release them from their anguish absorb their suffering until I felt nothing but the burn."

Chang listened, her eyes shining caught between horror and an overwhelming compassion. Her hand trembled faintly around her cup. The room held, for a moment, the thin border between human and divine, and outside, even the rain seemed to hold its breath.

Thomas fell silent. His features tightened. His voice when it rose again carried the weight of a verdict.

"Wounded by the evil inflicted upon them," he continued, "unjustly, whether by man's hand or by the crueler hand of illness, the soul trembled at the boundary. And my task was to free it from that torment... from that suffering."

Chang, shaken by the solemnity of his words, lifted her hands toward him as if to stop or implore him.

"Your task?" she repeated, trembling.

Thomas closed his eyes and pressed his hands violently against his temples, as if the memory tore them apart all over again.

"Like all the condemned through the centuries," he murmured, "I was forced to extract and carry the torment of innocent souls. Men, women, children... no distinction of age or origin. I absorbed their suffering so they could finally rise toward the light... join the eternal kingdom."

The words fell between them heavy, merciless. Chang frowned, leaning toward him, desperate to understand but terror flickering in her gaze.

"But... how do you extract suffering from these souls?"

Thomas opened his eyes. His voice cracked, low and raw.

"By absorbing their anguish at the very instant they draw their last breath. I take upon myself the weight of their pain a burden that tears at my flesh and burns my spirit. That is how I free them from their earthly life."

Silence. Dense as molten lead.

Chang blinked, nodding slowly her thoughts caught in a vertigo.

"And you... what do you feel during that passage?"

Thomas met her gaze. His features were ravaged. His voice rose with an intensity almost unbearable.

"I feel everything, Chang. Absolutely everything. Their horrors tear through me from their first cry to their final breath.

It is a dreadful, endless pain. It rips my soul apart without pause... a constant torment, as if I were burning for them each time."



Chang lowered her head, deeply troubled. Her lips trembled.  
"What you describe..." she whispered, "sounds less like a mission than a punishment."

Thomas straightened. His eyebrows arched, his wounded face lifted toward the ceiling as though he were seeking a sign in the invisible. His lips parted, but his eyes spoke first: a silent supplication, a mute scream to a God who did not answer.

His voice burst forth rough, cracked with suffering and angry devotion.  
"But why? Why would God inflict such penance on me? I only answered His call! I marched beside my brothers to defend Christianity against all other faiths. I fought for Him at the price of my blood!"

Chang lifted her head slowly. Her gaze hardened lit by a sharp new fire.  
"Maybe that is precisely the problem," she said, clear and cutting.

A heavy silence fell like an anvil hitting the earth.  
Thomas's fist slammed on the table with a sharp crack.  
"What are you saying!" he roared, eyes blazing.

Chang stood at once but her gesture was not violent. She raised her hands, gentle, calming, like soothing a wounded beast.  
"Okay... calm down, Thomas. We shouldn't talk about this anymore. Not tonight. Some wounds... need to stay covered. At least until they can heal."

Thomas pressed his hands against his temples in anguish, as if trying to hold back his memories. His reddened eyes stared into emptiness.

Chang turned away, seeking to break the tension. Her smile appeared fragile, like a thin beam of sunlight cutting through clouds.  
"You wouldn't be a little hungry?" she asked lightly.

Thomas lifted his gaze toward her. The simplicity of the word "hungry" after so much pain softened him instantly. He inhaled deeply, accepting her offer as one accepts a hand in the middle of a storm.

## Chapter 12 – The Fries Shack

The evening had settled in, warm and humid, when Chang and Thomas took their seats inside a small fries shack lit by flickering neon lights. The smell of hot oil, golden potatoes, and sugary sauces filled the air, comforting and ordinary. Sitting side by side at a metal table, they savored their steaming cones with quiet appetite.

Thomas chewed with an almost childlike calm, as if these simple fries were as mysterious a discovery as the strange new world surrounding him.

The door suddenly swung open, screeching on its hinges, and three men of mixed origins walked in, their voices loud with insolent bravado. One of them, tall and skinny, cast a disdainful look around the establishment before fixing his eyes on Chang. A mocking gleam lit his gaze. He turned to his two companions and, with a flick of his hand, encouraged them to join in his scorn. All three burst into crude laughter, their harsh voices echoing through the grease-heavy space.

Thomas lifted his head slowly. His eyes shifted from the three men to Chang. His expression remained calm, as though nothing had the power to disturb this moment.

"Men are always like that when they are about to eat," he said, taking another bite. "They laugh to forget their hunger."

But Chang had already felt the sting of their stares. She immediately lowered her head, hiding her face behind her cone. Her fingers trembled faintly.

"Don't pay attention, Thomas," she whispered. "Those guys... they don't have all their fries in their bags."

A timid, almost forced smile flickered on her lips, but her eyes stayed dim with unease.

"Eh?" Thomas frowned. "What do you mean by that?"

Chang let out a sigh and forced a fragile smile.

"It only means they're not thinking straight. They believe they need to show off their manhood to exist. Ignore them. They're nothing more than barnyard roosters."

Then she abruptly changed the subject, lifting her cone toward him.

"So? Do you like Belgian fries?"

But the three men were not finished. Loudly, mockingly, they began to imitate caricatured Asian chants, turning toward Chang at each note, their laughter thickening the already saturated air.

Thomas froze. He set down his cone of fries. His gaze darkened.

"I remember," he said in a low voice, "that in my time, the men who shouted their joy at every breath were usually worthless fools... straw blowing in the wind."

Chang lifted her head sharply, startled.

"What do you mean, Thomas?"

But he was no longer listening. His features twisted with an ancient, rising rage. In one sudden movement, he stood up, seized his chair, and charged toward the three provocateurs.

The first blow crashed through the shack like a thunderclap. The chair smashed onto their table, sending cups and fry trays flying, then Thomas struck again, and again, each gesture fueled by a rage shaped by centuries of war. The men, caught off guard, tried to shield themselves, stumbling backward under his onslaught.

"NO, Thomas! Stop!" Chang cried as she rushed toward him, her voice cracking with panic.

But Thomas did not hear her. In a blind frenzy, he hurled chairs aside, overturned tables, and struck relentlessly until the three terrified men bolted out of the shack, arms raised above their heads.

Silence fell, heavy and disastrous. The neon lights flickered above overturned tables, the floor littered with greasy papers and crushed fries. Thomas, panting, still gripped the chair in his hand, his eyes wild, like a warrior refusing to abandon the battlefield.

"What? Is that all?" he shouted hoarsely. "Idiots!"

Chang, her eyes filled with tears, grabbed his arm abruptly and shook him with desperate urgency.

"Honestly, Thomas, you never learn from your mistakes! You only repeat what condemned you before!"

Breath short, Thomas turned toward her. The chair still raised like a weapon, his expression hardened.

"I will not be like you, lowering my head and hiding," he said with unyielding tone. "I refuse submission, Chang. I will never live in fear."

A terrible silence settled, as if the walls themselves held their breath.

Chang stepped back, her hands raised as if to ward off his lingering violence. Her face was tight with fear and anger intertwined.

"I am not an animal!" she shouted, her voice trembling but firm.

Thomas pointed a rigid finger toward her, the gesture sharp and accusatory.

"No, you are not an animal, Chang. But be careful: if you keep bowing your head, you will forever remain the oppressed one."

The words fell like a verdict. Chang, shaken, felt tears rising despite herself. Her vision blurred, her throat tightened, and with a sharp movement, she released Thomas's arm. Without another word, she turned and hurried out of the fries shack.

Thomas stood alone amid the wreckage, the chair still in his hands, his breath ragged. Around him, shocked customers whispered; some had already fled to avoid any trouble. But Thomas saw none of it. His gaze remained fixed on the door through which Chang had disappeared, as if only now realizing the magnitude of what he had just shattered.

## Chapter 13 – The Royal Square

The following morning, the pale light of a hesitant sun spread over Brussels' Royal Square. The damp cobblestones reflected the imposing architecture, giving the place a solemn majesty.

Chang and Thomas walked side by side, yet a distance separated them, a cold space where unspoken words piled up. Both of them wore a pout, prisoners of their wounded pride and their lingering anger.

Suddenly, Thomas slowed down. He turned toward Chang, placed his right hand on his heart, and bowed his head slightly in a gesture of humility.

"I am sorry for losing my temper last night," he said softly. "I never meant to hurt you with my words."

Chang continued walking a few seconds longer, as if hesitating to respond. Then she stopped and looked up at him.

"I think you're right," she admitted reluctantly. "But it's the way you do things, Thomas, that I don't like. You always think you need to strike before speaking."

Thomas held her gaze, his expression grave and convinced.

"You will have to face them sooner or later. If you don't, they will break you again and again."

Chang looked away, but he noticed the crack in her resolve. She breathed in, then dared to reply with a mixture of timidity and pride.

"Easy for you to say... You have a strong build, a presence that imposes itself. And you're a crusader, trained to fight since childhood. I... I don't have any of that."

Thomas stepped a little closer, his gaze sharp yet not threatening, almost protective.

"Then let me teach you," he insisted. "I can show you a few techniques, enough to defend yourself, at least so no coward ever dares to lay a hand on you again."

Chang frowned, her hands rising toward the sky as if to ward off a truth she refused to accept.

"Thomas..."

Her voice trailed off, suspended between refusal and the faint desire to believe that such training could change her life.

Chang shook her head, her face tense. Her voice vibrated with a mix of anger and weariness.

“You really don’t understand how I feel, Thomas. I just told you it’s not the idea that bothers me, it’s the way you act! So no... thank you for your chivalrous concern, but I don’t want it.”

Thomas winced, as if wounded in his pride, then his expression softened. He flashed a teasing, almost conspiratorial smile.

“Alright, Chang! As you wish. But know this: if you ever need it, I will be there. And...” He studied her a moment, his smile widening. “You’re not badly built yourself!”

Chang stared at him, stunned and offended at once.

“Thank you for the delicacy,” she muttered with a grimace. “Take it for what it’s worth, of course...”

She tried to look away, but Thomas stepped closer. Without force, he wrapped his arms around her shoulders. There was no conquest in the gesture, no domination, only a sincere, almost awkward tenderness. Chang, surprised, felt her heart soften despite herself. Emotion rising in her chest, she yielded and nestled against him. Together they resumed walking across the square, their steps echoing over the cobblestones.

Then suddenly, Thomas stopped short. His face twisted under an indescribable emotion. His eyes filled with tears, and two of them slid down his cheeks without him trying to hide them.

“Incredible...” he murmured, his voice strangled.

Chang, startled, stepped back. But Thomas, seized by a force greater than himself, moved away from her, staggered, and fell to his knees before the equestrian statue of Godfrey of Bouillon. His joined hands trembled with intensity. He signed himself with solemn slowness, each gesture marked by ancient devotion.

“For God!” he breathed with fervor.

Chang stood a few steps away, observing. A discreet gleam of satisfaction lit her face.

“That’s why I wanted to bring you here,” she said softly. “I wanted you to see it with your own eyes.”

Thomas raised a gaze filled with gratitude.

“Thank you, Chang! I am glad my commander died here.”

But Chang’s eyes widened. She shook her head vigorously.

“No, Thomas... you’re mistaken. Sadly, that’s not how it ended. Come, look at the commemorative plaque. You’ll finally learn what really happened.”

Intrigued, Thomas stood up. He walked slowly toward the bronze plaque fixed to the base. His eyes scanned the lines, his lips moving silently as he read. Then suddenly, his face lit up. A laugh burst out of his throat loud, vibrant, almost joyful echoing across the square.

He fixed his gaze on the statue once more, his eyes shining with an exaltation that bordered on madness, as if he saw in that frozen bronze a fragment of his past glory.

Chang stared at him, shaken. His laughter, bright and misplaced, rang beneath the grey Brussels sky like an echo from another century.

“Why are you laughing like that, Thomas?” she asked, her voice trembling, almost irritated.

Thomas took two steps back, his eyes gleaming with pride.

“Because... with my fellow crusaders, we succeeded in liberating Jerusalem! We tore the Holy City from Muslim oppression, and Godfrey was buried in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Christianity had triumphed, Chang! It was God’s victory!”

A heavy silence fell. Chang, motionless, turned her head slightly. Her voice, when she spoke again, was soft yet sharp as a blade.

“Thomas... I just wanted to tell you that, since your crusade, seven others followed.”

The words struck Thomas like a thunderbolt. His mouth fell open. His eyes widened. He turned toward Chang, stunned.

“What? Seven others?... But... I feel as if I know this world, yet it escapes me. As if I’m nothing more than a stranger lost in a story that continued without me.”

Chang stepped closer, lifting her delicate hands, and began counting slowly on her fingers, almost like a schoolteacher facing a stubborn student.

“Yes. Counting yours, that makes eight crusades in total. Eight, Thomas. And you did not return to witness them.”

Thomas staggered. His eyes drifted skyward, searching for an answer in the heavy clouds.

“Then... God is sending me again to deliver Jerusalem,” he murmured, his voice low but fervent. “Yes, that must be it. To reclaim the Holy Land once more.”

“No!” Chang protested sharply.

She stepped forward, grabbed his calloused hand, and pulled it toward her with surprising determination. Together they began walking across the square. Chang’s steps were brisk, as if she wanted to flee her own words and his delusions.

“Thomas, listen carefully,” she said firmly, almost pleading. “Today, Jerusalem is at peace. Do you understand? The war you speak of belongs to another age. You cannot return. You cannot begin again.”

She shook her head vigorously, her dark hair swirling around her face.

“Stop thinking about that! You will destroy yourself if you remain trapped in this idea. Let’s walk. Look around you. Enjoy this city, this moment. It will do us good.”

Thomas remained silent, troubled. His eyes settled on Chang. He grimaced, torn between the burning pull of his faith and the reality this courageous woman was trying to impose on him. In his gaze lived a silent struggle: between the soldier of the past... and the man he might yet become.



## Chapter 14 – Between Fries and Palaces

Thomas shot a mischievous look at Chang, trying to dispel the heaviness of the revelations still hanging in the air.

“Are you going to make me eat fries again, aren’t you?”

Chang let a playful smile curl on her lips.

“Who knows!” she replied cheerfully. “But before that, I wanted to tell you something... We have a monarchy here in Belgium. And the Royal Palace is just a few steps from here.”

Thomas straightened abruptly, as if struck by wonder. His eyes swept over the imposing facades, the paved squares, the statues as though he were trying to find a point of reference in this overly modern world.

“Incredible!” he breathed. “So much evolution... and all of this since my death.”

Chang, amused by his sense of awe, shook her head lightly.

“And that’s not even the half of it!” she continued. “I’m not even mentioning the athletes, the sportsmen, the singers, the actors, the producers, the sculptors, the illustrators... all the artists who make the country shine and represent it to the world.”

Thomas stared at her, bewildered, then let out a nervous laugh.

“I’ll stick to the fries, I think. Otherwise, it would take me more than a single day to understand this world!”

Chang smiled, relieved to see him recover a bit of ease. They resumed walking side by side, carried by the flow of the city, somewhere between past and present, between memory and discovery.

## Chapter 15 – The Smoker of Truth

At the headquarters of the Federal Judicial Police, the air smelled of cold tobacco and the dust of old files. Inspector Louis Diallo, his suit wrinkled and weary, held a cigarette between two yellowed fingers, the tip hanging loosely from the corner of his mouth. His tired eyes scanned for the umpteenth time the pages of a report that stubbornly refused to reveal its secrets.

He grabbed the black receiver of his desk phone and pressed a button. After a moment of impatient silence, a familiar voice answered.

“Clara, it’s Diallo. Yes Inspector Diallo.”

His tone was firm, but beneath his words vibrated a deep weariness.

“I’d like to know whether you checked the hospitals nearby, and the café... the Manneken Pis, just like I told you yesterday.”

He took a long drag from his cigarette, inhaling slowly, exhaling harshly.

“What do you mean, nobody saw them there? And nothing in the hospitals either?”

His gaze drifted into emptiness for a second before he crushed the cigarette violently into an ashtray already overflowing.

“Of course... we’re stuck.”

A silence followed, then his voice fell lower, heavier:

“Besides that damn first name, *Chang*, showing up on the MP3 player, and the fact she’s clearly of Asian origin... we’ve got nothing. Nothing to chew on.”

He paused, longer this time, as if hoping for a sudden revelation from the other side of the line.

“And the DNA tests? Anything from them?”

A heavy sigh escaped him almost resigned.

“Of course not... I would’ve been surprised.”

He leaned back in his chair, shoulders slumped under the weight of the investigation. His eyes still carried the worn determination of a man who refuses to give up, even when every path seems blocked.

A dull silence buzzed through the receiver. Diallo lit another cigarette, crushed it, then his voice snapped like a whip:

“Clara! I need something *anything* if I want to present even a semblance of a case to the investigating judge. Time is running, you hear me?”

There was a hesitant breath, then Clara’s voice:

“Inspector... there is something. A guy filed a complaint at the local police station. Against a young woman named Chang.”

Diallo shot up in his chair, his eyebrows tightening.

“And you’re telling me this *now*? For God’s sake, Clara! I want that deposition immediately. You bring it to me within the hour. Not tomorrow, not later. *Now!*”

Without waiting for a reply, he slammed the receiver back into place. The sound echoed sharply in the office before fading into the heavy silence. His eyelids narrowed; his lips tightened on the cigarette filter. He inhaled deeply, then exhaled a long spiral of smoke drifting lazily toward the ceiling.

“Finally...” he murmured. “Finally, a thread to pull.”

His expression hardened.

“If it really is her, then the other one can’t be far. And him... I know he’s a criminal. Two men savagely executed. I won’t let that pass.”

He stood abruptly, snatched his coat from the back of his chair, and slipped it on with a nervous gesture. His hands instinctively checked for the comforting weight of his service weapon. He pulled it out, examined it for a moment, then slid it back into place against his body. A sigh of relief escaped him.

Glancing at his watch, he froze, annoyed.

“Seventeen thirty... Damn it! My wife is going to kill me. The neighborhood committee I promised...”

A cynical smile twisted his lips. Between a burning investigation and domestic obligations, Diallo already knew which he would choose.

## Chapter 16 – Passenger of the Night

The bar-café *Le Rétro* pulsed under the colorful glow of moving spotlights, while the deep voice of Pierre Rapsat echoed through the speakers: *Passager de la nuit*. The air smelled of hops, smoke, and the worn leather of the old booths. A warm, almost timeless atmosphere wrapped around the customers who had come to drown their thoughts in Belgian beer.

Chang gently pushed the door and led Thomas inside. He lifted his eyes toward the shifting lights, surprised by this place so unlike anything he had ever known. They took a seat at a table near the small dance floor, where a couple swayed awkwardly to the rhythm of the music.

A bartender with tattooed forearms approached, a towel slung over his shoulder. Chang took the lead, her smile bright.

“Two large beers, please.”

The server nodded and walked away. Chang turned to Thomas, her dark eyes glowing with a playful spark.

“No discussions tonight,” she insisted, placing her hand over his. “We drink Belgian beer and listen to Belgian music. That’s all.”

Thomas gave her a hesitant smile. He devoured her with his gaze, still stunned by the quiet strength she carried. To him, every corner of this modern city was a discovery, and every moment spent with her was a gift he had never dared to hope for.

The music wrapped around their thoughts, and within the noise of Brussels’ night, they were nothing but two passengers one carrying his past like armor, the other trying to crack it open to let in a fragile present.

Thomas, warmed by the lights and the atmosphere, leaned toward Chang. His shoulder brushed hers and, with a teasing smile, he said:

“At your command, my lady.”

She burst into laughter, her cheeks already flushed from the beer in her veins. The bartender placed the two large glasses before them before disappearing again, leaving them wrapped in their growing complicity. Around them, the noise grew animated conversations, glasses clinking, voices rising and falling into the melodies.

Hours passed without their noticing. In front of them, a line of empty glasses testified to their increasing drunkenness. Chang, her cheeks blazing, suddenly stood when the raspy voice of Arno filled the room: *Les filles du bord de mer*. The song seemed to take hold of her entire body. She grabbed Thomas’ hand.

“Come!”

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They rushed toward the center, among the other couples swaying clumsily. The tiny dance floor quickly became overcrowded. Bodies brushed against each other, bumped occasionally, causing bursts of laughter, irritated murmurs, and soon a few sharp words in several languages.

Thomas and Chang faced each other, eyes locked as if the rest of the world had disappeared. Their gazes burned with a budding desire, a fragile tenderness still unsure of itself.

But a harder shove than the others tipped the balance. Chang stumbled slightly.

“Please, Thomas... no!” she stammered, her eyes suddenly flooded with fear.

Thomas’ face darkened as if an ancient shadow had risen inside him. A brutal rage overtook him, wild and uncontrollable. He shoved the man who had bumped into Chang and then threw himself at him with a savage fury. His fists crashed down again and again on the man’s face.

Chang screamed, her voice cracked by terror.

“Thomas! Stop!”

But the man on the ground, half-conscious, kept receiving the blows. The customers, initially stunned, stepped back some calling for help, others shouting at Thomas.

“You’re going to kill him! I’m begging you!” cried Chang.

She threw herself at him, striking his back and chest with her small fists anything to pull him out of his violent trance. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

Suddenly, Thomas froze. As if waking from a nightmare, he let go of the man. The body fell back onto the dance floor, groaning faintly.

Chang, breathless, grabbed Thomas by the arm and pulled him toward the exit.

“Come on! Let’s get out of here before the police arrive!”

That word *police* rang like an alarm in Thomas’ skull. He stiffened, his eyes flashing with dread.

“The police?” he repeated, his voice strangled.

Chang tightened her grip, dragging him already toward the swinging door.

“Yes! And if you care about us at all, we need to leave now!”

## Chapter 17 – Chang’s Building

The cold night air bit at the street as Inspector Louis Diallo stopped in front of the social housing building. He crushed his cigarette under his heel, the butt rolling away before sinking into a shallow puddle. Past sixty, his face carved by countless sleepless nights and heavy cases, he carried himself like a man convinced the world revolved around him: long beige coat, collar turned up, sharp gaze over glasses he didn’t always need.

He scanned the row of mailboxes the way a general inspects his troops searching for an address, a clue, a name.

“Found it,” he muttered to himself. “Rudy Malfroid, Apartment D.”

He pressed the buzzer with an abrupt, impatient gesture. A raspy voice erupted through the intercom before one had the time to breathe.

“Who’s that!?” Rudy growled.

“Mr. Malfroid, good evening. Federal Judicial Police. Inspector Diallo speaking, here about the complaint you filed with the local police.”

Footsteps, swearing, then the door flew open with a bang. Rudy appeared a big-bellied man in his thirties, his jaw still swollen from the beating he had taken earlier. His fingers bore the marks of many fights: the kind that smelled of alcohol and hopeless evenings. He wore a smug grin, the kind found on men who think mishaps are opportunities to make themselves look important.

“Oh! The Federal Police? Coming all the way here for this?” he said, surprised and thrilled at once.

Diallo narrowed his eyes. His voice held that mix of forced politeness and quiet condescension he reserved for people he considered beneath him.

“Don’t misunderstand, sir. This isn’t about you. I simply had some time our units are very busy these days and I’d like to clarify a few points. I trust you understand.”

Rudy snorted, leaning one hand on the door as if he needed it to remain upright. His tone betrayed his wounded pride as much as his hunger for attention.

“Sure... It’s about that little Chinese girl, right? Let’s see who’s getting accused in the end. I already told them everything. Time for things to move.”

Diallo took a slow breath, the lingering smoke still inside his lungs seeming to calm his irritation. He hated small scenes like this. He preferred padded offices, neatly stapled files, and the smell of too-strong coffee. But he also knew exactly when to use a soft, subtly superior tone to coax information out of people.

“Mr. Malfroid, I’ll be perfectly clear. You filed a complaint for assault. That is a serious matter. I have a number of precise questions for you. Stay calm and answer honestly.”

Rudy shrugged as if he were acknowledging the mystique of the inspector’s coat and authority. Around them, the building breathed the night: yellowish lights, an abandoned stroller by the door, a cat darting away, the smell of late dinners, the murmur of a television. The ordinary pulse of working-class life stood in stark contrast to the importance Diallo attributed to his mission.

“Come along,” Diallo said, stepping inside with measured steps. “We’ll talk in the hallway. And no drama. I hate drama.”

Rudy shuffled after him, slamming the door, already rehearsing a version of the story that made him look better. Diallo, alone for a brief second, shook his head and wiped the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand, as if removing a bitter taste.

In this neighborhood, he sensed something bigger than a simple complaint from a beaten-up neighbor: a crack, a fault line that could lead to something much darker. The park, the two corpses, the stone, the military boots everything formed a strange puzzle. Diallo liked puzzles. He especially liked being the one who placed the final piece with a smile.

Inside, the hallway smelled of dampness and detergent. Clara wasn’t far she would pick up the phone early tomorrow and dig through hospitals and cafés like someone rummaging through drawers.

Diallo thought of Jeanne, his wife, and felt that familiar, secular pinch in the chest calculating the time between duty and a neglected dinner at home. Then he focused again on Rudy, whose bravado was already beginning to crack under his policeman’s stare.

“Well then, Mr. Malfroid, let’s start from the beginning,” Diallo said in a tone both indulgent and implacable. “Everything. Now.”

Rudy opened his mouth, searching for his words, and began to talk. Around them, Brussels continued its nocturnal breathing, indifferent, while inside this ordinary building, the investigation began to weave its first threads.

Rudy Malfroid didn’t have a filter. Arms crossed, belly protruding, he barked:

“Yeah! Well, Brussels is becoming impossible to live in with all these”

Diallo lifted a hand sharply, slicing the tirade before it turned foul. His steel-cold stare froze Rudy in place.

“Please, Mr. Malfroid. I don’t wish to discuss that with you. It would be inappropriate.”

Rudy’s face twisted into a sulky grimace. He shifted awkwardly on his feet like a child caught misbehaving.

“Let’s hurry, alright? My food is on the stove and my wife will kill me if I’m late. You get that!”

Diallo inhaled one long breath his nostrils filling with imaginary smoke, as if taking a final sip of patience. Then, with a curt flick, he tossed his cigarette on the ground and blew a puff of smoke directly toward Rudy's face. A deliberate, almost theatrical gesture that meant: *I'm the one leading this dance.*

"Don't worry, Mr. Malfroid. This won't take long."



## Chapter 18 – Chang’s Apartment

The door closed softly behind them, but the atmosphere was anything but peaceful. Chang, her cheeks still flushed with alcohol and anger, tossed her jacket onto a dining chair with a sharp, irritated gesture. Her dark eyes burned with a contained fire, her lips trembling under the weight of everything she could no longer hold back.

“I can’t do anything for you anymore, Thomas,” she said, her voice breaking. “You’re too unstable, too dangerous. You’re not on a crusade anymore, damn it!”

She struck the last word like a blade cutting through the air.

Thomas, head bowed, stepped toward her. His movements were hesitant, almost childlike. He raised his hand as if to defend himself, or perhaps to beg for understanding.

“I...”

But Chang didn’t let him finish. She locked her eyes onto his, and that look, filled with pain, hit him harder than any blow ever had.

“Be quiet. Tomorrow, I want you out of my apartment. Out of my life. No questions. Do you understand?”

Her voice cracked. She turned her head away so he wouldn’t see the tears gathering in her eyes, then walked off abruptly. Her footsteps echoed sharply on the wooden floor as she vanished into the darkness of the hallway.

From behind her bedroom door, her trembling voice reached him again:

“This is already hard enough...”

Thomas remained still, frozen in the heavy silence of the apartment. His broad shoulders sagged, and the rugged lines of his face suddenly seemed carved by exhaustion. The quiet around him vibrated like a sentence being passed. His eyes stared into the void, but inside him everything felt shattered.

With a few sharp words, Chang had ripped away the last breath of hope he carried. He felt foreign, useless, reduced to the shadow of a knight without a crusade.

His hand slipped across the table, searching for something to hold on to. The cold wood gave him nothing. He clenched his fist and murmured, barely audible:

“So I am nothing...”

He stayed there for a long time, standing alone in the half-light, until fatigue finally overtook him, leaving behind only the grey promise of morning.

## Chapter 19 – In Front of Saint-Pierre Church – Uccle

The next morning, a heavy silence tied their steps together. Chang and Thomas walked side by side, heads bowed, their silhouettes cut out against the pale light of a cloudy sky. The light stone of Saint-Pierre Church rose before them like a mute witness to their torment.

Thomas was the one who finally broke the suffocating stillness. His deep voice trembled with painful sincerity.

“Yesterday, you asked me to leave, Chang. So if you want, you can leave me here. I promise I will never appear in your life again. I will accept your judgment. These few days spent together will remain etched in me like a gentle, eternal burn.”

He stopped, swallowed hard, then added in a strangled breath:

“I am truly... sorry.”

Chang slowed down, her face marked by sadness. She turned her dark eyes toward him, still damp from the night before.

“Stop talking, Thomas... Listen to me. I would like to try one last thing, before we part.”

Thomas froze, surprised, his foot suspended above the cobblestones.

“Huh? What?”

Chang took a deep breath, gathering her courage.

“Come with me into this church. Let’s talk to Father Léonard. He’s different, very open. You’ll tell him your story... this extraordinary story. Maybe he’ll believe you. Maybe he’ll find a solution... or at least some hope.”

Thomas lifted his eyes to the grey sky, as if hoping to read an answer there. His face hardened, his jaw clenched. Then he looked at her more seriously.

“Don’t misunderstand the mission God has given me, Chang. I will leave. I will find a new crusade, and new companions will join my cause, whether you wish it or not.”

He paused, and his voice softened, almost tender:

“But... for you, whom I care for more than I thought possible, I am willing to confess everything to this priest. After that, I will go and meet my fate.”

Chang’s eyes filled with tears, her face grew grave. She squeezed Thomas’s hand with desperate strength, as if that contact alone could still hold back the man who was already slipping away from her.

Without another word, they crossed the forecourt together and walked towards the great carved wooden doors, which seemed to be waiting for them like a gaping mouth opening onto the unknown.

#### Under the Sacred Vaults

The heavy wooden door closed behind them with a solemn creak, instantly muffling the noises of the street. The silence of Saint-Pierre Church wrapped around them, broken only by the creaking of wood and the distant echo of their footsteps. Chang walked a few steps into the narthex, her eyes adjusting to the dimness, streaked by colored shafts of light from the stained glass windows.

She turned back, came closer to Thomas and whispered in his ear in a soft, almost conspiratorial voice:

“Wait for me here. I’m going to get Father Léonard.”

Thomas nodded almost imperceptibly, and Chang disappeared toward the side chapel to the left.

Left alone, Thomas let his eyes wander. He noticed the holy water font, a simple stone basin worn by time, with a thin layer of still water glistening inside. Without thinking, his body obeyed an ancient reflex: he dipped his right hand into the cold water and slowly, solemnly made the sign of the cross. His lips barely moved, but a silent prayer seemed to cross his thoughts.

Then his gaze suddenly fixed on the heart of the church. Something invisible yet compelling drew him. His features tensed, and his eyes clouded with a mystical gleam. Then, as if guided by a higher force, Thomas began to move forward with mechanical steps. His boots rang out on the stone slabs of the central aisle, each step sounding like a heartbeat, heavier and heavier. He walked like a man possessed, pulled deeper into the vast nave.

#### Left Side Chapel

In the soft shadow of the candles, Chang found Father Léonard, a man in his fifties whose face was marked by kindness. He was carefully arranging candles, as if he were holding a quiet conversation with them. The precision of his gestures betrayed long habit, almost a ritual.

Chang approached and said timidly:

“Father Léonard! Good morning... I’m Chang, from the social building on Rue de la Fauvette.”

The priest straightened up, a peaceful smile on his lips.

“Yes, I know exactly who you are. Welcome, Chang. But if you’re here to receive a sacrament, or to talk about your journey toward faith, we’ll need to set up an appointment.”

Chang shook her head quickly, her eyes shining with urgency.

“No, you’re mistaken, Father. I didn’t come for myself... but for my friend. He is in urgent need of you.”

Father Léonard sighed, and his gaze grew sad.

“I understand, but unfortunately I don’t have time at the moment. If your friend wishes, he can come on Saturday evening. I’ll devote the time he needs then.”

Chang, shaken by this answer, lifted her hands in a pleading gesture. Her voice caught slightly.

“No... it can’t wait until Saturday! He has to talk to you now, immediately. His story... it’s unbelievable, almost impossible. Even I have trouble believing it.”

Father Léonard first gave her an indulgent smile, like someone offering forgiveness in advance. He gently waved his right hand in a calm gesture of refusal.

“I understand,” he murmured, “but I truly must decline your request. As I told you, I still have work to do.”

#### Central Aisle of the Church

At that very moment, Thomas, as if torn away from the pull of gravity, kept walking. His blank stare reflected a bottomless void, and his pale face already seemed to belong to another world. Each step sounded like a sentence being pronounced in the immense nave.

Halfway down the aisle, he tore off his shirt in a single, firm gesture, revealing a torso scarred by ancient battles. His marked skin, taut like a parchment of flesh, carried the echo of centuries. Naked before God, he moved toward the transept, his arms slowly lifting into the shape of a cross.

#### Left Side Chapel

Father Léonard, about to turn away, suddenly froze. His instincts reared up. Frowning, he narrowed his eyes toward the nave, trying to pierce what was happening. His hand rose abruptly, his index finger pointing like a blade.

“I forbid it!” he thundered.

Chang jumped, startled by the gravity of his tone. Her gaze swung toward the central aisle, and she saw Thomas. Her lips trembled.

“Thomas! What are you doing?”

#### Crossing of the Transept

Unfazed, Thomas walked on. As if possessed, he fell heavily to his knees at the exact center of the transept, where the stone arms of the church intersect. His body stiffened, his arms still outstretched a living image of a crucified man without a cross.

Then, from the stained glass in the radiant chapel, a burst of light flared out. The multicolored glow shot forth, wrapping his face as though heaven itself were pointing at him. His features twisted in a painful ecstasy.

He lifted his head, his eyes burning from within, and cried out in a forgotten yet solemn tongue:

“Miserere mei, Deus!”

God, have mercy on me!

Left Side Chapel

Father Léonard stood transfixed, lips parted, breath suspended. His face, usually so gentle, had frozen into a mask of sacred shock. Chang, for her part, knitted her brows, torn between fear and incomprehension.

“What is he saying?” she whispered, her voice shaking.

Léonard, his eyes fixed on Thomas, answered in a low, strained voice:

“He is praying... in Latin. He is begging for God’s mercy.”

Crossing of the Transept

On his knees in the center of the transept, Thomas slowly raised his head. His eyes opened wide, turned upward in an invisible agony, and his hands spread, offered like those laid on an altar. Suddenly, in each of his palms, a red mark appeared, bright and sharp, as if seared into his flesh. His wrists too were ringed with deep burns, glowing with a red, inflamed halo.

His lips parted and his voice rose, solemn, filling the silent nave. He prayed in Latin, his diction clear and relentless, as if the language itself were reclaiming its place in this church:

“Pater noster, qui es in caelis, sanctificetur nomen tuum, adveniat regnum tuum...”

(Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven...)

A groan of pain threaded through his words. As he prayed, an invisible crown traced itself across his brow: the flesh swelled, marking the bloody pricks of imagined thorns. His skin tightened, and blood beaded at his temples like a rain of sacred rubies.

“...et dimitte nobis debita nostra, sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris. Et ne nos inducas in tentationem, sed libera nos a malo...”

(...forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.)

His voice broke into a ragged gasp, yet he carried on, pleading, exalted:

“Lord, God of all creation... Your world, cradle of life, is filled with your glory. Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is he who is born upon the sacred lands of the Lord!”

Then his chest convulsed violently. Under the stricken gazes of Chang and Léonard, bloody welts split across his skin: marks of flagellation, as if an invisible whip were lashing him again and again. His flesh swelled and striped until he let out a scream of agony that made the vaults of the church tremble.

“Lead us, Lord! Teach us the power of sharing, the love in your image... Give your people hope, as your son Jesus Christ taught us!”

His voice shattered into a final cry. His body collapsed face-first against the floor, stretched out at the foot of the altar. When he rolled halfway onto his back, a gaping wound opened at his right side a terrifying echo of the lance at Calvary. On his shoulder, another reddish mark appeared like a seal: the mark of the cross once borne there.

Chang and Father Léonard rushed toward him, shaken. Léonard, breathing hard, knelt at his side. His trembling eyes took in the scene with utter disbelief.

“By the Holy Cross!” he stammered. “I can’t believe my eyes... These are the stigmata of Christ... They have just appeared on him!”

Thomas’s body suddenly began to convulse again. His chest heaved in violent spasms, his arms jerked, his eyes rolled back. Panicked, Chang clutched the priest’s arm. Her voice tore through the air, ripped by terror:

“Father Léonard! Do something, quickly! Please, I’m begging you!”

Chancel

Father Léonard, mind overwhelmed but heart steady, lifted his eyes toward the shining choir. Searching for an answer in the gold of the tabernacle, he gradually calmed himself. Then, with quick, almost solemn steps, he crossed the stone slabs toward the altar. His trembling hands opened the little door of the sacrament. Inside, a terracotta bowl waited, filled with amber oil scented with myrrh and frankincense.

He took it, held it close like a relic, then hurried back to the transept.

Crossing of the Transept

Thomas was still lying there, tossed by increasingly violent convulsions, his arms flailing, his torso twisted by spasms. Chang, kneeling at his side, could do nothing but hold back her tears.

Léonard set the bowl beside him, then, with calm, grave composure, dipped his right thumb into the scented oil. His gesture was slow, almost ceremonial. He drew the sign of the cross on Thomas’s pale forehead.

At once, as if struck by an invisible wave, Thomas’s body grew still. His tremors stopped. His breathing, until then ragged and broken, settled into a steady rhythm. His features, contorted by pain, relaxed like a sea after a storm.

Chang, mouth slightly open, looked at the priest with a mixture of fear and awe.

“What did you do to him?” she stammered.

Léonard straightened slowly, his face lit by a faint glow of faith and pride.

“I gave him the anointing,” he answered calmly. “It is consecrated oil, perfumed with myrrh. It sinks deep, even into the hardest stone. Water evaporates, but oil seeps in, saturates, down to the deepest fibers... In this way, the Holy Spirit finds a passage. It spreads through him, stirs his heart, rekindles his mind.”

A peaceful smile crossed his lips.

“It is the gift of God.”

At those words, Thomas slowly opened his eyes. His lids lifted to reveal a gaze at first clouded, then peaceful, washed clean of suffering. He winced faintly, pressed his palms to the ground, and pushed himself up slowly.

His voice, hoarse but steady, echoed in the sacred space:

“I saw him... and now I know.”

Léonard knelt in front of him, his sharp eyes locked on his.

“What did you see, my son?”

Still unsteady, Thomas got to his feet. He swayed, but remained standing, a fragile figure at the center of the ancient stones. His gaze shone with a new, almost consuming intensity.

“Eternity,” he said quietly.

Those words drifted through the nave like an immemorial truth.

Chang, overwhelmed, stepped closer and picked up the shirt he had left behind. She held it out to him with a shaking hand. Her voice broke as she repeated, stunned:

“Eternity...”

Thomas took the garment, nodded slowly, and slipped it back on without a word. The fabric closed over his marked torso, as if to veil a mystery too vast for this world.

“Life after death!” Thomas cried, his eyes blazing as they fixed on Father Léonard.

He buttoned his shirt slowly, each button seeming to close a chapter of his own being. His wide-open eyes gleamed with a truth no sermon had ever fully spoken.

“No, Father,” he went on, “existence after death is not what you think... nor what you’ve preached all these years.”

Léonard, struck dumb, could not answer. His suspended breath betrayed a mix of dread and wonder.

Without waiting any longer, Thomas took Chang's hand. His fingers closed around hers gently, but with the urgency of someone carrying a burden too heavy to bear alone. Together, they walked toward the entrance.

Narthex

When they reached the massive arches of the narthex, Chang stopped. She held Thomas back by the arm and raised to him eyes filled with confusion.

"I... I don't understand," she whispered, her voice torn between fear and a desire to believe.

Thomas turned to her, and his gaze sank into hers with an intensity that pinned her to the spot.

"Chang," he murmured, "the eternal kingdom is not in some unreachable elsewhere. It is all around us, invisible yet present. It breathes through us, it lives within us."

He leaned closer, so close his breath brushed her trembling lips.

"Where all religions meet," he continued in a vibrant voice, "God is one. Only one. From my past crimes, committed in His name, I now grasp the horror. For never was His hand vengeful, never was it the hand that takes life from man, woman or child. No... God is neutral and impartial in the world of the living."

His words rang out like a revelation torn from the depths of the ages. Chang stared at him, shaking, deeply shaken.

Thomas lifted his eyes toward the dark vault, as though he could see the light of heaven breaking through.

"It is up to us," he went on with grave conviction, "to give meaning to this life, to give mankind a guiding ideal. That is the purest gift He has given us."

He paused. His voice broke with emotion as he added:

"But there is still one hope left for me... for my soul weighed down by crimes. A hope of finally being freed to one day reach true life after death."

Chang, breathless, searched desperately for his eyes.

"What hope, Thomas?" she implored, her heart on the verge of tears.

Thomas, suddenly calm, lifted his head toward the shadowed ceiling of the narthex, as if looking beyond the stone, beyond the visible sky. The features of his face, carved by pain, relaxed. His lips parted in a faint sigh of release.

Thomas slowly lowered his head again, as if crushed by an invisible burden, then raised his eyes to Chang. In his gaze burned a newfound resolve.



“I must make an act of faith,” he said in a deep, almost solemn voice.

Chang was struck silent. She pressed her index finger to her lips, as though to hold back the torrent of questions burning on her tongue.

“But... what act of faith is He asking of you?” she breathed, her voice trembling.

Thomas slowly shook his head, his eyes still locked in hers.

“That is the question...”

A silence heavy with mystery settled between them. Then, against all odds, a smile bloomed on Chang’s face fragile at first, then bright, like a clearing after a storm.

“At least,” she said with a hint of mischief, “there’s no more talk of crusade. Come back home with me, Thomas... We’ll find the answer together.”

Hand in hand, they left the church. Their silhouettes slowly faded into the daylight, and the great wooden door closed behind them with a dull crash, like a full stop at the end of the revelation they had just lived.

## Chapter 20 - Chang's Building

The walk back was short, their steps driven by impatience and uncertainty. In front of the brick building, Thomas suddenly slowed. His expression shifted, shadowed by an unusual hesitation as he glanced at Chang.

“Would it be possible... to wash myself at your place?” he asked, almost timidly.

Chang froze. Her eyes widened in disbelief before she exclaimed:

“You’re kidding, right? Of course you can wash at my place.”

Thomas bowed his head slightly, humble.

“Thank you, Chang.”

She rolled her eyes upward and let out a long sigh, caught between weariness and tenderness. Then, with a gentle determination, she resumed her pace and led him toward the entrance of the building.

Across the street, a white unmarked vehicle from the federal judicial police sat parked quietly. Inside, Inspector Diallo remained in the driver’s seat. He stared intently at the entrance of the building, nodding to himself with a faint, knowing blink.

### Chang's Apartment

The door creaked softly as they stepped inside. Chang hit the hallway switch with a quick gesture, bathing the cream-colored walls in a soft, warm yellow glow. The apartment breathed simplicity but a simplicity carefully arranged, touched with feminine warmth.

A faint scent of jasmine floated through the air, mixed with the aroma of the tea still lingering in a half-finished cup on the coffee table. On the shelves, worn paperbacks rested beside little objects from China: a small Buddha statue, a painted fan, a tiny red lantern.

Thomas paused at the threshold of the living room, almost intimidated by the delicacy of this refuge. His eyes moved slowly across the details, attentive, as if discovering for the first time what the word home truly meant.

“Your apartment... it is like you,” he murmured. “Quiet, but... full of light.”

Chang, slightly embarrassed, shrugged as she dropped her bag near the couch.

“Full of light? You’re exaggerating... It’s just a small two-room place.”

Thomas smiled faintly.

“To me, it looks like a palace.”

She looked away, unsettled, then regained her practical tone.

“The bathroom is down there,” she said, pointing to a door at the far end. “You can take a hot shower. It will do you good.”

Thomas inclined his head with gratitude.

“Thank you, Chang.”

He walked toward the bathroom, but stopped just as he reached the doorway. Turning back to her, he added softly:

“You have no idea how much this simple gesture... means to me.”

Chang remained still for a moment. Her eyes lingered on him this misplaced knight wandering through the present and a shiver slipped along her spine.

## Chapter 21 – The Unexpected Guest

Thomas, wrapped in a tight Chinese kimono, was eating noodles with Chang while the radio filled the room with music. Suddenly, someone knocked at the front door. Chang froze mid-chew, her eyes drifting toward the sound. She dropped her chopsticks, stood up, and walked toward the entrance.

Chang opened the door cautiously, her face stern. Then she bent slightly forward, her expression transforming into a bright smile.

Alice's eyes sparkled as she leaned in, peering toward the dining room.

"Hmm! It smells delicious... What did you make, Chang?"

Chang, a bit embarrassed, gave her a timid smile.

"Stir-fried noodles."

Thomas's voice rose from the dining room, warm and welcoming:

"Let her in, Chang! I would like her to share our meal, if that's alright with you."

Chang froze for a second, stunned, and looked at Alice. Alice's lips curled into a mischievous smile, thrilled by the opportunity.

"Thank you for the invitation, Chang!"

Without waiting for further permission, she stepped in, limping slightly, and headed toward the dining room.

### Dining Room

Thomas had stood up to greet her. Tall and poised, he addressed her with a courteous nod that carried an almost knightly elegance. Alice, surprised and amused, looked him up and down with barely concealed admiration.

"Well now! What a handsome young man we have here!"

She extended her hand toward him with exaggerated grace.

"I am Alice, Chang Lee's neighbour."

Thomas took her hand gently, bowing his head slightly.

"Hello, Alice. I am Thomas, a"

“A very good friend!” called Chang from the kitchen, her voice pointed on purpose.

Blushing, she appeared briefly in the doorway and pointed to a chair to Thomas’s right.

“Please, sit down, Alice.”

Alice nodded and settled in slowly, her movements calculated, almost territorial. Thomas, eyebrows slightly furrowed, followed her with his eyes before glancing toward the kitchen, where Chang disappeared again to bring the dishes.

He lingered for a moment, lips parted as if torn between speaking or remaining silent.

“You said your name is Lee?” Thomas asked, intrigued.

From the kitchen, Chang’s voice answered clearly.

“Lee is my family name, just like yours is De La Lys.”

Thomas lowered his head thoughtfully.

“Your first name and family name... do they have a special meaning?”

Chang returned with a steaming dish, placing it in the center of the table. She met his gaze with a small, proud smile.

“In Chinese, Lee means strength and power. And Chang means strong, independent, and free.”

Thomas straightened up, struck by the obvious meaning. A smile lit his face.

“It suits you perfectly.”

His eyes took on a dreamy glow.

“As for me, De La Lys comes from the land my family lived on a farm surrounded by several ponds. In summer, white and orange lilies grew so densely along the banks that it looked like a living mantle.”

Chang leaned forward, captivated.

“The same lilies that are the emblem of the kings of France?”

“Exactly,” replied Thomas with enthusiasm. “You like history, so perhaps you know that it was the King of the Franks, Clovis, who, on the advice of Queen Clotilde, replaced the three toads of his crest with three golden lilies. Legend says an angel appeared to him during prayer and inspired the change.”

Until then, Alice had remained silent. She frowned, studying Thomas with sudden suspicion.

“Well! You do know quite a lot, sir. But tell me... where do you live? Where exactly are you from, dear Thomas?”

Caught off guard, Thomas lowered his head. His gaze drifted away, as if searching for an escape in the shadows of the room. Slowly, he sat down, trying to mask his discomfort.

But Alice pressed on, her clear eyes drilling into him.

“Did you study in Brussels, perhaps?”

A heavy silence fell. Thomas took his fork, fingers tense, stirring his noodles without appetite. His breathing shortened; his jaw tightened.

“I... I” he began weakly.

“You said... Brussels?” insisted Alice.

She leaned closer, her face approaching his, scrutinizing every quiver of his lips.

“And your parents, which commune are they from?”

At that moment, Chang burst in, placing a large bowl of steaming noodles loudly in front of Alice.

“Alice! You’re always digging into people’s lives,” she snapped.

She sat down across from Thomas, her gaze avoiding his as embarrassment colored her voice.

“Thomas won’t say it, but he’s an orphan. He did primary school in Uccle, then in Brussels... like me. But he was always late, always last in the class. Eventually, he dropped out and drifted around the capital, without really knowing where to go.”

Alice blinked, stunned. Her expression softened, then she sighed.

“My God... you really haven’t had it easy.”

She looked at Thomas, who still stirred his noodles nervously.

Trying to lighten the mood, Alice smiled again.

“And I could never manage those damn chopsticks! Every time I try to eat noodles, more fall to the floor than make it to my mouth.”

Thomas burst out laughing, freed from the tension. His smile lit up his face.

“You’re right, Alice! But you should see Chang... she’s an expert.”

Without hesitation, Chang picked up her chopsticks. With graceful precision, she lifted a tangle of noodles and slipped them into her mouth effortlessly.

“You’re all silly. It’s just a matter of habit,” she said with a shrug.

Alice laughed, then took a bite of her own dish. Her smile remained, but her eyes... her eyes never left Thomas. They watched him with unsettling intensity.

Then, her gaze dropped to his kimono. A spark of mischief lit her expression.

“That’s a lovely kimono you’re wearing!” she said with a giggle. “A bit tight, though, dear Thomas.”

Flustered, Thomas tugged at the fabric awkwardly, trying to make himself comfortable. His cheeks reddened.

“Indeed... But it was the only thing Chang could lend me while my clothes are being washed.”

Alice swallowed another mouthful, then smiled knowingly.

“I see... And do you plan to stay here long?”

Chang straightened up immediately, stung.

“Alice! That’s inappropriate!”

Thomas remained calm, his presence serene. His gaze slid to Chang, soft but resolute.

“As long as Chang allows me to stay.”

Chang froze. Her chopsticks hung still in her fingers, her mouth slightly open. Her eyes widened before lowering shyly. A tremor ran through her, a mix of embarrassment and something deeper she did not name.

Alice cackled, delighted by the scene.

“Oh, she didn’t see that one coming!”

Thomas finished his plate, put down his fork, and wiped his lips. Then he turned toward Alice, as if reclaiming control of the conversation.

“I was wondering... since you are the oldest in the building, you must know all the tenants well. Could you introduce them to me?”

Alice straightened, swelling with pride. She lifted her index finger like a teacher preparing a lesson.

“Apartment A: Juliette, thirty-six. Works in a law office. No children, lives alone. Nothing to say about her.”

Her tone was solemn, authoritative, savoring every second.

“Apartment B: Lucas. Twenty-three. Doesn’t work... well, not often. Unfortunately, he takes drugs. But he’s very kind. He’s the father of two children he sees occasionally.”

Her finger swept the air again.

“Apartment C: Anne, twenty-eight. She’s... a prostitute, with quite a temper. But she takes excellent care of her daughter. She lives with a man who only shows up at night.”

She let out a short, sharp laugh.

“Apartment D: Rudy. But no need to introduce him, right?”

Thomas arched an eyebrow, then smirked.

“Indeed...”

“Apartment G,” she continued, “is Jules, my ex-partner. Seventy-two. A walking barrel... and a complete jerk.”

She paused dramatically, then added:

“And I live in apartment F. And Chang, you already know, is in E.”

Thomas looked at her with genuine softness.

“I am truly sorry for your former companion.”

Alice shrugged, tapping her fork like a queen with her scepter.

“Oh, don’t be! We were a fine couple, but with no children, working every day... And people change with age. Sometimes they become the opposite of what you hoped they would be. That’s life.”

Thomas smiled warmly.

“You have character, Alice. And I like that.”

Chang struck her chopsticks against her plate in irritation.

“Alright! Time for you to head back to your apartment, Alice. I have to leave with Thomas soon.”

Alice raised her eyebrows, amused.

“You seem rather upset!”

“Sorry, Alice,” said Chang, tense. “It’s not you... it’s Thomas.”

Alice slowly turned toward him. Her eyes sparkled with wicked glee. She winked, then shifted back to Chang, her tone suddenly serious.



“Did you see the local news? They say two strange murders were committed Monday night in Wolvendaal Park.”

A heavy silence fell.

“The more time passes,” Alice continued, “the less safe we are anywhere. People kill for nothing now.”

She folded her napkin neatly, stood up, and limped toward the entrance.

At the Entrance

When she reached the door, Alice turned around. Her voice carried a nostalgic tremor.

“In my time, things like that didn’t happen.”

Chang joined her, shaken by the remark.

“I’m sure crimes happened in your time too. At school, we studied the ‘Bonnot Gang’... early last century. Anarchists, criminals, who robbed, stole, and murdered brutally in Belgium and France.”

Alice tilted her head, a sly smile forming.

“True, but I wasn’t born yet! And despite everything people say, there was something... romantic about them, even years later.”

She let out a strange, sharp laugh.

“Alice! Honestly...” sighed Chang, mortified.

Still grinning, Alice limped out. The door closed softly behind her.

Chang remained motionless a moment, then let out a long, exhausted sigh. Shoulders slumped, she returned slowly toward the dining room.

“I’m sorry, Thomas,” she said quietly. “I made up that orphan story... but if it wasn’t dramatic enough, Alice would still be asking questions.”

Dining Room

Thomas set down his glass, swallowing the last sip with eyes shining in silent gratitude.

“I truly didn’t know what to say. Thank you... Your story even moved me. It stirred something in me, as if it awakened a real pain.”

Chang smiled mischievously. She sat facing him, took her chopsticks confidently, and met his gaze.

“So... the noble knight does have a little sensitivity in him after all?”

Thomas didn't answer. His eyes remained fixed on her, drawn to her delicate features and the spark in her smile. He felt admiration rising in him, mingled with a tender pull he could no longer ignore.

The silence between them spoke louder than any words.

## Chapter 22 – The Breath of Evening

At the end of the day, Chang and Thomas walked side by side through the quiet streets of the Uccle district. The sky had begun to melt into glowing shades of orange; the façades of the houses caught the warm light, and the parked cars lined the street like silent sentinels.

Chang lifted her eyes toward him with a half-tired, half-amused grimace.

“Tomorrow, I have to go back to work... Bills don’t pay themselves.”

Thomas turned his head slightly toward her. His gaze softened, attentive.

“Do you want me to walk you there?”

Relief immediately washed across Chang’s face. Her features loosened, and despite her fatigue, she smiled sincere, luminous.

“I’d like that,” she answered. “And don’t forget to pick me up around six-thirty, when the shop closes.”

Thomas nodded. A small but genuine smile stretched across his lips.

“You can count on me, Chang.”

He paused, observing her with an intensity that made the evening air vibrate between them.

“Do you want me to find work?” he asked, his voice low and serious. “Something that might make your life easier?”

Chang stopped in her tracks, startled by the question. Her eyes widened slightly, as if she no longer quite recognized the man walking beside her. She stepped closer, narrowing the distance.

“You’ve changed,” she murmured. “It’s as if...”

Thomas raised his index finger toward the twilight sky, where the first stars were beginning to show.

“God has opened my eyes,” he said with fervor. “A new path lies before me.”

Chang leaned back a little, frowning, torn between admiration and unease.

“You’re not planning on becoming a security guard... or worse, a nightclub bouncer, are you?”

A softened smile crossed Thomas's face. He stepped closer, his body brushing lightly against hers, his face drawing near enough for her to feel the warmth of his breath.

"I will do whatever you want," he said quietly, "so as not to displease you. But..."

His gaze deepened, almost burning.

"... I desire something precious. Something wonderful... something that comes from you."

Chang's heartbeat quickened. She leaned in, her lips only a breath away from his. Her eyes glimmered with curiosity and a tremor of emotion.

"What do you mean?" she whispered.

Their breaths mingled in the muted silence of the evening, suspending time around them.

With eyes shining with love, Thomas tilted his face toward hers. His lips brushed against hers with a warm, tender fire. She yielded to the moment, responding with growing fervor, her lips pressing against his in an ardent kiss. The instant stretched, suspended in the hush of the world that seemed to vanish around them.

## Chapter 23 – Along the Wolvendael Park

The next morning, the crisp air wrapped around them. Chang and Thomas walked side by side, their fingers interlaced, content simply to be together. Their steps echoed softly on the damp pavement as they followed the iron fence of the park, still veiled in a thin morning mist.

But Chang, suddenly pensive, turned her gaze toward the silent trees. A shadow of worry crossed her eyes.

“A few days ago,” she murmured, “you saved me from certain death.”

Thomas followed her gaze toward the dark groves. A warm smile softened his features.

“And what a meeting that was,” he replied with gentle warmth.

Chang’s face changed instantly. She looked back at him, a faint smile blooming at the corner of her lips.

“Five days already since you walked into my life... I wasn’t exactly at my best then.”

Thomas wrapped an arm protectively around her waist, drawing her close.

“Don’t think about that anymore, Chang. Look toward the future... to what it will bring us.”

They continued walking, wrapped in their own little world. However, on the other side of the street, Rudy followed them with a lazy step. His malicious gaze lingered on them, amused by what he saw. He looked like a shadow drifting through everyday life.

Chang noticed him. Her instinctive fear surged again: she lowered her eyes, submissive. But almost immediately, something inside her straightened. She inhaled deeply and lifted her head. Her eyes met Rudy’s. A fierce spark lit in her gaze. She held it firmly, refusing to yield this time.

Surprised, Rudy scowled, looked away, and quickened his pace. Thomas, lost in his own smile, noticed nothing.

Relieved, Chang drew closer to Thomas, slipping a tender hand across his back. She allowed herself a discreet smile, as if she had won an invisible battle.

“I wanted to know something, Thomas,” she said, her voice trembling but determined. “And please, be sincere with me. I’m asking you with all my strength.”

Thomas raised an eyebrow, amused by the solemnity in her tone.

“Well, that sounds serious. Tell me.”

Chang breathed in, ready to ask the question burning inside her.

“When... when you left for the crusade, in the year one thousand... were you married? Or courting some noble lady?”

Thomas burst out laughing, surprised by the boldness of her question. He leaned forward and placed a tender kiss on her forehead, as if to soothe her.

“What an indiscreet question,” he teased.

But Chang’s face tightened. She stopped abruptly and stepped away from him.

“You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to...”

Her voice carried disappointment. Thomas saw it clearly. He stepped toward her again, took her in his arms, and held her warmly. His gaze rose to the horizon, as if searching the sky for the right words.

“I’ll answer you honestly,” he whispered.

He paused. His eyes clouded with distant memories.

“Yes, at the time, some ladies looked at me with kindness, and there were moments... small gestures, attentions that hinted at a future that might have been possible.”

He tightened his embrace slightly.

“But my duty mattered far more than the flesh. I had so little time to devote to love. God’s love consumed me. It lifted me beyond everything, until I lived entirely for that alone.”

His voice carried a solemn intensity:

“A crusader had a single motto: Deus Vult. ‘God wills it.’ And believe me, when your spirit is in total union with that doctrine, every fiber of you vibrates only for Him.”

Chang lifted her eyes slowly, seeking his truth.

“So... you...”

Thomas inclined his head gently, a soft smile shaping his lips. His gaze shone with a truth he embraced without hesitation.

“Yes, Chang. I am a virgin. Or if you prefer the word... untouched.”

He leaned closer.

Chang, troubled and serious, felt his breath brush her skin. She stepped closer too, embarrassed yet unable to look away.

Their faces were only a breath apart.

Chang lowered her eyes slightly, then said in a quiet but firm voice, like confessing a long-held secret:

“I’m not ashamed of it... because I’m a virgin too.”

Thomas gazed at her with renewed tenderness. His features softened, and he kissed her with gratitude and respect.

“Then we are equals,” he murmured.

Chang wrapped her arms around his neck and held him tightly. For a moment, she abandoned herself to pure, unrestrained affection. Then, with a small, playful grimace, she wrinkled her nose.

“In my family, consent is... complicated. Impossible, even, without marriage. And marriage, for me... that’s another world, something out of reach. So...”

Thomas nodded gravely, though his eyes remained gentle.

“You’re right. Work comes first. There’s no need to rush anything.”

Chang looked away for a moment, regaining her composure. Then she scanned the street before meeting his gaze again with her usual fragile determination.

“Speaking of that... here we are. This is where I work.”

They stopped in front of a modest little food store. The morning sun shone on the fruit and vegetable baskets lining the window. For a moment, they stood still, unwilling to break the bubble surrounding them.

Their eyes met one last time. Thomas leaned in and kissed her deeply, as if sealing the moment.

When their lips parted, Chang said softly:

“Thomas... before you go home, I’d like you to visit Father Léonard. I think he needs more explanations...”

The morning wind tousled Thomas’s hair. He straightened, standing tall and calm.

“As you wish, Chang. I’ll go see him at once. Have a pleasant day. See you this evening.”

Chang stepped backwards toward the store entrance, her steps hesitant, like a child reluctant to let go. Yet her eyes never left him. Before entering, she raised her hand and blew him a kiss.

“See you tonight, my beloved crusader!” she called, joyful and solemn at once.

Thomas lifted his hand and blew her a kiss in return, a tender smile on his lips. Then he turned and walked toward Saint Peter's Church with steady steps, his silhouette clear beneath the rising sun.

Chang looked at the shopfront, took a deep breath, and entered almost dancing, her face glowing with joy.

"Good morning, Luc!" she exclaimed. "I'm back!"

Across the Rouge Street, a white unmarked car idled for a few seconds. Then the engine fell silent. The door opened. Inspector Louis Diallo stepped out. His tall frame dominated the scene, long coat, firm stride, severe gaze. His face closed, he observed everything with that stubborn intensity that defined him, then pulled up his collar against the wind.



## Chapter 24 – Saint Peter’s Church

Left aisle

Under the ancient vaults, Thomas and Father Léonard sat side by side on the last pew. The silence was broken only by the soft flicker of the flames. Before them, in the eastern chapel, a large candle stand held dozens of burning tapers whose fragile lights cast trembling reflections on the old stones.

Thomas broke the silence with a deep voice filled with a new gravity.

“So, as Chang asked of me, you now know when and where I was born... and why my destiny was to walk the path of Almighty God.”

Léonard, stunned, ran his tongue slowly across his lips and lowered his gaze, moved to the core. When he looked up again, his eyes burned with solemn intensity.

“What religion has always taught,” he said slowly, “is that everything begins between a man and a woman, through the flesh or the spirit, it does not matter... Where God breathes life, eternity is already given, even before that innocent being sees the light of day.”

He paused, closed his eyes as if weighing the weight of his own words, then continued with more force:

“But what terrifies me is your confirmation of what I dreaded... Yes, hell truly exists. Not as an image, but as a horrifying, infernal reality. All those who have sinned, the powerful and the humble, warriors and rulers who brought death into the world... all of them will know eternal damnation.”

His hands trembled slightly. He lifted his face toward the towering stained-glass windows of the radiant chapel. Their deep colors dispersed into fiery reds and mysterious night blues.

“And here it is,” he continued, his voice vibrating, “the cradle of life... eternity hidden in these fragments of light.”

He breathed deeply, seized by a sudden vertigo. His eyes filled with tears.

“Oh God... how can such a thing be?”

Shaken by Thomas’s revelation, Father Léonard rose slowly. His steps echoed faintly beneath the vaults as he approached the candle stand, where dozens of flames burned in the scent of warm wax. With a trembling hand, he took a candle, lit it, and placed it gently beside the others, as though sealing a silent prayer with this gesture.

His fingers pressed together, he lifted his hands to his mouth and murmured, voice quivering:

“Remember... Before the anointing, you were suffering, marked by the stigmata of Christ. And such marks only appear to those whose faith burns with the greatest fervor. Then your soul found inner peace...”

Moved by such a confession, Thomas rose as well. He joined the priest, his firm steps contrasting with Léonard’s trembling emotion. The older man stared at him, searching the mysteries of this being who seemed both man and legend.

“Your battles, your violence, the blood you shed during the Crusades... that is your suffering,” Léonard continued. “Your soul never found rest, it never reached eternal peace. God demands penance from you, and yet He granted you the most incredible vision: the certainty of life after death.”

Thomas took a candle of his own. He brought it to the flame, lit it, and placed it beside the priest’s. The two flames touched, brushed, fed one another. Their glow illuminated his face, outlining his grave and resolute features.

His voice rose, calm but charged with troubling intensity.

“God spoke to me, Léonard. He revealed that where all religions meet, He remains one and indivisible. His hand is never vengeful. Never does He take the life of a man, a woman, or a child. He is neutral, impartial, in the kingdom of the living.”

He paused, gazing thoughtfully at the flames, then continued:

“Only the archangels whisper to us, breathing hope into our ears, the hope we refuse to hear. And for those whose souls are fully imbued with God, miracles remain possible. But here is the truth: it is up to us men and women to give meaning, an ideal, to the progressive life we were given. Whether we believe or not, with or without Scripture, this duty belongs to us.”

Léonard stepped back, shaken by these words. His brows knit together, his face hardened, as if struggling to accept such boldness.

“Life is God’s gift,” he conceded. “But God is mystery, Thomas, not naïveté. He does not absolve without condition. He demands absolution from you, and you must expect penance. Only through the ultimate act of faith will you be freed.”

Thomas lifted his head. His eyes darkened, filled with the memory of centuries of torment.

“In hell, Léonard... I have already done my penance. For centuries I carried the suffering of innocents. I absorbed their cries, their wounds, their pain. Every tear, every gasp, I felt in my flesh and in my soul. The evil that consumed them, I drank like an endless poison.”

His voice trembled, yet remained firm.

“And yet, here I am. Standing. Alive. Searching.”

Silence fell between them, broken only by the crackling of the flames dancing before the chapel.

“You are right,” Léonard murmured, “but you were in hell... and now you have returned to Earth!”

The words sounded like an impossible truth. Thomas lowered his head. His shoulders sagged slightly, burdened by centuries of silence and invisible weight. A shadow crossed his face, followed by a sudden anxiety. His eyes turned toward the church entrance.

Noticing the shift, Léonard tilted his head.

“What is it, Thomas?” he asked with concern.

“I... I felt something,” Thomas admitted. “A breath. A presence...”

The priest said nothing. He simply placed a calming hand on Thomas’s shoulder and pointed toward the central aisle.

“Come. Let us pray for a moment. Perhaps we will discover together what God expects of you.”

The two figures walked toward the heart of the church. The stained glass cast blue and crimson shadows across their faces, and the silence, tinged with incense, hung heavy as an unspoken expectation.

## Chapter 25 – The Interrogation

Federal Police Headquarters – Diallo's office

At the very same moment, in another place where silence had a very different taste, Chang sat rigid in her chair, hands clenched on her knees. Her gaze kept slipping to the floor, but her whole body radiated tension.

Opposite her, Inspector Louis Diallo settled into his seat with the ease of a man used to watching anxious souls file past. He calmly lit a cigarette, drew in deeply, then exhaled a long plume of smoke that rose in slow arabesques through the air. Opening the drawer of his desk, he glanced inside as if to check some detail, then closed it gently again, his narrowed eyes locked on Chang.

His voice turned falsely cordial.

“Before we begin, Miss Chang, I'd like to thank you for agreeing to come here and answer a few questions. They're essential to my investigation.”

He blew out more smoke, a thin smile on his lips.

“Your boss is... very understanding. He confirmed to me that this will have no impact on your job. You can be reassured on that point.”

Another drag, another calculated pause.

“In any case, I won't keep you too long.”

Chang lifted her head a little, her eyes shining with fear. Her hands, still clenched, moved slowly toward the edge of the desk, as if begging for a little leniency.

“Listen, Inspector... I'm completely legal when it comes to my immigration status.”

Louis Diallo jerked back theatrically: his eyes widened and he suddenly threw both hands up in protest, as though accused of something outrageous.

“No, no! Don't worry, Miss Chang,” he replied with a fake, almost paternal smile. “This has nothing to do with your immigration status. I know very well that you're in order. Your work contract renews your residence permit in Belgium for another year. You see? Nothing to fear on that front.”

He took a long drag, then exhaled slowly, letting the silence weigh.

“Can I offer you something to drink?” he added, in a tone that pretended to be polite.

Chang shook her head quickly, refusing. Her hand shot up to her hair, scratching at her scalp as if she could scrape away the tension building inside her.

Diallo leaned forward over the desk. His left hand disappeared into the drawer. He pretended to search for something, willingly letting the suspense stretch. Then he said, in a lightly provocative tone:

“My wife, whom I always listen to... often tells me that music soothes the savage beast.”

A sly smile twisted his lips. With his right hand he stubbed out his cigarette in the overflowing ashtray, sending one last swirl of smoke into the air. Then, with his left, he slowly pulled out a small object and laid it on the desk: an MP3 player.

“Do you like music, Miss Chang?”

Her heart skipped a beat. Her eyes widened. That MP3 player... it was hers.

Savoring the effect, Diallo then produced a small portable speaker and carefully connected it to the device. A click, a faint hiss... and suddenly the voice of Michel Sardou filled the room:

Je vais t’aimer...

The inspector closed his eyes for a moment and moved his head from side to side as if tasting every note. His gaze, however, never left Chang.

Abruptly, he stopped the track. Rewound with a precise gesture, then pressed play again. This time, the powerful voice of Mike Brant rang out:

Laisse-moi t’aimer...

The words filled the room so intensely they seemed to crash against the grey walls of the office.

Diallo stared at Chang, unblinking. He wanted to catch every reaction, every flicker in her eyes. But Chang, petrified, did not move. Her face was an embarrassed mask, her pupils searching desperately for an escape route.

Then, with a sharp motion, Diallo switched off the player. The silence dropped, heavy. His voice suddenly climbed a notch.

“My wife adores them, you know! Sardou, Brant... And then Gainsbourg with Birkin, that scandalous duet. Joe Dassin, the universal romantic. Ah, and the great Jacques Brel, of course! Not to mention Adamo, Frédéric François, Lara Fabian...”

He let himself flop back in his chair, eyes shining with a bogus enthusiasm. Then he sighed deeply, almost theatrically.

“Love... always love.”

He let another weighted silence hang in the air, then tilted his head slightly, his eyes drilling into hers.

“And you, Miss Chang... do you enjoy old love songs?”

Chang’s eyes fled from his. She bit her lip. Her head gave a tiny hesitant nod. Yes. But the word remained stuck in her throat.

Louis Diallo immediately frowned, like a teacher annoyed by a timid student. He leaned toward her and pointed to his ear, his face closed.

“Sorry? I didn’t hear you, Miss Chang.”

Flushing, Chang lowered her gaze again. Her fingers trembled on her knees. She drew a discreet breath, then dared to lift her eyes for a brief instant toward the inspector.

“Yes... I like that music very much.”

Diallo sighed as if relieved, then leaned back. His eyes still dissected her, but his tone regained a feigned lightness.

“I miss Michael Jackson so much,” he said, his face suddenly softened.

He even allowed himself a small amused smile.

“Fortunately today, without wanting to sound too patriotic, I listen to that little... Angèle, you know. Her song ‘Bruxelles je t’aime’, what a marvel! And Stromae... ah, Stromae! Quite a symbol, don’t you think, Miss Chang?”

Chang nodded mechanically. But her troubled face betrayed a melancholy she could no longer hide. Her eyes darkened, and her lips, pressed too tightly together, pinched as if under the weight of a painful memory.

Diallo, ever observant, narrowed his eyes. He watched her for a long moment. Suddenly his expression shifted entirely. The mask of conviviality shattered. His gaze turned razorsharp, his face hardened. Leaning forward with a quick movement, he said:

“On Monday night, in Wolvendael Park, two individuals were brutally killed.”

His words cracked like a verdict.

“Are you aware of that, Miss Chang?”

Chang jolted in her chair. Her breathing stopped. Her hands clenched tighter.

“Y-yes!” she stammered. “My neighbor told me... because... I don’t have a television, Inspector.”

Diallo did not let go of her eyes. Fixed, implacable, he slowly leaned back again. Inhaled, exhaled, like a predator preparing its next leap.

“I see.”

Another heavy silence. Diallo let his words linger, savoring the effect of his psychological pressure.

“Of course,” he resumed in a slow voice, “these two men weren’t choirboys. But still... murder is murder, and in the eyes of the law, a crime remains a crime.”

He paused, ground his cigarette out with deliberate force, then tilted his head slightly toward her. His tone turned falsely neutral.

“Tell me, Miss Chang... do you own a bicycle and... an MP3 player?”

Chang’s eyes flew open. Her body tensed, her hands began to flutter nervously, as if pushing away the air around her.

“Yes... well... I had a bicycle,” she stammered. “But... it was stolen, unfortunately.”

Diallo sighed and folded his arms across his chest. It was not the sigh of compassion but of calculated exasperation.

“The neighborhood isn’t what it used to be,” he muttered bitterly. “People steal everything now... Everything that isn’t nailed down.”

He paused again, then added, almost casually:

“And the MP3 player?”

Chang’s eyes grew even wider. Her throat tightened. She shook her head emphatically, keeping her gaze locked on the inspector’s.

“I... I don’t have an MP3 player, or a smartphone. They’re... they’re far too expensive for me right now.”

Diallo nodded slowly. His face remained emotionless, but his clenched jaw betrayed his tension.

“I understand... I understand.”

Another silence, deliberately stretched. Then, in a soft, almost casual voice, he asked:

“If I may... do you have a boyfriend, Miss Chang?”

The question hit like a hammer. Chang’s mouth fell open. No sound came. At last she managed to stammer, flushed with shame:

“Uh... no, Inspector.”

Diallo pulled an odd face, as if doubtful. He raised both hands, palms outward, in a gesture meant to be reassuring but which rang hollow.

“So you live alone, then?” Diallo asked, eyes narrowed, his voice a mix of statement and trap.

Chang lifted her head. Her features darkened, her mouth tightened. A mute sadness flickered in her eyes.

“Yes...” she murmured. “Since my parents moved back to China.”

Diallo sighed, as if he sympathized. His hands clasped together, his shoulders sagging slightly.

“I’m sorry for you,” he said in a tone that sounded more like a rehearsed formula than genuine compassion.

Then he leaned forward, grabbed a file lying on his desk, opened it casually and began to leaf through it. His eyes skimmed the pages with a pretence of precision, until he stopped abruptly. He looked up suddenly, his eyes wide, fixing Chang like prey caught in a snare.

“I have here a statement from a certain Rudy Malfroid, who lives in your building.”

The name cracked through the air like a slap.

“He recently complained about taking a punch right in the face. Two lines, no more, but quite clear: according to him, the perpetrator is your boyfriend. And he even adds, I quote: ‘a racist guy.’”

An amused smile slid across Diallo’s face. He tossed the file onto the desk with nonchalant contempt, as if the truth no longer needed written proof.

“So, I’m listening, Miss Chang. Even though you and I both know this guy isn’t exactly a reliable witness.”

Chang’s eyes widened. Her breath came in ragged bursts. A dull panic rose in her chest, so strong that she brought a hand to her throat. Her breathing grew heavy, labored.

Diallo, on high alert, never took his eyes off her. His face tightened, his instincts kicking in. He almost sprang from his chair, extending a hand toward her.

“Pull yourself together, Miss Chang, come now!”

Then he shouted, his voice rattling off the office walls:

“Clara!”

The door flew open. Clara appeared, alert, her face serious.

“Inspector Diallo!”

“Quick, get her a glass of water, please,” he ordered sharply, but with calculated composure, as if he needed to stay firmly in control of the scene.



Clara cast a worried glance at Chang, as if torn between obeying and staying. But a short nod from the inspector sent her out. The door closed softly behind her and silence fell once more, heavy and suffocating.

Diallo, alone again with his prey, made himself comfortable. He settled back in his chair, crossed one leg over the other, and observed Chang in silence. His piercing eyes seemed to search the very depth of her soul.

A few moments later, the door opened again. Clara returned quickly, a glass of water in hand. She approached Chang, her voice gentle, in sharp contrast with the oppressive atmosphere of the room.

“Here you go.”

Chang took the glass, inclining her head in silent thanks. She raised it to her lips and drank in small sips, trying to regain her composure. When she set the glass back on the desk, Clara had already slipped away, leaving the scene to close once more around her and the inspector.

Diallo, who had not moved, now slid a small object across the desk. With a near-ceremonial gesture, he put the speaker aside, then picked up the MP3 player between his fingers. His eyes gleamed with a nasty satisfaction as he pushed the device toward Chang.

“I believe this belongs to you, Miss Chang.”

She took it automatically, almost hypnotized. The screen, still lit, displayed her first name. That tiny detail hit her like a final proof. Without a word, she slipped the device into her pocket, her heart racing faster.

Diallo lit another cigarette, inhaled deeply, then exhaled a thick cloud of smoke that coiled lazily through the air between them. His eyes never left her face, watching for the slightest twitch.

“I almost forgot... Your neighbor Alice told me something during her interview.”

He took in another lungful of smoke, then added evenly:

“Monday night, she saw you at the entrance of your building... in the arms of a handsome young man. Dressed in military clothes.”

He blew out the smoke like a slap.

“Apparently, you were in shock. That’s what she said.”

Chang’s face froze. Her eyes darted helplessly from left to right, as if seeking an exit that did not exist.

“Alice...” she whispered, as though the simple name condemned her further.

Diallo smiled. Not a warm smile, but an ironic, satisfied grin.

“She seems to know the residents of your building extremely well, that Alice. And at her age, that hardly surprises me. A real living gazette, don’t you think?”

He straightened abruptly, nailed his gaze into hers and brought down the next question like a blade:

“What’s his name?”

Chang shrank back in her chair, tense. Her hands shook on the armrests, her eyes fixed on the floor. She shook her head, stammering in a broken voice:

“I... I can’t.”

Implacable, Diallo sat up straighter and shifted to a more comfortable position. His elbows rested on the armrests, his gaze freezing hers with icy intensity.

“It’s in your best interest, Miss Chang,” he said firmly. “Think about your future here, in our beautiful country.”

The hint hung in the air like a veiled threat. Chang bit her lip, then suddenly sprang to her feet, unable to stay seated. Her whole body vibrated with nerves.

“What are you going to do to him, Inspector?” she asked, eyes wide with fear.

Diallo held his hands up again in a mock gesture of reassurance, almost fatherly.

“Calm yourself, Miss Chang. Come on, sit back down. We’re not finished here.”

Defeated, drained, she obeyed. Her movements were sluggish, her shoulders slumped. She let herself sink onto the chair, her gaze lost. Her voice, barely a breath, finally yielded:

“If I cooperate... you won’t harm him?”

With a conciliatory smile, Diallo lifted his hands slowly, as if to seal an invisible pact.

“Don’t worry, Miss Chang. I just want to speak with this young man tomorrow. Nothing more.”

He exhaled a plume of smoke toward the ceiling, his eyes still fixed on her.

“I won’t do anything to him... but believe me, it’s better to cooperate. You understand what I’m saying.”

A tense silence followed. Desperate, Chang clasped her hands over her mouth as though to hold her secret in. Her eyes filled with tears. Then, in a resigned whisper, she said:

“Thomas De La Lys. His name is Thomas De La Lys. Tomorrow morning, he’ll walk me to work... and after that, I’ll ask him to meet you.”

Diallo straightened, his face lighting up with a smile he did not bother to hide. It was not joy, but the thrill of a hunter who has just been handed his prey. His features stretched into an almost ecstatic satisfaction.

“Good, Miss Chang,” Diallo said, nodding slowly. “You’re making the right decision.”

He stubbed out his cigarette, his fingers trembling just a little, then added in a tone that aimed to sound reassuring but echoed like a sentence:

“Tell him I’ll be waiting for him tomorrow in Wolvendael Park, after he’s dropped you at work. It’s just a few steps away... he’ll have no excuse to refuse.”

Chang stared at him for a long moment, her eyes heavy with worry she could no longer hide.

“What will happen to Thomas?” she asked, her voice shaking.

Diallo stood, adjusted his coat with deliberate slowness and approached her. He held out a hand, inviting her to rise, like a master granting temporary freedom to his captive.

“Nothing, as I already told you. I simply want to hear him out, build a profile. For the moment, he’s still presumed innocent.”

He blew out a thin trail of smoke, a narrow smile on his lips.

“Go back to work now, and above all... don’t disappoint me, Miss Chang.”

Chang got to her feet. Her legs trembled, her chair scraped faintly against the floor. She carefully avoided his eyes, pushed a lock of hair behind her ear with a nervous gesture, and walked toward the exit. The door closed behind her in a heavy silence, as if all the air had left the room with her.

Diallo remained motionless for a few seconds, then let out a noisy breath. He took two steps forward, rolled his shoulders as though shrugging off the tension, and sneered.

“Phew... She wasn’t too hard to get talking. But the other one... ah, the other one, that won’t be the same song.”

He shook his head, amused by his own thought.

“More overtime this Saturday... My wife’s not going to be thrilled. Definitely...”

With a cynical edge to his voice, he turned toward the door and barked:

“Clara!”

Moments later, Clara entered the office, alert, almost stiff, as if she had guessed the case was taking a serious turn.

“Inspector Diallo!”

Diallo walked toward her, hands clasped behind his back, his face set in studied concentration. His voice took on a grave tone, as if he were entrusting her with a crucial mission.

“Tomorrow morning, I have to question a very dangerous suspect in Wolvendael Park. You’ll come with two colleagues. I want you to stay discreet, but not too far from me. Understood?”

He paused, eyes narrowing. An idea flashed across his mind, and a half-smile appeared.

“Clara, you have a dog, don’t you?”

The young woman lifted her chin, proud, almost defiant.

“Yes, Inspector.”

He eyed her with a mock worried look, his tone turning almost plaintive.

“I hope it’s not... a Chihuahua?”

Clara shrugged with confidence and took a step forward.

“It’s a German shepherd, Inspector. He obeys me to the letter... and he can attack on command.”

A burst of laughter escaped Diallo. At last, his face relaxed.

“Well then, I’m impressed, Clara. Tomorrow, be ready. Not too far from me with your dog, understood?”

She nodded, eyes shining with contained excitement. The inspector’s words had just turned a simple instruction into a personal challenge.

## Chapter 26 – The Shadow and the Red Cat

Later, in the hushed quiet of the building, a very different scene unfolded. Thomas gently closed the apartment door behind him. The hallway, lit only by a small yellowish night-light, breathed the silence of evening.

A movement caught his attention: a red cat, sitting in the middle of the passage, was staring at him with big golden eyes. Thomas knelt down, his tall frame bending with unexpected gentleness. He held out his arms and gathered the animal against him.

“So, mister cat... are you lost?” he asked softly. “And who do you belong to, little one?”

The cat purred, rubbing its head against his chest. Thomas stroked its back slowly, as if he found in this small creature an echo of the innocence he thought he had long lost. He glanced left and right along the deserted corridor.

“I don’t have much time,” he sighed, “because I must go pick up Chang from her work... but what am I going to do with you?”

The cat closed its eyes, trusting, as if it had already chosen him.

Suddenly, the door of apartment D burst open, releasing a flood of curses that echoed through the entire hallway. Rudy appeared massive, hair disheveled, his face red with anger. His eyes scanned the hallway with animal-like aggression.

“Filthy little ginger! Come here or I’ll feed you to the dogs!”

Thomas slowly turned his head. Without a word, he stood up, straightening to his full height, the red cat still safe in his arms. He walked toward Rudy with calm steps that sounded like a challenge in the silent corridor.

Rudy halted in front of him, scowling. His lips twisted in a sneer.

“My cat!”

Thomas didn’t flinch. He met his neighbor’s gaze, his tone firm and steady.

“This is your cat, Mr. Rudy.”

Annoyed, Rudy thrust out his arms brusquely.

“Yeah! And I want him back, now, before my wife blows a fuse.”

Thomas moved the animal slightly toward him, as if about to hand it over. But at the last moment, he stopped. His eyes narrowed, his voice sharpened.

“The ginger one... you don’t really intend to give him to the dogs, do you?”

Rudy looked away, uncomfortable, his jaw clenched.

“Fuck... that’s none of your business.”

Thomas frowned and tilted his head slightly, bringing his face closer to Rudy’s. His words dropped like a warning.

“I think I’d rather bring him to your wife. For his safety.”

A heavy silence fell. Rudy forced a nervous, awkward smile, then finally took the cat back, holding it clumsily against his chest. His movements suddenly softened, as if trying to make up for his earlier rage.

“I bark a lot,” he muttered, “but I’d never hurt an animal.”

Thomas stepped back, still gauging him. The cat purred in his owner’s arms, unaware of the silent standoff that had just taken place.

Thomas nodded, his expression softening. He rubbed his hands together, as if closing the confrontation.

“I’m counting on you. And I’m sure that, in the future, we’ll get along like brothers.”

The words fell with a disarming serenity. Rudy blinked, stunned by such an unexpected statement. Then his face twisted into an ironic sneer. He stepped back twice, clutching his cat like a shield.

“You feeling all right, or what?”

Without waiting for an answer, he turned on his heel.

“Hey, fatty!” he shouted into the apartment. “I found your damn cat!”

The door slammed behind him. The hallway returned to its quiet, as if nothing had happened.

Thomas remained still for a moment, a small smile forming on his lips.

“I think we’ll never be friends,” he murmured.

He took a deep breath and straightened his shoulders. Time was passing.

“Now, I should hurry and go pick up Chang. I don’t want to be late for her first day.”

## Chapter 27 – The Weight of the Secret

Outside, the night had already spread its mantle. The streetlamps cast a yellow light that stretched long shadows across the sidewalk. Standing in front of the grocery store, Thomas waited, his heart beating with impatience.

At last, the glass door opened. Chang appeared, a fragile silhouette in her dark coat. Her face lit up when she saw Thomas, but a veil of worry quickly dimmed her joy.

Without a word, she threw herself into his arms. Their lips met in a long, fevered kiss, as if trying to push back the specters of the day.

Thomas, his breath uneven, gently caressed her cheek.

“You look tired,” he said softly.

Chang nodded. But immediately, her body tensed again. She pressed herself harder against him, and tears rolled down her cheeks.

“Let’s go home,” she whispered. “I have important things to tell you.”

She stepped back slightly, wiped her tears quickly, and lifted toward him a gaze filled with distress and urgency.

“Don’t ask me any questions, Thomas,” murmured Chang, her voice carrying an unusual gravity. “Let’s just walk, hand in hand, without ever letting go. Let’s savor each step and each moment together.”

Thomas looked at her, intrigued. His brow furrowed, worry flickered in his eyes.

“What’s going on?... Is it your religion that”

He stopped himself, shook his head slowly, and added in a resigned sigh:

“Okay.”

He tightened his fingers around hers. Their joined hands became a silent promise. Then they walked side by side through the night, without exchanging a word, as if each step carved into the darkness could hold back the inevitable.

### Apartment of Chang

The apartment was bathed in soft light. Steam rose from a still-warm cup that Chang held in her hands. Sitting at the table, she stared into it, the spoon endlessly turning in the dark liquid, betraying her agitation.

Finally, she spoke, her voice trembling but determined:

“... Inspector Diallo absolutely wants to meet you tomorrow morning. After you drop me off at work, he’ll be waiting for you in the Wolvendael Park, somewhere near the entrance.”

Thomas raised his eyebrows, surprised, then his face relaxed.

“That’s why you looked so burdened at the store... I understand why your day was so hard. Don’t worry anymore. Tomorrow, I’ll go see this inspector and I’ll answer his questions.”

Chang’s eyes widened. She stopped stirring immediately. Her gaze locked onto his, filled with desperate pleading.

“Let’s run away, Thomas! Let’s leave everything. Let’s go far from here and hide.”

Thomas narrowed his eyes, a calm but determined smile touching his lips.

“You know me, Chang. I never run from danger.”

She stood up abruptly, her features marked by a sudden resolve, and she headed toward her bedroom.

“Then I’m packing my suitcase. I won’t let you face this alone!”

Thomas reached out toward her and gently pulled her back. His warm hands closed around hers, enclosing them in a protective hold. Chang froze at the tenderness of the gesture. Her fingers tightened around his with force, as if that touch was the only certainty she had left.

“Stop, Chang!” exclaimed Thomas, his voice firm but filled with a tenderness meant to soothe. “I will not let our love be lost forever. And besides, he would need to make me confess crimes. That will not happen: he has no proof.”

He paused, his eyes hardening.

“So he will have to look for another culprit.”

Chang stood motionless, her fists clenched so tightly that her knuckles turned white. Her gaze pierced into his with a glimmer of fear.

“You don’t understand... The inspector found my MP3 player and my bike. I’m sure of it he has tangible evidence. But he keeps it hidden to pull it out at the last moment, when we’re cornered. He’s manipulative, Thomas! I didn’t even sign a deposition... all of this is a web he’s trapping me in.”

Her voice cracked, a wave of despair passing through it.

“Thomas, I beg you... don’t go. Let’s run away before it’s too late!”

Thomas straightened to his full height, his jaw clenched. Slowly, he shook his head.



“Running like thieves, hiding while waiting for him to find us? Never. We deserve better than that, Chang. And besides, the bike and the MP3 player prove nothing: neither your involvement nor mine.”

She shrugged, her hands slipping from his. She turned away, rubbing her long hair nervously, as if trying to chase an invisible anxiety.

“If only it were that simple... But my woman’s intuition is screaming that he’s preparing something. I feel it. Inspector Diallo is going to arrest you. And then... you’ll never come back.”

A heavy silence fell. Thomas, his gaze filled with reassuring confidence, reached his hands out to her again, as if pulling her from the edge of her fear.

“Stop imagining the worst. Tomorrow, I’ll see this inspector. And tomorrow evening, I’ll come back to pick you up from work.”

He paused, softening his tone, trying to offer a smile.

“Better yet... I’ll come at noon, during your break. That way, you won’t have to wait until evening to be reassured.”

Chang’s tense features finally relaxed. Her eyes shone with fragile hope. She straightened up, her breath escaping in something like relief.

“You promise me, Thomas!” exclaimed Chang, her hands clasped, her voice trembling with a mix of love and fear.

Thomas solemnly placed his palm on his chest, like a medieval oath.

“For you!”

Chang grimaced, shaking her head.

“Oh, Thomas! Stop being an idiot... We’re not in a crusade anymore.”

A tender smile lit up her face. Her features softened, her voice became a caress.

“You’re my crusade now, my love.”

Then Chang leaned suddenly over the table. Her lips met Thomas’s in a passionate, burning kiss, as if she wanted to seal this promise with an unbreakable mark. Time seemed to freeze, suspended in the warmth of that moment.

## Chapter 28 – The Morning of Goodbyes

The morning sun filtered between the still-sleepy façades. In front of the grocery store, Thomas held Chang by the waist, his gaze drowned in affection. His fingers slowly caressed her cheek, then slid down to her neck, brushing her skin with infinite delicacy.

“Chang... stop worrying,” he said softly. “Don’t forget: I’ll be there, at exactly noon.”

But Chang’s face betrayed her despair. Her hands clung to him like to a lifeline.

“We can still leave, Thomas! I’m begging you...”

He gently moved her hands away, with a gesture filled with calm and certainty. His eyes shone with a confidence that seemed unshakable.

“Chang, have faith in yourself.”

She lowered her head, ashamed. A tear rolled down, but she managed a fragile smile.

“... Not to bow my head anymore, I know.”

Their eyes met one last time before she walked off toward her work. In that brief instant, all their love, all their fear, and all the weight of fate seemed suspended between them.

Thomas smiled softly and placed a kiss on Chang’s forehead, like an intimate blessing.

“Now you have to go to work,” he murmured.

Chang answered with a passionate, fierce, almost desperate kiss, as if she feared it might be the last. Then, with a steady step, she headed toward the entrance of the store. She crossed the threshold without looking back, taking with her a shard of Thomas’s heart.

Left alone, he remained motionless for a few moments. His eyes still followed the vanished silhouette, as if trying to hold it there. He drew a deep breath, filling his lungs with cold air, then slowly exhaled while crossing his arms tightly over his chest. This gesture, half protective, half premonitory, was that of a man about to face his fate.

The meeting in the park

Wolvendael Park stretched out, wide and silent beneath the pale morning light. At the entrance, Inspector Louis Diallo waited, dressed in his long dark coat that flapped with the wind. His closed face betrayed suspicion. Between his fingers, a cigarette was burning quickly, and each drag seemed to gnaw a little more at his nerves.

His eyes swept the surroundings. Farther away, on a bench, Clara sat with her big dog lying at her feet, ears pricked. She appeared relaxed, but her eyes followed every movement. On a side

path, two men in plain clothes walked at a measured pace, discreetly scanning the area. The net was set.

“Everything’s ready,” Diallo muttered to himself.

He threw his cigarette to the ground and crushed it with a sharp movement. His wrist turned: his watch showed that the time was near.

“You must be the inspector, I suppose!” suddenly called a voice behind him.

Startled, Diallo turned his head toward the entrance. Thomas was approaching with a confident stride. His silhouette cut through the morning light, tall and firm. When he reached the inspector, he looked him straight in the eye.

“Thomas de La Lys, I’d imagine,” said Diallo in a neutral, almost ironic tone.

Their gazes crossed. Thomas’s clear eyes shone with calm intensity, a strange, almost disarming confidence.

“And what if we walked together through this beautiful park?” Thomas suggested in an even voice.

Diallo gave a tight, annoyed grimace that twisted his features. His gaze slid briefly toward the trees in the distance, then came back to Thomas.

“All right. But not toward the edge of the woods. I don’t like that place much,” he muttered, with a hint of spite.

Thomas did not look away. He held the inspector’s gaze with an intensity that almost unsettled him. Then a faint, mysterious smile crossed his lips, as if he had guessed something the other man did not yet know.

“If you say so,” Thomas replied, with a very slight undertone of irony.

The two men set off side by side along the park’s main path. Their steps fell into the same regular rhythm, but each of them tried to impose his own pace on the other. The air was cool, heavy with the morning’s dampness, and a heavy silence stretched out for a moment, broken only by the rustling of the leaves above them.

“Chang told me you absolutely wanted to see me,” Thomas resumed in a clear voice. “So here I am, inspector.”

“Diallo,” corrected the other sharply, without looking at him.

“Sorry?”

“I am Inspector Diallo,” he snapped, emphasising each syllable as if to reassert his authority.

Thomas narrowed his eyes and stopped in a single movement, planting his heels in the gravel. He straightened, shoulders square, and faced the inspector. His gaze locked onto Diallo's, unshakeable.

"Ask your questions. I'm listening, Inspector."

A flicker of annoyance crossed Diallo's face. He pulled out a pack of cigarettes, stuck one between his lips, and lit it with studied slowness. He inhaled deeply, held the smoke for a few seconds, then let it escape in a thick cloud that rose between them like a barrier. Behind that grey curtain, his eyes gleamed with a hint of amusement.

"All right... I imagine Chang informed you of our meeting yesterday, at my office at the federal police?"

Thomas did not flinch. He nodded slowly, his gaze still anchored in the inspector's.

"She did."

"So you know I still have investigative duties to carry out," continued Diallo in a falsely relaxed tone, as if he meant to lighten the gravity of his words.

Thomas took his hands out of his pockets. He opened them wide, palms turned toward the sky, like an offering, a sign of openness.

"Then get to the point, Inspector."

Silence fell again. The cigarette smoke slowly dispersed in the air, carried by the wind. Between them, more than words, it was a battle of gazes, a silent confrontation where each tested the other's strength.

Two plainclothes officers crossed their path. They walked slowly, their eyes wandering casually over the surroundings, yet on alert at Thomas's every move. They passed the two men, then continued their discreet patrol a little farther away, like two shadows ready to intervene at the slightest alarm.

Lost in his thoughts, Diallo drew in another deep drag, held it for a long time, then let it out in a noisy puff. His eyes, narrowed, turned toward the dark edge of the woods.

"What happened Monday night, at the edge of the woods?" he asked, his voice taken on a carefully weighed gravity. "And don't tell me you're unaware of the two murders committed there with such savagery."

His gaze returned to Thomas, scanning him from head to toe as if looking for invisible traces of guilt. Then he threw his cigarette down and crushed it with a sharp twist of his shoe.

"And what are you doing," he went on, "wearing the military clothes of Jean Van Stell?"

Thomas inhaled sharply, a dry, nervous breath. His eyes locked onto those of the inspector with fierce intensity.

“Who told you they were his?” he shot back, his voice hard.

A nasty smile stretched Diallo’s lips. He dropped his eyes to Thomas’s boots, then sighed as if he had just obtained silent confirmation.

“You’re also wearing his boots... and you’ve kept his little quirk, that absurd detail: the loose laces, exactly like him.”

“Pure coincidence,” Thomas replied coldly, his tone as sharp as a blade.

Diallo started to smile nervously, a twitch of the lips that was neither joy nor irony, but the reflex of a hunter sensing his prey waver. He frowned, inhaled deeply, and his gaze turned piercing, almost cruel.

“It was you,” he finally spat, “who impaled Jean Van Stell and crushed Marcel Poinpont’s skull. Admit it, Thomas de La Lys!”

A heavy silence followed, weighing like a slab of stone. The wind stirred a few dead leaves that whirled around them.

Diallo resumed, even darker:

“Chang was nothing but an unfortunate victim of their scheme, after that ‘accident’ on Rue Rouge. An accident staged by those two men. The marks on their car’s bumper match the old bike Chang used to ride.”

Thomas straightened, his jaw tight. His voice vibrated with a firm conviction:

“Chang did have an accident that Monday night. But she went home right away, safe and sound.”

His words rang out like a barrier raised between him and the accusation. His gaze burned with fierce determination, that of a man who would not let himself be cornered without a fight.

Diallo’s smile broadened, mocking, like that of a player who believes he has found the flaw. He raised his hands, palms open, in a theatrical denial.

“And let’s not forget,” he added in a mocking tone, “her MP3 player and her bike, left behind as if by magic.”

Thomas tensed. His eyes darkened, and his reply cracked out:

“And then?”

A strained silence followed. The cold, biting wind whipped at the tails of Diallo’s coat. He resumed a more serious, more solemn expression, like a priest pronouncing a sentence. His hands moved slowly as he spoke, as if to give his words more weight.

“I suppose you know Alice, Chang’s neighbor. She made a statement. She swears she saw you that evening, holding Chang in your arms, still in shock. And according to her, she had

never seen you before. She knew nothing about you. You were, to her, a stranger fallen out of nowhere.”

He stepped closer to Thomas, reducing the distance between them to only a few steps. His eyes narrowed, his voice becoming sharper, almost cutting.

“Chang,” he went on, “had been beaten, raped, by Jean Van Stell and Marcel Poinpont. Do you know what they had planned to do next?”

Diallo suddenly raised his voice, his words lashing out like a whip.

“They were going to burn her alive, Thomas! Yes, burn her, to feed on her screams, to revel in her agony. They were going to gorge themselves on her flames like on their victory over an innocent life!”

A flash of rage shot across Thomas’s face. His jaw clenched, his gaze blazed, his features drew tight to the breaking point. His voice burst out, heavy with a fury he no longer tried to hide.

“Today, they are the ones burning in hell!”

The brutal confession cracked out like thunder in the frozen air of the park. Diallo, taken aback, instinctively stepped back. His face first crumpled in shock, then reshaped itself into a twisted, satisfied smile. In his eyes glowed the light of a predator who had at last trapped his prey.

“Here we are at last, Thomas,” he breathed with a sick pleasure.

With a sudden movement, he plunged his right hand into the deep pocket of his coat. His eyes never left Thomas’s.

“How did you do it? And above all... who are you really?”

In the store

In the grocery where she had just finished her first shift, Chang was mechanically shelving cans. Her movements, usually precise, had become nervous and jerky. Her mind was elsewhere. The murmur of customers, the creak of shopping carts, all of it dissolved around her in a fog of anxiety.

The radio was playing an upbeat, almost cheerful song, which cruelly contrasted with the weight crushing her chest. Suddenly, her hand froze on a tin of soup. A tear slid silently down her cheek, beyond her control.

“Thomas...” she whispered, like a desperate prayer.

She remained motionless, her eyes staring into emptiness, while outside, in the park, the decisive confrontation was unfolding.

In the park

On the path carpeted with dead leaves, Diallo and Thomas had drawn closer to each other. Clara, who had stayed back with her German shepherd, watched with palpable tension.

Thomas, his gaze wandering yet his soul ablaze, suddenly fixed his clear eyes on the inspector's. His voice rose, deep, carried by an almost mystical force.

"Do you believe in God, Inspector?"

Diallo raised an eyebrow, intrigued, but remained silent. Thomas stepped sideways a little, slowly moving away as if to get some distance, his loosened-lace boots crushing the dead leaves. Then he went on, with growing intensity:

"I am going to tell you everything, Inspector."

With a quick gesture, Diallo lifted his left hand toward Clara, a signal to stand down. She stopped, her dog motionless at her feet, but her eyes stayed locked on Thomas, ready to react to the slightest suspicious move.

The inspector quickened his pace and came level with Thomas, his imposing figure wrapped in his long coat. His voice snapped like an order.

"No, not here! Come to my office. You'll give a proper statement. You'll sign, and it will be official."

Thomas stopped beside a large mossy rock, standing like a mute witness at the edge of the path. His face tensed, and he raised his hands, palms open, in a clear refusal.

"No. Before anything else, I will tell you who I am. And why I am here."

Diallo frowned. His right hand remained buried in his coat pocket, as if it were secretly caressing the cold metal of his weapon. His look grew arrogant, imperious.

"It doesn't work like that, Thomas!" he snapped. "I'm the police inspector, and my rules govern this investigation. You will not impose your own."

A contemptuous smirk crossed Thomas's lips. He nodded slowly, in a disillusioned motion, his eyes never leaving the inspector's.

"In that case... I won't tell you anything."

Silence fell again, heavy and threatening, broken only by the cold breath of the wind that set the branches above their heads shivering.

Diallo, his nostrils flared with contained anger, leaned so close that Thomas could feel the acrid breath of tobacco. His gaze burned with arrogance.

"You're not recorded anywhere in this country," he said in a low voice. "And according to Interpol, you simply do not exist. No papers, no identity... nothing!"

A vicious smile pulled at his lips.

“In other words, I could have you arrested. Or even kill you on the spot if I wanted to. And no one would ever come to claim you.”

Thomas stepped back slightly, as if to gain some air, but his gaze only grew harder. A cold, almost supernatural intensity came into his eyes. His voice cracked out, calm but glacial:

“Before your right hand even leaves your coat, I would stop you dead... and your neck would be broken.”

Diallo flinched, but Thomas continued, relentless, each word cutting the air like a blade.

“As for that woman and her dog,” he said, indicating Clara and her German shepherd with a tilt of his head, “I would only have to pick up this stone at my feet to reduce them to nothing. Then it would be his turn.”

He paused, his tone growing even more grave.

“And your two men over there... too far, too distracted. They’d never catch up with me.”

For a moment, Diallo’s blood ran cold, but he hid his unease with a nervous laugh, a rictus of defiance.

“It would be a slaughter, huh?...”

Thomas skewered him with his blazing gaze, and his voice thundered:

“Just like with Van Stell and Poinpont!”

The names of the two victims hung for a moment in the air like an irrevocable condemnation. Diallo, shivering in spite of himself, narrowed his eyes and dug his left hand deeper into his coat pocket, as if searching for courage there.

Then, putting his strategist’s mask back on, he spoke more slowly, weighing each word like a threat:

“All right... but know this. Chang can be arrested whenever I decide. She can be sent back to her country from one day to the next. Worse: I can have her charged as your accomplice in the two murders. She’ll taste prison before deportation.”

A cold glint lit up his eyes.

“You don’t want her to waste her life, do you? Then listen carefully. If you care about her... you will come this Sunday to my office. You will bring your full confession, written in your own hand. You will sign that you are guilty of the two murders.”

Diallo paused, a predatory smile on his lips.

“And if you refuse... she will be the one to pay the price.”



The autumn wind stirred the branches of the park, throwing their shifting shadows over the two men's faces. Diallo pulled his collar closer around his neck with a theatrical, almost arrogant gesture. His voice dropped, tinged with icy sarcasm.

"You'll come on Sunday. With a written confession, detailed, complete. And you'll describe who you claim to be. You'll sign it yourself. That will be your seal. Your condemnation."

Thomas, his breath short, felt his heart pounding harder not with fear, but under the weight of a crushing dilemma. He moved closer to the inspector, so near that their gazes locked like crossed blades. His voice, laden with anxiety, trembled in spite of him:

"If I give in to your demand, Inspector Diallo... If I accuse myself and accept my condemnation... will you leave me alone? Will you leave Chang in peace? Will she be able to stay in this country?"

Diallo gave a cold, almost imperceptible smile, like a man who has just won a round. His fingers slid slowly up the collar of his coat, a calculated gesture of superiority. He narrowed his eyes and said, in a sarcastic tone:

"Do you believe in God?"

Thomas remained frozen, unable to answer. Because what the inspector was insinuating was not just a question. It was a test.

In front of the store

At noon, in front of the grocery where Chang worked, the air was charged with impatience. Thomas, standing facing the large glass door, waited, his eyes haunted by the encounter that had just shaken his destiny. The weight of Diallo's words still crushed him, but as soon as the door opened and Chang appeared, he straightened up as if the light had just returned.

Chang hurried outside, her face radiant and trembling at the same time. Her quick breath mingled with sobs of relief. Without thinking, she threw herself into his arms, held him as tightly as she could, and sealed their reunion with a passionate kiss, burning with tears and the desire to live.

"I thought I would never see you again!..." she sobbed against his lips. "Thomas, tell me what happened."

Thomas held her tighter, then, as if to erase her fears, he forced a wide, almost carefree smile.

"The inspector is dropping it, Chang. Lack of evidence."

She stepped back suddenly, her eyes widening in disbelief.

"What?... But..."

He reassured her with a gesture of his hand and a falsely light tone.

“Your bike, your MP3 player... all that is only linked to the accident on Rue Rouge. Nothing that can prove any involvement in the murders in Wolvendael Park.”

Chang fixed her gaze on him, her dark pupils shining with a mixture of fear and instinct.

“And Alice?... Her statement...”

Thomas held her eyes, his forced smile hardening into a controlled seriousness.

“That doesn’t prove anything either. Nothing at all, Chang. Neither against you, nor against me.”

She remained motionless, torn between relief and a lingering doubt, as if her woman’s intuition sensed that Thomas was still hiding a part of the truth.

For a moment, Chang stood still, unable to utter a word. Her slightly open mouth betrayed her disbelief, her mind still hesitating to believe that the nightmare was over. Then suddenly, a bright smile broke over her face, a smile that came from her heart, soaked with tears.

“So... we’re free!” she breathed, her voice breaking with emotion.

Thomas opened his eyes wide, savoring the warmth of that sentence like a blessing. A frank laugh burst from his chest.

“Yes, Chang! That’s why I’m here. To bring you the good news. You can now look to your future without fear, in complete peace.”

She threw herself against him again, tears rolling down her cheeks like a rain of deliverance. She clung to him with all her strength, seeking refuge in his powerful arms.

“My future...” she murmured in a trembling voice. “My future is with you, Thomas. It’s with you that I want to build it.”

She stepped back a little, wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand and, finding again a spark of determination, went on:

“Starting in January, I’m enrolling in evening classes. I want to get a degree in business management. You were right... I have to rise up, become stronger, so I never let anyone dominate me again.”

Thomas raised an amused eyebrow, trying to lighten the intensity of the moment.

“Business management, huh? Don’t tell me your dream is to sell fries!”

Chang burst out laughing, a clear, almost childlike laugh that made her eyes shine.

“Even though I love Belgian fries, no, Thomas. That’s not my dream. I want to be a manager. A respected, responsible woman. I want no one ever to be able to doubt me or humiliate me again.”

Thomas clapped his hands once, his face lit with sincere pride.

“You’re growing in the right way, Chang. And I love your ambitions.”

Without waiting, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her passionately, as if to forever engrave this hopeful moment into their shared memory. Their hearts beat in unison, echoing like a silent vow: never again to let themselves be crushed by the shadow of the past.

## Chapter 29 – The Echo of Prayers

The solemn silence of Saint Peter's Church wrapped around Thomas like a shroud. Kneeling in the center of the transept, head bowed, he seemed small beneath the immensity of the statues that represented Christendom. Their stone faces watched over him like immutable witnesses to his burden.

His hunched shoulders carried not only the memory of the Crusades, but also the uncertainty of his earthly future. His lips parted in a broken plea.

"Lord... why do You torment me so? Why do You condemn me to lie to the woman I love?"

His wounded face slowly lifted toward the choir, flooded with colored light. The stained-glass windows cast fragments of purple and gold across him like a celestial judgment.

He closed his eyes, fists clenched, and whispered again, his voice frayed with anguish:

"Help me walk this path... Show me the meaning of Your trial..."

Thomas remained kneeling, his fists tight, tears streaming slowly over his grief-marked cheeks. His voice, first a murmur, rose through the nave like a cry torn from the deepest recesses of his soul.

"God! Why do You torment me so? Why do You place upon me the unbearable weight of lying to the one I love?"

He raised his head, and his reddened eyes met the immobile silhouettes of the statues—mute witnesses of his torment. His face, twisted with sorrow, bared the naked truth of his heart.

"I am in love with Chang," he confessed in a trembling breath. "It is a love I had never known before. To know the tenderness of a living woman... it is so deep, so delicate..."

Then his voice cracked, only to rise again, sharpened by a burst of anger. He stood abruptly, spreading his arms wide as if challenging the heavens.

"But what do You expect of me, Lord?" he shouted, his voice echoing under the vaults. "I feel betrayed! You deny me passion, desire, tenderness, affection. To me, who carried Your love like a banner, You leave only bitterness. Cruel!"

His arms fell heavily along his sides, emptied of strength. He staggered, then brought his trembling hands together in a desperate prayer.

"O God... forgive my weakness. Show me the way. What do You require of me to be worthy in Your eyes? What trial, what suffering does Your will still demand?"

A crushing silence filled the church, broken only by the faint crackle of burning candles. Thomas bent forward, almost crushed beneath the weight of his supplication.

Then suddenly, a deep, gentle voice rose behind him.

“God does not ask for your suffering, Thomas. Only an act of faith. Nothing more.”

Thomas jolted, his eyes widening. He turned slowly and saw the silhouette of Father Léonard emerging through the diffused light of the stained-glass windows. His step was measured, almost solemn, as though he were walking out of the shadows to embody a divine answer.

“Léonard...” Thomas breathed, shaken. “But... what do you mean?”

Léonard stopped a few steps away. His joined hands rested before him, and his face bore a serene tenderness that contrasted with the intensity of his gaze. His eyes shone with calm benevolence, yet also with the gravity of a man who knows the battles of the soul.

“God requires fidelity, conviction, and absolute trust,” he said in a steady voice, every word resonating like timeless truth. “Not words, but actions, Thomas.”

He paused, letting the sacred silence of the church deepen the weight of his message.

“If you have returned to Earth, it is not to be punished. It is to face a trial. Your trial is love. The love you have discovered with Chang.”

Thomas’s eyes filled again, his lips tightening.

“But... why?” he whispered, almost ashamed.

Léonard inclined his head slightly, as if to see more clearly into the depths of his heart.

“Because that love is your path to redemption. You once committed bloody deeds; you bore the cross of a warrior. Today, God offers you another cross: that of giving, tenderness, and fidelity. It is not punishment, Thomas it is instruction. What you learn from Chang will serve your eternal soul, far beyond this life.”

He stepped closer and gently rested a hand on Thomas’s shoulder.

“It is yours to choose. Always free. But know that God awaits your act of faith. Not your prayers. Not your sacrifices. Your choice.”

Thomas trembled. His gaze drifted toward the illuminated choir, toward the radiant chapel where color danced softly on his face like a fragile blessing.

He raised his eyes toward the invisible heavens behind the vault and exhaled.

“Lord... help me walk this tortuous path.”

His joined hands rose slowly. He traced the sign of the cross with deliberate solemnity like a weary soldier who, at last, finds the meaning of his battle.

## Chapter 30 – Alice’s Shadows

Night had fallen, and in the narrow hallway of the building, Thomas knocked on the door of apartment F. A few seconds later, the door opened with a slow creak.

Alice appeared, hunched in a worn evening robe, her loose hair framing a tired face lit only by a courteous smile.

“Good evening, Alice,” Thomas said, his voice calm but carrying a slight tension.

She raised an eyebrow, surprised to see him at such a late hour.

“Thomas... to what do I owe your visit? Do you want to come in?”

He shook his head gently, lifting his hands as if to ease her concern.

“Thank you, Alice, but no. I don’t want to disturb you more than necessary.”

Alice’s lips tightened for an instant, both relieved and intrigued. Her eyes softened, and a delicate smile appeared on her weary face.

“It seems things are going well between you two,” she murmured, her voice tinged with nostalgia.

Thomas’s eyes narrowed with quiet joy. It was written clearly in his features: the pride and devotion of a man truly in love.

“Chang is extraordinary... so attentive, so generous. I adore her.”

Alice lowered her gaze, hesitant. Gathering courage, she stepped closer. Her thin fingers fidgeted nervously with the belt of her robe.

“I hope you’re not too angry with me... for the statement I gave to the federal police. You know, that inspector Diallo... I didn’t think. I just believed...”

A moment of awkwardness floated in the air. Thomas regarded her calmly, then waved his hands lightly, as if brushing the discomfort aside.

“No, no, don’t worry, Alice. Everything is settled with the inspector. The case was dropped.”

A deep breath lifted Alice’s chest. Her shoulders relaxed, and her expression brightened almost instantly.

“Really?... Oh, I’m happy for you,” she said with sincere relief.

Thomas joined his hands before his mouth, almost like an improvised prayer. His eyes grew darker, more intense.

“Actually, Alice... I was wondering if you could help me.”

She nodded quickly, as if seeing here a chance to redeem herself.

“Of course, Thomas. What do you need?”

“Would you happen to have something that could help me sleep deeply tonight?” he asked, his voice heavy with fatigue. “Everything that happened today has exhausted me... I fear I won’t sleep at all.”

Alice tilted her head, a tender smile brushing her lips. Compassion filled her eyes.

“Oh, I know that feeling very well, Thomas. Wait here I’ll get you a sleeping pill. It will help you rest tonight.”

She disappeared into her apartment, leaving behind a faint scent of herbal tea and clean laundry. From inside, her voice rose, slightly louder, almost like a confession thrown into the hallway.

“Whenever my painful past comes back to haunt me, I take this medicine! It’s the only way I’ve found to quiet my nights...”

Thomas, still waiting in the corridor, tilted his head. A subtle pang of compassion passed through him, but he said nothing. He knew the weight of hidden wounds how they hide behind the most mundane gestures.

Soon, Alice reappeared, a small box in her hand. She removed a pill and offered it to him like a fragile gift.

“Here, Thomas. Take it with plenty of water.”

He extended his hand gratefully and accepted the pill as though she were placing trust directly into his palm.

“Thank you, Alice. And... please, don’t tell Chang. I wouldn’t want her to worry.”

Alice nodded, understanding perfectly.

“Of course. Your secret will stay with me.”

Thomas slipped the pill into his coat pocket, thoughtful. Then he straightened up, and a mischievous smile lifted the corner of his lips.

“In exchange, I promise you a dinner soon. I’ll invite you to try some stir-fried noodles... but with a real fork, no chopsticks.”

Alice let out a light laugh, surprised by such unexpected warmth. A faint blush rose on her cheeks.

“Goodnight, Thomas. You’re a sweetheart, really.”

She gently closed the door, leaving Thomas alone in the dim corridor. He breathed deeply, turned on his heel, and walked away with quick, determined steps his shadow stretching across the silent walls.



## Chapter 31 – The Night of Confidences

In the bathroom, steam was still fading from the mirror. Thomas, hair still damp, bare-chested, stood with a towel wrapped around his waist. His troubled gaze shifted toward his trousers thrown over the chair. He slipped a hand into the pocket and pulled out the pill Alice had given him.

The small tablet lay in his palm, insignificant at first glance, yet unbearably heavy with the weight of an unspoken choice.

He stared at it for a long moment, as though it carried a fate he refused to confront. His throat tightened.

“Forgive me, Chang...” he murmured in a broken voice. “But I have no choice.”

His trembling fingers closed around the pill, then he slipped it into the pocket of his silk robe, inspired by the elegance of the Far East. He wrapped himself in the garment with a mix of resignation and modesty, then left the bathroom.

The silence of the living room received him like a judgment. Thomas walked heavily toward the couch, but the bedroom door suddenly opened, spilling a soft light and a fragrant warmth into the hallway. He stopped at once, frowning.

“Chang? Are you all right?” he asked, forcing a calm tone. “I was just coming to bring you some water... and a medicine to help you relax.”

No answer. His words echoed into the warm air and disappeared. Suspicious, he stepped closer to the half-open door.

The bedroom glowed under flickering candlelight. Flames danced on the furniture, stretching shadows across the walls. The sultry voice of Mike Brant filled the air: *Laisse-moi t’aimer...*

Chang appeared within this intimate scene, her loose hair cascading over her shoulders. Wrapped in a silk robe, she moved toward Thomas with a tenderness weighted by something deeper. She placed her fine hands on his shoulders and, in a slow, almost ceremonial gesture, let the fabric slide from her body, leaving him naked before her.

Then she let her own robe fall, revealing the delicate curves of her silhouette. They looked at each other for a long moment, like two souls finally freed, before they fell into each other’s arms. Their kisses grew heated, desperate, as though the night itself granted them a fragile reprieve—an instant stolen from eternity.

Thomas lifted her with infinite gentleness, carrying her to the bed. Chang, lying back, pulled him against her, her lips feverishly seeking his. In a trembling whisper, her mouth brushed his ear.

“You are my angel...”

Then, in the scented darkness, to the rhythm of the song rising like a carnal prayer, they united. Every touch, every caress seemed to erase, just for a moment, the threat gathering outside their fragile sanctuary. Their bodies intertwined with an intensity woven from desire and faith, passion and surrender.

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## The Morning Letter

Dawn filtered through the curtains, pale and cold. In the dining room, Thomas stood fully dressed. His shoes were tightly laced silent proof of an irreversible decision. His eyes fell upon the sleeping pill resting on the table. He picked it up, studied it, and a faint, ironic smile passed over his lips. With a sharp gesture, he slipped it back into the pocket of his coat.

He sat down, pulled a blank sheet toward him, and uncapped a pen. The silence was broken only by the soft scratching of the nib gliding across the paper. His words, swift and deliberate, aligned themselves like stones paving a road he no longer had the right to turn away from.

After several lines, he set down the pen, breath shallow. His eyes fell upon a small knife lying nearby. Without hesitation, he seized it and drew it across the skin of his left index finger. A bead of blood rose and slid down his skin.

Wincing, he pressed his thumb onto the paper, leaving a red print at the bottom of the letter. A signature of flesh and pain. Then he brought his finger to his lips and tasted the metallic salt.

He folded the paper carefully, slipped it into an envelope, and tucked it into the back pocket of his trousers. He stood, casting one last melancholic look at the closed bedroom door where Chang still slept. His lips trembled.

“Today makes only seven days since we met... and yet it feels like I’ve loved her a lifetime,” he whispered.

He remained motionless for a heartbeat, then turned the doorknob, opened the front door, and stepped out, closing it behind him with the silence of a tomb.

## Chapter 32 – The Inspector’s Lair

Morning at the federal police station.

The acrid smell of tobacco clung to the walls of Inspector Diallo’s office. Seated behind his desk buried under scattered files, he stared into nothingness, his expression dark and heavy. A cup of cold coffee sat within reach. With his other hand, he tapped nervously on a dossier he refused to open, as though its mere presence reminded him of the magnitude of the case.

“Don’t play games with me, Thomas...” he muttered through clenched teeth. “Don’t play with me...”

A puff of smoke escaped his lips before he violently crushed his cigarette in the ashtray.

Suddenly, the door burst open. Clara rushed inside, pale-faced, eyes wide, breath trembling.

“Inspector! He’s here... Thomas De La Lys. The suspect is here!”

Diallo snapped his head up. His brows furrowed, but his voice remained firm and icy.

“Calm yourself, Clara. Keep your composure. They did teach you that at the police academy, didn’t they?”

Clara lowered her head, ashamed of her outburst.

“I’m sorry, Inspector Diallo... It’s just that... I didn’t really believe he would come.”

The old inspector rose slowly, adjusted his coat, then approached her with a heavy, deliberate step. His gaze sharpened like a blade.

“Listen to me carefully. Stay close. If anything happens... anything at all... you intervene without hesitation. Understood?”

Clara nodded quickly. Her hands trembled, but determination returned to her eyes.

Diallo paused, then added with a lighter tone, almost ironic:

“And... thank you again for assisting me this Sunday. But don’t get used to it, Clara... or my wife will file for divorce.”

A bitter smile flickered across his lips before vanishing under a mask of cold resolve. He reached to his belt, drew his service weapon, checked it with precise movements, then holstered it again.

“Let’s hope we won’t need this,” he growled. “But remember... we might be facing the killer from Wolvendael Park.”

Clara swallowed hard, nodded again, and left the office, leaving Diallo alone.

He sat back down, lit another cigarette, and waited, stiff and unreadable.

The office lay in a pale, sickly light filtering through dusty blinds. Smoke thickened the air. Diallo leaned back in his chair, blowing out a long stream of smoke, his sharp gaze fixed on the door.

Clara reappeared, still shaken.

“Inspector Diallo... Mr. Thomas De La Lys is here. He wishes to speak with you.”

Diallo crushed his cigarette, his face barely shifting except for a faint crease of irony.

“Good, Clara. Send him in.”

She obeyed at once. With a brief, almost ceremonial gesture, she opened the door for Thomas.

The man entered with a disconcerting calm. His step was firm, his posture proud. He placed himself before the desk without attempting to sit like a soldier presenting himself for judgment. Clara retreated silently and closed the door behind her.

Smoke curled upward once more. Diallo exhaled loudly.

“I’m pleased you came, Thomas,” he said, voice dripping with sarcasm. “I hope you brought what I asked for.”

Without another word, Thomas reached into the back pocket of his trousers and produced an envelope, carefully sealed. He placed it on the desk with solemn slowness. His eyes did not waver.

“The statement is here,” he said clearly. “I’ve explained everything, from beginning to end. And I want Chang cleared. She has nothing to do with your accusations.”

Caught off guard, Diallo raised his eyebrows. A flicker of hesitation crossed his eyes, but he regained control almost instantly. His mouth twisted into a mocking grin.

“That’s for me to decide,” he replied coldly. “For now, you’re still suspect number one... and she’s still your accomplice.”

He snatched the envelope, tore it open hastily, and unfolded the document. The paper trembled between his tobacco-stained fingers. His eyes darted across the first lines hungry, suspicious, eager to pounce on any flaw.

He lifted the deposition with two fingers, as if holding a contaminated object, and lowered his glasses.

“You can sit while I read this,” he said, feigning detachment.

Thomas remained silent. Hands deep in his pockets, he straightened his posture, refusing the offer.

“I prefer to stand,” he answered. “Soon enough, she will be free once you’ve read the truth.”

The inspector stared at him, unsettled by his composure. A strained grin twisted his lips. Then he plunged back into the document, eyes scanning frenetically.

Thomas turned to the window. Outside, autumn spread in flaming colors. Leaves, shaken by a faint breeze, fell one by one like lives torn from the earth. The sight tightened his chest, a brutal reminder of his own fragile fate.

“You’re mocking me!” Diallo suddenly exploded.

His voice cracked through the room like thunder. Thomas spun around, hands rising to calm him.

“Inspector,” he said gravely, “you asked me for a sworn statement, confessing the murders I committed. I gave you exactly that. In full conscience.”

Diallo leapt from his chair, slamming his fist onto the desk so hard the stacks of files rattled.

“What is this nonsense!” he shouted, face flushed, neck veins bulging.

Thomas clenched his jaw but did not step back.

“It is... my story, Inspector. My truth.”

“Your truth!” Diallo barked with a harsh laugh. “You’re insane. Completely insane!”

He seized the document in both hands, as though ready to tear it apart but instead his eyes darted across the pages again, lips moving in disbelief.

Then, with a venomous sneer, he looked up.

“Let me read between the lines... You claim to be a crusader. A crusader! From the year... 1099! Serving under Godfrey of Bouillon! Of all things!”

He burst into a cruel laugh before collapsing back into his chair.

Diallo kept reading aloud, his tone cutting the text like a knife.

“For your war crimes, God condemned you to Purgatory to free tortured souls... Wonderful! Sounds like a sermon gone wrong.”

Another passage.

“I returned to Earth to atone for my sins. Ah! Magnificent!”

Another scoff.

“I met Chang, whom I saved from two murderers. I must perform an act of faith so my soul may be liberated. Incredible!”

Finally, he jabbed his finger at the last line, voice rising in disgust.

“And finally, eternity is offered to me. Absolute drivel!”

He hurled the deposition onto the desk, eyes blazing.

“This is bullshit!” he roared. “If you don’t rewrite this if you don’t give me a real confession you’re going to prison, crazy or not!”

Thomas didn’t flinch.

“It’s the truth, Inspector. The whole truth.”

Diallo collapsed into his chair, breath labored.

“Fine,” he spat. “Have it your way... Just know this: I can have Chang deported whenever I decide. And before that, she’ll be charged as an accomplice. Her life will be over. Even in China, with such a record, she’ll be under constant surveillance. The slightest error... and she’s back in prison. And trust me no one comes out of a Chinese prison.”

His words struck the air like a sentence.

Thomas staggered, color draining from his face.

“You can’t!” he shouted. “She’s innocent! She did nothing she was the victim!”

Diallo’s eyes narrowed, his voice turning to ice.

“Then write the confession I demand. Admit you’re the killer I’ve been looking for.”

Thomas shook his head wildly, hands rising to his ears as though to block out the command.

“No! I can’t sign a lie. Give me my deposition back... I’ll submit it directly to the judge. It will prove my guilt without dragging Chang down.”

Diallo smirked.

“Not a chance. If you think you’ll escape prison by pretending to be delusional... you’re finished, Thomas. And so is Chang.”

A crushing silence fell.

Diallo reached out toward the document hesitant for a heartbeat, then fully determined.

Thomas gasped. In a desperate surge, he lunged forward, arms outstretched, trying to seize the paper that sealed his fate.

And then the room exploded.

Two gunshots tore through the air. The blast made the windows tremble. Thomas was thrown backward against the desk, collapsing heavily. His eyes widened... then faded at once, frozen in a final glimmer of defiance.

Diallo stood frozen, pale, staring in horror.

Slowly, he turned toward the door.

Clara stood there, arms extended, her gun still smoking. Her face was white with terror.

"I... I thought he was attacking you," she stammered. "I thought he was going to hurt you..."

Diallo ran his hands over his face, trembling with rage and shock. He approached her, lowered her weapon gently, and felt her wrists trembling like those of a frightened child.

Together, they turned toward the body.

Thomas lay motionless, his imposing frame sprawled across the desk like a fallen titan.

Then

A blinding light erupted.

A flash so intense it swallowed the room the walls, the shadows, even the sound.

Diallo and Clara shielded their faces, blinking desperately.

When the light finally faded, silence collapsed over the office.

Thomas was gone.

Only the deposition remained, untouched, lying over the desk like a final testament.

Diallo approached in a daze, fingers shaking as he picked it up.

"What happened...?" he whispered, voice strangled. "Where is he...?"

Clara, pale as a ghost, approached with trembling steps. Her eyes were locked on the blood-stained page.

"He... he vanished, Inspector," she said in a trembling voice.

Diallo stared at her, incredulous.

"He couldn't have escaped. Impossible!"

Clara swallowed.

“The investigation is over,” she murmured. “No one will believe any of this. And... and Thomas De La Lys isn’t registered anywhere. Not here. Not in Europe. For the world... he never existed.”

Diallo inhaled deeply, cheeks swelling before releasing a long, ragged sigh. The paper shook between his fingers.

He folded the deposition with slow, ceremonial care.

“I think... I’m ready for retirement,” he muttered, eyes glazed with exhaustion.



## Chapter 33 – The Revelation

A few streets away, Saint Peter's Church was wrapped in sacred silence. In the left aisle, Father Léonard sat motionless, hands clasped, eyes fixed on the chapel where dozens of candles were slowly burning. Their flickering light danced over the stone walls, painting shifting, living shadows.

Troubled, he rose to his feet. His steps echoed across the flagstones as he approached the votive stand. He took a fresh candle. His fingers trembled slightly as he brought the flame to life. He placed the candle among the others, then brought his hands together near his mouth, a serene smile softening his aged features.

"Thomas..." he murmured. "I understand now. Your act of faith... it is the love of one's fellow. That is the truth. It is through Chang that you will find it."

His eyes closed. With a slow, precise movement, he traced the sign of the cross on his forehead and chest. Silence fell again, solemn and deep, as though the heavens themselves had drawn closer to listen.

## Chapter 34 – The Absence

In her apartment, still wrapped in the scent of the night, Chang walked barefoot to the dining room. Her long black hair fell in damp strands over her light robe. Her half-closed eyes showed a soft fatigue, heavy with the quiet lethargy of morning.

“Thomas...?” she called in a tender voice. “Are you there?”

Her steps slowed. Her gaze settled on the empty room, then suddenly lifted to the wall clock. The hands were already pointing at eleven.

Her eyes widened.

“Shit...” she whispered. “It’s already eleven.”

A brief smile lit her face.

“Thomas probably went to get breakfast,” she murmured, as if to reassure herself.

She rubbed her arms, shivering.

“In the meantime... I’ll make myself a coffee. I really need one after last night... unforgettable.”

At that exact moment, three sharp knocks echoed through the front door. Chang froze. She narrowed her eyes and muttered, half amused, half annoyed:

“I bet it’s Alice... What does she want now?”

She approached the door and opened it in one quick motion... then stood petrified.

“Inspector Diallo!”

Framed in the doorway, the man looked dark, drawn, his eyes heavy with an unusual gravity. Without a word at first, he held out a folded document: Thomas’s statement. His voice, deep and tired, broke slightly:

“I regret to inform you... of the accidental death of Thomas De La Lys, Miss Chang.”

The world slipped away. Chang instantly brought her trembling hands to her head, her fingers burying themselves in her black hair. She staggered, then collapsed to her knees, a raw wail tearing through her throat:

“No!”

Diallo stepped forward, his face twisting with discomfort and sorrow.

“I am truly sorry,” he said in a softer voice. “And I promise you... you will not be prosecuted in this case.”

He hesitated, then, driven by a rare human impulse, bent his knees to meet her at eye level. His gaze sought hers, drowned in tears.

“But I need to know,” he insisted. “I absolutely need to know if what’s written in this statement... is true. Because... I don’t understand.”

His voice faltered into a breath:

“By what miracle... Thomas completely vanished. Vanished in a flash, right after the gunshots.”

Chang’s trembling fingers seized the paper. She unfolded it clumsily, her tear-blurred eyes running over the lines. Each word tore her heart open. Then, at the bottom, she recognized the blood-red thumbprint of Thomas.

A sob ripped through her. She nodded slowly, unable to speak more.

Diallo remained frozen. His lips parted, a rough breath escaping.

“My God...”

But Chang, within her grief, found an unsuspected strength. She rose slowly, her face ravaged by tears. Her fists clenched with fierce determination, as if she were pledging to rise from the ashes of her lost love. She wiped her cheeks in one abrupt gesture, then lifted her chin, straight and proud.

“I promise you, Thomas De La Lys...” she murmured, her voice trembling yet firm. “To always love you, and never forget you for the rest of my life. I will be worthy. I will never bow my head to anyone again.”

Her words hung in the heavy air of the apartment like a vow.

End of the flashback.

## Chapter 35 – The Passage

Reality snapped back into motion.

Inside the cramped cabin of a sedan, Chang lay collapsed on the passenger seat. Her face, hollowed by pain, gleamed with sweat. Her lips struggled to grasp air. Her fingers, rigid with tension, clutched a small pendant the last relic of Thomas. At its center, on the tarnished metal, the bloody imprint of his thumb shone like an eternal seal.

“Ma’am! Stay with me!” cried an anxious voice.

An EMT leaned over her, his eyes wide with urgency. He grabbed her wrist, counting the faint pulse that still flickered beneath her skin. With a sharp turn, he shouted toward the open door:

“Doctor! Hurry! I think we’re losing her!”

Chang let her head roll to the side. Her eyelids drooped. Yet instead of fear, a tender smile brushed her lips.

“Oh, God... if I deserve it... let me discover eternity.”

Her features softened, serene. Her hand slipped open, the pendant falling against her hip. Her breath extinguished like a candle burning down to its final drop of wax.

“No! Ma’am, stay with me!” the EMT shouted, his heart pounding.

He tore open her blouse, placed his hands on her fragile chest, and began compressions with furious determination. Each push twisted his face with strain and desperation.

Seconds stretched, endless.

Then, in a final flicker, Chang’s eyes opened. For the briefest instant, at the center of her clouded pupils, a spark of light burst forth like a reflection of infinity. And then the spark faded.

The EMT, sweat streaming down his forehead, froze mid-compression. His ragged breathing filled the cabin. He shook his head in despair, whispering:

“I’m... sorry, ma’am.”

His face devastated, he pulled himself away from the lifeless body. His hands fell limp at his sides, his eyes burning red.

“I... I’m sorry, ma’am...” he murmured again, voice tight with grief.

He turned toward the outside, calling out, broken:

“Doctor... The woman didn’t make it.”

In the silent cabin, Chang remained motionless. Her eyes, wide open, gazed at an invisible beyond. And in those lifeless pupils, the immensity of the universe was already forming: constellations, galaxies, an ocean of infinite light.

## Chapter 36 – The Rebirth

At the edge of the universe, in the maternity ward of the megacity of Bôôt, on the planet Meridianne-Six.

The birthing chamber shimmered with opalescent walls streaked with abstract lines, as if the very matter of the room was breathing. In a basin of warm water, a young naked woman with flaming red hair panted, her belly swollen by the imminence of birth.

Beside her, a midwife in an orange tunic, cinched by a wide belt, watched over her with a benevolent intensity. Her fitted cap hid her hair, but her eyes sparkled with compassion.

“Courage,” she said in a firm voice, “your baby boy is coming!”

The young woman screamed, not from pain alone, but from rage and determination, her cry vibrating like a proclamation of life. Her face contorted, then lit up.

A suspended instant. Then the midwife’s expert hands rose from the water, holding a newborn, crying, fragile, burning with life.

“There,” she whispered gently. “Here is your child.”

She placed him into the trembling arms of the mother. The woman drew him instantly against her chest, her exhausted features melting into a radiant smile. Tears filled her eyes, but this time they were tears of joy.

The child sobbed, his tiny fists clenched. As he calmed, he turned his head, and on the delicate skin of his neck appeared a birthmark shaped like a drop of water, on the right side.

The midwife, moved, lifted her hands and applauded softly, as if blessing the moment.

“Life is a gift from God!” she exclaimed.

The mother, sitting proudly despite her fatigue, contemplated her son with infinite tenderness. Time seemed to stop. The entire universe shrank to this new breath, this eternal link between a soul and a body reborn.

Eternity had just begun.

THE END