**Where the Sorrow Sings**

**Part 1: Transfer to the Valley of Weeping**

The air in the Ploiești train station hung thick and grey, tasting of diesel fumes and damp concrete. Elder Jacob Madsen adjusted the impeccable knot of his tie, the familiar gesture a small anchor in the swirling unfamiliarity of Romania. Beside him, Elder Thomas Davies shifted his weight, sketchbook clutched in one hand, his gaze drifting towards the weary faces of the waiting passengers, his expression a mixture of curiosity and apprehension.

“Zone Leaders should be here any minute, Elder,” Jacobs said, his voice maintaining the cheerful, confident tone mandated by the Missionary Handbook and his own optimistic nature. He checked his watch, a precise Swiss Army model his father, a former mission president himself, had given him. Six months into his mission, Jacobs still operated with the crisp efficiency he’d learned in the MTC, fueled by unwavering faith and a lineage steeped in Church leadership back in Provo, Utah.

Elder Davies nodded, tucking a stray strand of sandy hair behind his ear. “Right.” Davies was Jacobs’s new companion, transferred in from Bucharest. He was quieter, more observant, a convert from Arizona whose artistic sensibilities sometimes seemed at odds with the rigid structure of mission life. Jacobs already felt a familiar flicker of impatience; Davies seemed prone to distraction, his focus diffuse where Jacobs’s was laser-sharp. Companionship, Jacobs reminded himself, quoting the Handbook mentally, is ordained of God and requires patience, love, and mutual respect. He’d make it work. They always did.

Two slightly harried-looking Assistants to the President finally emerged through the throng, their badges gleaming. Elder Stone, tall and authoritative, clapped Jacobs on the shoulder. Elder Miller, shorter, with tired eyes, offered Davies a wan smile.

“Elders, good to see you,” Elder Stone said briskly. “Quick transfer today. You two are heading up to Cernavodă-Mică. Elder Davies, you know the area somewhat from your last zone?”

Davies nodded. “A little south of there. Heard it’s… quiet.”

“Quiet, yes,” Elder Miller echoed, his gaze flicking nervously towards Stone before settling back on the new companions. “Your apartment is sorted. Elders Henderson and Clark left… rather suddenly.”

“Suddenly?” Jacobs asked, his internal antenna twitching. Transfers happened, but abrupt departures often meant disciplinary issues or serious illness. “Everything alright with them?”

Elder Stone cleared his throat. “Severe illness. Both of them. Medical transfer back to the States. Happened fast.” He avoided Jacobs’s direct gaze. “The Lord works in mysterious ways. Means Cernavodă-Mică needs strong elders like you two to keep the work progressing.”

“What kind of illness?” Davies asked quietly.

Elder Miller shuffled his feet. “Doctors weren’t entirely sure. Some kind of persistent infection, severe fatigue, psychological distress… Bad water, maybe. Or burnout. It’s a challenging area.” He forced another smile. “Just stick to the rules, watch out for each other, boil your water, and you’ll be fine. Great opportunity to serve.”

The explanation felt thin, evasive. Psychological distress? Jacobs filed it away. He wouldn’t let unsubstantiated rumors affect his focus. They were there to preach the Restored Gospel, not worry about the previous elders’ perceived weaknesses.

The train journey north took several hours, rattling through flat farmland that gradually gave way to rolling hills, the distant peaks of the Carpathians hazing blue in the afternoon light. Jacobs studied scripture passages on his tablet, meticulously highlighting verses about faith and perseverance. Davies sketched in his notebook – Jacobs caught glimpses of somber landscapes, stark trees, faces etched with worry. An unproductive use of P.E. time, Jacobs thought, but held his tongue. Build unity first.

As the train climbed higher, the landscape grew wilder, denser forests clinging to steep hillsides. The sky seemed to darken, the blue leaching away to a perpetual overcast grey. Villages grew smaller, farther apart, houses clustered defensively, smoke curling from chimneys like uncertain prayers.

“Cernavodă-Mică,” Davies murmured, looking out the window, his voice hushed. “Little Black Water. Heard some of the members in my old area call the valley around it Valea Plângerii.”

“Valea Plângerii?” Jacobs frowned. “Valley of Weeping? Sounds a bit dramatic.”

“It’s just local folklore, I guess,” Davies shrugged, but his eyes remained fixed on the passing landscape, a landscape that seemed to absorb the light. “They say it holds… old sorrows.”

Jacobs made a dismissive noise. “Superstition, Elder. Our message is one of hope, not sorrow. We bring the light of the Gospel to dispel such shadows.” He projected confidence, but a sliver of unease, sharp and unwelcome, pierced his certainty. Psychological distress.

Their destination wasn’t much more than a large village clinging precariously to a hillside overlooking a sluggish, dark river. Grey stone houses huddled together, slate roofs slick with damp. A few concrete apartment blocks, relics of the communist era, stood starkly against the older architecture. The air felt heavy, carrying the scent of wet earth, coal smoke, and something else… a faint, underlying sweetness, like overripe fruit on the edge of decay. The few people they saw on the winding, cobbled streets moved slowly, their faces etched with a weariness that went beyond simple poverty. Their eyes slid past the missionaries, incurious, almost guarded.

Their apartment was on the top floor of one of the concrete blocks, overlooking the river valley. It was small, sparsely furnished, and permeated by a deep, unshakeable chill that had nothing to do with the outside temperature. A faint, unpleasant odor, reminiscent of stale sweat and sickness, clung to the air despite the open windows.

“Needs a good airing out,” Jacobs said, forcing cheerfulness as he dropped his bags. He ran a finger along a dusty windowsill. “And a deep clean. Standards, Elder.”

Davies didn’t seem to hear him. He stood in the center of the small living room, turning slowly, his brow furrowed. “Feels… heavy in here, doesn’t it?”

“It’s just old, Elder,” Jacobs said, already mentally prioritizing tasks: unpack, clean, plan, pray. “Nothing a bit of work and the Spirit can’t fix.”

But as they began to unpack, Jacobs couldn’t entirely shake the feeling Davies described. It was more than just neglect. It felt like the apartment itself was sighing, burdened by a residue of misery. In the cramped bedroom they would share, Jacobs found a small, crudely made object tucked under one of the thin mattresses – a bundle of dried herbs tied with red string. He frowned, recognizing it as similar to folk charms he’d seen occasionally displayed in more rural areas. He tossed it into the rubbish bin with distaste. Superstitious nonsense left by the previous elders, no doubt. A sign of their weakening faith.

Their first few days followed the familiar mission rhythm, yet everything felt subtly wrong. Contacting on the streets yielded few results. People averted their eyes, murmured excuses, or simply shut their doors. The customary Romanian hospitality seemed absent here. When they did manage to engage someone, the conversation often died when they mentioned they were the new missionaries, the new elders. A flicker of fear, or perhaps pity, would cross the person’s face before they made their excuses and hurried away.

“‘This valley holds too much sorrow for new gods,’” one old man muttered, spitting on the ground after they offered him a pamphlet.

“‘Leave the sleeping dogs lie, boys,’” a woman warned, clutching a small cross hanging around her neck, her eyes darting towards the dark woods crowning the opposite hillside. “‘Some paths are best left untrodden.’”

Elder Davies diligently recorded these cryptic warnings in his journal, sketching the faces, the gestures. Elder Jacobs found it increasingly irritating.

“Focus on the positive message, Elder,” Jacobs instructed during their evening planning session. “Don’t get bogged down in local superstitions. We have the truth. That’s all that matters.”

“But don’t you feel it, Elder Jacobs?” Davies persisted, looking up from his sketchbook, his eyes wide and earnest. “The… sadness here? It’s like a weight. Even the air feels tired. And the apartment… I keep hearing things at night. Whispering.”

Jacobs sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “It’s an old building in a depressed area, Elder. Pipes rattle, wind whistles. And we’re stressed, adjusting to a new place. Get enough sleep, pray harder, focus on the work. The Lord will bless our efforts.” He refused to acknowledge the fact that he, too, had heard faint whispers, had felt unseen eyes watching him in the dim hallway of the apartment, had woken sometimes with a crushing sense of inexplicable grief clinging to him like grave dust.

Their first Sunday was equally disheartening. The local branch consisted of barely a dozen members, mostly elderly, who met in a small rented room above a bakery. The Branch President, Brother Ion Corbea, a weary-looking man who ran the local general store, welcomed them kindly but seemed burdened. Attendance was down, he explained vaguely. People were struggling. Sickness, unemployment, general malaise.

One elderly sister, **Elena Popescu**, approached them after the short meeting. Her face was a roadmap of wrinkles, but her eyes were sharp, intelligent. She lived alone on the outskirts of town, near the edge of the forest. Unlike the others, she looked at them directly, a hint of compassion in her gaze.

“Welcome to Cernavodă-Mică, Elders,” she said, her voice raspy with age. “It is… a difficult place to serve. Requires strong spirits.”

“We’re ready for the challenge, Sister,” Jacobs replied with determined enthusiasm.

She studied them both for a long moment. “Be watchful,” she said softly, her gaze lingering on Davies. “This valley… it remembers. And it feeds on sorrow. Valea Plângerii did not earn its name lightly.” She offered no further explanation, just patted Davies’s arm gently before shuffling away.

That night, the uneasy atmosphere in the apartment coalesced into something more tangible. As they lay in their separate beds in the shared room, the oppressive silence was broken by a faint sound from the living room – a low, rhythmic weeping. Not loud, but distinct, filled with an unbearable, ancient grief.

Jacobs froze, straining his ears. Davies sat bolt upright. “Did you hear that?” he whispered, his voice trembling.

Jacobs did. He couldn’t deny it this time. It sounded like a woman sobbing, heartbroken. He swung his legs out of bed, grabbing the heavy Maglite flashlight he kept beside him. “Stay here, Elder.”

He crept towards the living room door, his heart pounding. The weeping continued, seeming to echo from the very walls. He pushed the door open, shining the beam into the darkness.

The room was empty. Silent. The weeping had stopped the instant the light hit the room. But the air was freezing cold, and the lingering scent of decay, sweet and nauseating, was stronger than ever. He swept the beam around the room – the threadbare sofa, the rickety table, the dusty bookshelves. Nothing.

He turned back to the bedroom, forcing his face into a mask of calm. “Nothing there, Elder. Must have been the wind, or pipes.”

Davies stared at him, his face pale in the dim light filtering through the window. “No,” he whispered. “That wasn’t the wind.”

Neither of them slept much for the rest of the night. Jacobs lay rigid, flashlight clutched in his hand, straining to hear any recurrence of the sound, while trying desperately to rationalize it away. Davies eventually turned on his small bedside lamp and began sketching frantically in his notebook, his pencil scratching against the paper like trapped insect wings.

Jacobs knew, with a certainty that chilled him far more than the apartment’s unnatural cold, that this was more than superstition, more than stress. Something was deeply wrong in Cernavodă-Mică, in the Valley of Weeping. And it was aware of their presence. The shadows here had substance, and the sorrow Elena Popescu spoke of felt less like an abstract concept and more like a palpable, waiting entity. The light of the Gospel felt very far away indeed.

**Part 2: Feeding the Shadow**

The weeping incident marked a turning point. The thin veneer of normalcy Jacobs had struggled to maintain cracked, revealing the unsettling reality beneath. The oppressive atmosphere in the apartment intensified, no longer just a passive weight but an active presence. Cold spots migrated unpredictably. Doors would drift open or shut on their own. Objects left on tables would sometimes be found on the floor, not thrown, just… placed, as if by unseen, melancholic hands. The faint, sickly-sweet odor of decay became a near-constant companion.

Sleep offered little escape. Both elders were plagued by nightmares steeped in sorrow. Jacobs dreamt of wandering lost in endless, grey corridors, hearing the muffled sobs of unseen mourners, feeling an immense weight of failure pressing down on him. Davies dreamt of the valley itself suffused with a black, viscous substance like tar, swallowing homes and people, while skeletal trees clawed at a perpetually weeping sky. He would often wake up gasping, sketching the disturbing images compulsively, his notebook filling with monstrous shapes born of grief.

Their physical and mental health began to fray. A persistent fatigue settled deep in their bones, a weariness no amount of sleep could alleviate. They grew irritable, snapping at each other over minor issues – a missed appointment, a poorly worded phrase in Romanian, the way the other chewed his food. The enforced proximity of companionship, usually a source of strength and accountability, transformed into a claustrophobic trap, amplifying their anxieties and suspicions.

Jacobs fought back with rigid adherence to the mission schedule, doubling down on scripture study, extending prayer times, convinced that stricter obedience was the antidote. He pushed them both harder, scheduling more contacting hours, insisting they revisit houses where they’d been rebuffed, convinced that a breakthrough, a baptism, would banish the oppressive influence. His faith felt like armor, but it was heavy, cumbersome, and he feared what might happen if it were pierced. He started seeing Davies’s sensitivity not as intuition, but as weakness, a dangerous susceptibility to the valley’s morbid atmosphere.

Davies, meanwhile, grew quieter, more withdrawn. He felt the weight of the valley’s sorrow pressing in on him, a vast, echoing emptiness that resonated with his own insecurities, his anxieties about his worthiness, his place. He found it increasingly difficult to focus on the lessons, the memorized discussions feeling hollow and inadequate against the palpable despair that saturated Cernavodă-Mică. He tried to pray, but the words felt like ashes in his mouth. He saw Jacobs’s relentless optimism not as strength, but as willful blindness, a refusal to acknowledge the darkness that was slowly consuming them.

They sought out Elena Popescu again, visiting her small, neat cottage nestled against the ominous backdrop of the forest. Her home felt different from the rest of the valley – still poor, but clean, filled with the scent of dried herbs and woodsmoke, and possessing a quiet resilience.

She welcomed them with strong, dark tea and listened patiently as Davies, haltingly at first, then with growing urgency, described their experiences – the weeping, the cold spots, the nightmares, the crushing fatigue, the growing sense of being watched, drained. Jacobs remained mostly silent, uncomfortable acknowledging the phenomena but desperate for answers.

Elena sighed, gazing out her small window towards the brooding forest. “It is the Jelitor,” she said finally, her voice low and grave. “The Sorrow-Drinker. It is ancient, older than the church steeple, older than the road. It is tied to this valley, to the jele – the mourning, the sorrow that soaks the earth here.”

“Sorrow?” Jacobs asked skeptically. “You mean… a ghost? A spirit?”

Elena shook her head slowly. “Not a ghost of a single person. More… a presence. An echo made flesh, perhaps. Born from centuries of hardship – battles fought in these hills, plagues that swept through, miners lost in the earth, families starved by harsh winters. All that pain, all that weeping… it didn’t just dissipate. It coalesced. It became the Jelitor.”

“And it… feeds on sorrow?” Davies asked, leaning forward, his sketchbook momentarily forgotten.

“It draws strength from despair, from grief, from hopelessness,” Elena confirmed. “It wraps itself around the valley like a shroud, amplifying the natural melancholy, making it harder for joy or hope to take root. People here… they grow weary. Their spirits dim. The Jelitor sips at their light, their energy, leaving them listless, prone to sickness and despair.” She paused, her sharp eyes fixing on them. “It is drawn to strong emotions. Deep despair nourishes it best, but intense light – strong faith, fervent hope – also attracts its attention. Like a moth to a flame, it seeks to extinguish it, to turn that light into more satisfying darkness.”

“The elders before us…” Jacobs began.

“Henderson and Clark?” Elena’s face tightened. “They were like you, Elder Jacobs. Full of fire, determined to banish the shadows. They held meetings near the old ruins up the ridge, prayed loudly, commanded the darkness to flee.” Her voice dropped. “They provoked it. The Jelitor focused on them. It drained them, hollowed them out, filled them with such terror and despair they nearly lost their minds. Sickness followed, as it often does when the spirit weakens.”

“The Lupului Ruins?” Davies recalled the name from earlier warnings.

“Aye. The Wolf Ruins. An old place, from before the village was settled properly. A place of bad history, dark deeds. Some say it is the heart of the Jelitor’s power in this valley. Or perhaps just a place where the veil is thin.” She looked at them sternly. “You would be wise to stay away.”

Jacobs felt a conflict raging within him. His training screamed against acknowledging such folklore, yet their experiences, Elena’s conviction, the fate of the previous elders – it all pointed towards a terrifying, non-scriptural reality. Could a priesthood blessing not banish such an entity?

“We have the authority of God,” Jacobs stated, the words feeling slightly less certain on his tongue. “We can cast out unclean spirits.”

Elena regarded him sadly. “This is not a simple demon, Elder. It is the sorrow of the land itself, given form. Priesthood is powerful, yes. But the Jelitor… it twists things. It feeds on the doubt that arises when faith is challenged. A blessing given without perfect faith, or received by a soul riddled with fear… it can sometimes strengthen the shadow, not banish it.”

Her words struck a chord. Jacobs remembered the blessing he’d tried to give Davies for comfort after a particularly bad nightmare. Davies had flinched as if struck, and the oppressive feeling in the room had intensified tenfold for several hours afterward. At the time, Jacobs had blamed Davies’s lack of faith. Now…?

“What can we do?” Davies asked, his voice barely a whisper.

“Protect yourselves,” Elena advised. “Keep the Spirit close, yes, but understand what you face. Avoid places where the sorrow is strong, like the ruins. Some old ways offer small shields – salt, running water, certain herbs bound with prayer… they can distract, or ward off the lesser intrusions, the whispers, the cold.” She gestured to the bundles of herbs hanging from her own rafters. Jacobs thought of the charm he’d thrown away. “But mostly… do not feed it. Do not give in to despair. And do not provoke it with misplaced arrogance.”

They left Elena’s cottage armed with unsettling knowledge and a handful of dried herbs that Jacobs reluctantly allowed Davies to place around their apartment – near the windows, under their pillows. He told himself it was merely humoring his companion, appeasing local customs. But he couldn’t deny the faint sense of relief, however irrational, it brought.

Their attempts to work felt increasingly futile. The few investigators they had stopped answering their calls. Branch members offered sympathy but kept their distance. The missionaries were becoming isolated, quarantined by the valley’s fear and the Jelitor’s growing influence.

The entity’s focus sharpened, becoming more personal, exploiting their individual weaknesses. For Jacobs, it manifested as intense pressure, vivid waking visions of failure. He’d be walking down the street and suddenly see his father’s disappointed face superimposed on a passing stranger. During personal study, the words on the page would blur, replaced by imagined letters from the Mission President demanding higher baptism numbers, threatening disciplinary action. His own ambition and fear of inadequacy became tools used against him, fueling a frustrated anger that simmered constantly beneath his cheerful facade. He started considering shortcuts, bending rules for contacting, anything to show progress, to prove the darkness wasn't winning.

For Davies, the assault was more insidious. The Jelitor fed his empathy, turning it into a weapon. He began experiencing flashes of the valley’s historical traumas – the terror of a peasant family fleeing invaders, the agony of a mother losing a child to plague, the crushing despair of a miner trapped underground. These weren't just visions; they felt real, emotionally overwhelming, leaving him shaken and weeping. The sorrow of the valley became his own, threatening to drown him. He sketched darker and darker images, feeling his own faith, his own sense of self, eroding under the tide of vicarious grief. He started pulling away from Jacobs, hiding his experiences, fearing his companion’s judgment or dismissal.

The apartment became a battleground. Not just against the external presence, but between the two elders. Arguments flared over trivial matters, fueled by exhaustion, fear, and the Jelitor’s subtle poisoning of their perceptions. Jacobs accused Davies of malingering, of giving in to superstition, of not trying hard enough. Davies accused Jacobs of being blind, arrogant, uncaring, of pushing them both towards disaster. The unity essential for their spiritual protection crumbled.

One rain-lashed afternoon, Jacobs returned to the apartment after a frustrating solo contacting attempt (Davies had claimed illness) to find his companion gone. A note lay on Davies’s neatly made bed: “Went for a walk. Needed air.” But beside the note lay his sketchbook, open to a chillingly detailed drawing of the Lupului Ruins, dominated by a swirling vortex of shadow.

Panic seized Jacobs. Elena’s warning echoed in his ears. Stay away from the ruins. Davies, overwhelmed by the sorrow, sensitive to the valley’s psychic wounds… had the Jelitor lured him there?

Jacobs grabbed his raincoat and flashlight. He had to find his companion. He had to face the ruins. He prayed for strength, for protection, but his heart pounded with a terrifying mixture of fear for Davies, and fear of what awaited them both at the heart of the valley’s ancient sorrow. The rain beat against the windows like desperate fists, and the wind howled through the eaves, sounding less like weather and more like a hungry, mournful cry.

**Part 3: The Grip of the Ruins**

The path towards the Lupului Ruins was little more than a goat track winding steeply up the ridge opposite Cernavodă-Mică, through dense, dripping forest. Rain plastered Elder Jacobs’s hair to his scalp and soaked through his trousers despite his raincoat. The woods were unnaturally dark, the thick canopy overhead swallowing the already weak afternoon light. An oppressive silence reigned, broken only by the drumming rain and the frantic thudding of his own heart. No birds called, no small animals rustled in the undergrowth. It felt like the forest itself was holding its breath.

He pushed onward, driven by panic and a suffocating sense of guilt. He’d been harsh with Davies, dismissive of his fears, blinded by his own pride and desperation for success. If something happened to his companion… the responsibility would be his. He gripped his flashlight, its beam cutting a weak swathe through the gloom, and tried to focus his thoughts on a prayer, but the words felt clumsy, inadequate against the ancient, palpable menace emanating from the woods around him.

He found Elder Davies near the crest of the ridge, standing utterly still amidst a cluster of crumbling stone walls barely visible through the rain and encroaching foliage – the Lupului Ruins. They looked less like the remnants of human habitation and more like broken teeth jutting from the hillside. Strange, angular symbols, disturbingly similar to the ones Davies sometimes sketched, were carved into some of the fallen stones, seeming to pulse faintly in the gloom. The air here was freezing, heavy with the scent of wet stone, decay, and that same underlying, sickly-sweet odor from their apartment, only stronger, more cloying.

Davies stood facing the largest remaining section of wall, his back to Jacobs. He wasn’t wearing his raincoat, and his white shirt and dark trousers were drenched, clinging to his thin frame. He seemed oblivious to the downpour, his head cocked as if listening to something Jacobs couldn’t hear.

“Elder Davies!” Jacobs called out, his voice tight with fear. “Tom! What are you doing here? We need to go back!”

Davies didn’t turn around. He didn’t seem to register Jacobs’s presence at all. He raised a hand slowly, tracing one of the symbols carved into the stone wall.

“So much pain,” Davies murmured, his voice unnervingly calm, distant. “Can you hear it, Elder? The weeping? It’s woven into the stones. Hundreds of years of it.”

Jacobs approached cautiously, his flashlight beam playing over the crumbling walls, the rain-slicked stones. The feeling of being watched was intense here, suffocating. He felt a profound wave of despair wash over him, thick and cold, trying to pull him down. It took a conscious effort to resist it, to focus.

“Elder, snap out of it!” Jacobs grabbed Davies’s shoulder, trying to turn him around. Davies felt unnaturally cold, his muscles rigid. “This place is… wrong. Sister Popescu warned us. We need to leave. Now!”

Davies finally turned, and Jacobs recoiled. His companion’s eyes were wide, unfocused, swimming with tears, but beneath the surface grief, something else glinted – an ancient, chilling emptiness. His face was deathly pale, his lips tinged blue.

“But this is where it’s strongest, Elder,” Davies said, his voice flat, echoing slightly, as if layered with other, older voices. “The Jelitor. It remembers everything. Every tear shed, every heart broken in this valley. It showed me.” He gestured vaguely towards the ruins. “There was a village here once. Older than Cernavodă-Mică. Wiped out. Plague, famine, invaders… maybe all three. Their sorrow birthed it. Or perhaps… fed something that was already waiting.”

“Elder, please,” Jacobs pleaded, shaking his companion’s arm. “This isn’t you talking. It’s… the influence. The entity Elena warned about. Fight it!”

Davies gave a small, broken laugh that dissolved into a sob. “Fight it? How? It’s everywhere. It’s in the air, in the water, in the earth.” He looked down at his own trembling hands. “It’s inside me, Elder Jacobs. It likes the hollow spaces.” He met Jacobs’s eyes, and the emptiness within his gaze deepened, pulling Jacobs in. “It showed me you, too. Your fear of failure. Your pride. Your secret belief that none of this is real, that it’s all just… hardship testing your great faith.”

Jacobs flinched as if struck. The Jelitor wasn’t just feeding on sorrow; it was sifting through their minds, their hearts, finding their deepest vulnerabilities.

“It promises relief, you know,” Davies continued, his voice taking on a seductive, whispering quality that wasn’t entirely his own. “An end to the struggle. Just… let go. Let the sorrow wash over you. Become part of the weeping. It’s peaceful, in its own way. An end to striving.” He reached out, his cold fingers brushing Jacobs’s cheek. “Join us, Elder. Rest.”

Revulsion and terror surged through Jacobs. He slapped Davies’s hand away. “No! That’s the entity talking, Tom! Resist it! Remember who you are! An Elder in Israel! A child of God!” He fumbled under his raincoat, pulling out the small vial of consecrated oil they carried. “We need a blessing!”

As soon as the word “blessing” left Jacobs’s lips, the atmosphere shifted. The rain intensified, hammering down with stinging force. The wind howled through the ruins, carrying a cacophony of weeping, screaming, despairing voices. The temperature plummeted, and the faint light filtering through the trees vanished, plunging the ruins into near-total darkness, illuminated only by Jacobs’s wavering flashlight beam.

Davies cried out, clutching his head as if in agony. The entity’s influence seemed to momentarily recede, replaced by sheer terror. “It hurts!” he gasped. “Make it stop!”

But something else was happening. A shape began to coalesce in the darkness near the central wall, where Davies had been standing. It was tall, unnaturally thin, composed of swirling shadows and flickering grief-stricken faces that writhed and dissolved within its form. It had no discernible features, yet Jacobs felt an ancient, malevolent intelligence focused entirely on them. The Jelitor. Manifesting. Provoked by the invocation of priesthood power.

The wave of despair radiating from it was almost physical, buckling Jacobs’s knees. He felt his own fears, his own carefully suppressed doubts, surging to the surface, amplified a hundredfold. The faces of failed missionaries, disappointed leaders, his own family turning away in shame – they flickered at the edge of his vision, whispering accusations. Failure. Weakling. Not strong enough.

He fumbled with the cap of the oil vial, his fingers numb with cold and fear. He had to perform the blessing. It was their only chance. But Elena’s warning echoed: A blessing given without perfect faith… can strengthen the shadow. Did he have perfect faith? Right now, staring into the abyss given form, doubt gnawed at him, cold and sharp.

“Tom, listen to me!” Jacobs yelled over the wind’s roar, trying to reach the terrified Elder Davies huddled at his feet. “We have to do this together! You need to accept the blessing! Resist the fear! Have faith!”

Davies looked up, his face streaked with rain and tears, his eyes darting between Jacobs and the horrifying apparition. “I… I can’t…”

The shadowy form of the Jelitor drifted closer, extending a tendril of darkness towards Davies. The air crackled with cold energy.

Jacobs made a decision. He couldn’t force faith into Davies, but he could act on his own. Ignoring the gnawing doubt, he uncapped the oil, placed a drop on Davies’s head, and began the words of sealing and blessing, his voice shaking but resolute, pouring every ounce of his remaining conviction into the sacred language.

“Upon the authority of the Holy Melchizedek Priesthood…”

The Jelitor reacted instantly. It let out a silent scream that tore through Jacobs’s mind, a wave of pure, concentrated agony and malice. The ground beneath them seemed to tremble. The swirling faces within its form became more distinct, more tormented. It surged forward, no longer focused on Davies, but on Jacobs, the one wielding the light, the authority it despised.

Jacobs continued the blessing, shutting his eyes against the terrifying visage, focusing on the words, on the power he knew resided in the priesthood, even as the entity’s aura of despair threatened to engulf him. He felt its icy touch brush against his soul, probing for weaknesses, whispering promises of oblivion.

He blessed Davies with protection, with clarity, with strength to resist the sorrow. He commanded the opposing force, the Jelitor, in the name of Jesus Christ, to depart, to release its hold. His voice cracked, doubt warring with faith, but he pushed through, finishing the prayer.

“…Amen.”

For a moment, absolute silence fell. The wind died. The rain softened. The shadowy form flickered violently, seeming to recoil, its substance thinning. A collective sigh, like the release of centuries of held breath, whispered through the ruins.

But it wasn’t banished.

The Jelitor stabilized, smaller, perhaps, less defined, but still present. It regarded Jacobs with an ancient, chilling intelligence that held no fury now, only a cold, calculating patience. It had been challenged, perhaps even slightly wounded, but not defeated. And it knew his weaknesses now. It had tasted his doubt.

Davies collapsed, sobbing, but his eyes were clearer, the terrifying emptiness receding, replaced by exhaustion and trauma. The immediate possession was broken.

Jacobs helped his companion to his feet, his own legs trembling violently. “We have to go. Now. While we can.”

He half-carried, half-dragged Davies away from the ruins, stumbling back down the treacherous path through the darkening woods. He didn’t look back, but he could feel the Jelitor’s cold regard following them, a silent promise that this was far from over. The blessing had bought them time, perhaps broken the direct hold on Davies, but it had also been a declaration of war. And Jacobs feared, deep in his trembling soul, that it was a war they were ill-equipped to win. The sorrow of the valley ran deep, and its master was patient, hungry, and intimately aware of the frailties of their faith.

**Part 4: Reckoning in the Valley**

They stumbled back into the apartment like survivors of a shipwreck – soaked, shivering, covered in mud, and deeply traumatized. The oppressive atmosphere within seemed slightly less pronounced, the cloying scent of decay fainter, as if the Jelitor’s focus remained partially fixed on the ruins, or perhaps weakened by the direct confrontation. But the respite felt fragile, temporary.

Elder Davies collapsed onto his bed, pulling the thin blankets around himself, his body wracked with tremors. The terrifying emptiness was gone from his eyes, replaced by a raw, haunted look that tore at Jacobs’s conscience. He looked older, scarred.

Elder Jacobs moved numbly through the motions of shedding wet clothes, trying to warm himself, his mind reeling. The encounter at the ruins had shattered his framework. The neat categories of spiritual warfare he’d learned – demons, temptation, doubt – seemed utterly insufficient to encompass the ancient, sorrow-drenched entity they faced. It wasn’t just an external force; it fed on the internal landscape, twisting grief, amplifying fear, blurring the lines between the spiritual and the psychological. The priesthood had power, yes – he’d felt it, seen the entity recoil – but it wasn’t a magic wand. His own faith, his own worthiness, his companion’s state of mind… it all played a part, creating vulnerabilities the Jelitor could exploit.

He knew, with chilling certainty, that they couldn’t stay. The Jelitor was tied to this valley, and their presence, their light, their struggles, were feeding it. Every prayer uttered with a flicker of doubt, every moment of despair, every surge of hope it sought to extinguish – it all nourished the Sorrow-Drinker. They weren't banishing the darkness; they were intensifying it.

“We need to call President Stavros,” Jacobs said, his voice hoarse. “Tell him what happened. Request an immediate transfer.”

Davies looked up from his blankets, his eyes hollow. “Will he believe us?”

Jacobs hesitated. Probably not. Not fully. He’d likely hear concern, advice about stress management, perhaps a suggestion to see the mission doctors. But he had to try. “We have to report it, Elder. We can’t stay here.”

The call was as frustrating as Jacobs feared. He tried to explain, sticking to the facts as objectively as possible – the oppressive atmosphere, the locals’ warnings, the incident at the ruins, Davies’s temporary breakdown, the manifestation, the blessing. President Stavros, a kind but pragmatic man based hours away in Bucharest, listened patiently.

“Elder Jacobs,” he said finally, his voice laced with concern. “It sounds like you and Elder Davies are under immense strain. This ‘Jelitor’… it sounds like local folklore possibly exacerbated by stress, isolation, perhaps even a reaction to something environmental. We know the previous Elders suffered… psychological difficulties. Perhaps the power of suggestion is strong?”

“President, with all due respect, this was not suggestion,” Jacobs insisted, struggling to keep his voice calm. “We both saw it. Felt it. Elder Davies was… influenced. The blessing pushed it back, but it’s real.”

“I believe you believe it’s real, Elder,” the President said gently. “But manifestations of ancient entities… it’s highly unusual. I recommend you both focus on the fundamentals – prayer, study, companionship inventory. Perhaps take a P-day for rest and recuperation. I can arrange for you to see a mission counselor via video call. But an immediate transfer based on… local legends… is difficult without more concrete evidence.”

Jacobs felt a cold knot of despair tighten in his stomach. They were on their own. The structure, the authority he’d always relied upon, couldn’t reach them here, couldn’t comprehend the nature of the threat.

He relayed the conversation to Davies, whose face fell further. “So,” Davies whispered. “We’re trapped.”

“No,” Jacobs said, a new, unfamiliar resolve hardening within him. He looked around the oppressive apartment, thought of the weary faces in the town, the ancient sorrow clinging to the valley. They couldn't defeat the Jelitor, not alone, not with their fractured faith and dwindling strength. But perhaps they didn’t need to. “We’re not trapped. We’re leaving.”

“But the President…”

“The President isn’t here,” Jacobs stated flatly. “He doesn’t understand. Our first responsibility, according to the Handbook itself, is to protect ourselves and our companion. Staying here is dangerous. We’re feeding it. We need to break the connection. We need to get out of the valley.”

It felt like heresy, a flagrant disregard for authority, for the chain of command that was drilled into every missionary. But the primal instinct for survival, coupled with the terrifying clarity gained at the ruins, overrode his ingrained obedience.

Davies stared at him, seeing a different Elder Jacobs – not the rule-bound, optimistic Utahn, but someone stripped bare, relying on something more fundamental than the Handbook. Davies slowly nodded. “Okay. What do we do?”

Their escape plan was simple, desperate. They would pack only essentials, leave the apartment before dawn, walk to the nearest town outside the valley’s influence (a grueling hike of several miles over the hills, avoiding Cernavodă-Mică itself), and catch the first bus or train they could, heading towards Bucharest. They would contact the President again once they were safely out. It was unauthorized departure, bordering on desertion, but it felt like the only sane choice.

Before leaving, Davies insisted they visit Elena Popescu one last time. They found her tending her small garden, her movements slow but deliberate. They explained their decision, the President’s disbelief, their plan to leave.

She listened, her expression unsurprised. “It is wise,” she said, wiping her hands on her apron. “This valley’s sorrow is too deep for outsiders to heal quickly. The Jelitor has deep roots. Leaving is perhaps the only way to stop feeding it your light.”

She pressed something into each of their hands – another small charm of dried herbs, similar to the one Jacobs had discarded, but this one included a tiny sliver of rowan wood. “An old protection,” she explained. “Not as strong as your priesthood, perhaps, but it holds an echo of the earth’s resilience, not its sorrow. Keep it close until you are far from here.” She looked at them both, her gaze lingering. “Go quickly. And do not look back with regret. Regret is just another flavor of sorrow for it to taste.”

Their departure before dawn was cloaked in nervous silence. They left the apartment key on the table, abandoning most of their belongings, taking only their scriptures, journals, passports, wallets, and a few essential clothes stuffed into their backpacks. The apartment felt still, watchful, as if holding its breath.

Walking through the sleeping outskirts of Cernavodă-Mică under a sliver of moon felt like traversing enemy territory. Every shadow seemed to writhe, every gust of wind carried phantom whispers. Jacobs found himself glancing back, half-expecting to see the tall, shadowy form of the Jelitor drifting between the houses, but there was nothing but the oppressive gloom.

The hike over the hills was arduous, the terrain rough, their bodies aching with fatigue and stress. But with every step they took away from the valley center, Jacobs felt the oppressive weight on his spirit lessen, fractionally. The air seemed cleaner, the silence less menacing. Davies, too, seemed to revive slightly, his breathing evening out, the haunted look in his eyes receding, though not disappearing entirely.

They reached the neighboring town, larger and slightly more prosperous, as the sun rose, painting the sky in unfamiliar shades of pink and orange. The simple sight of ordinary life – people heading to work, shops opening, the smell of baking bread – felt like a miracle. They bought bus tickets to Bucharest, the transaction mundane, blessedly normal.

As they waited for the bus, Jacobs looked back towards the hills they had crossed. Valea Plângerii was hidden from view, but he could almost feel its presence, a distant ache, a lingering chill. He thought of the people left behind, living under the Jelitor’s shadow, their spirits slowly dimming. He felt a pang of guilt, of failure. They hadn’t saved anyone. They had simply run away.

Davies seemed to sense his thoughts. “We did what we could, Elder,” he said quietly, clutching the herbal charm in his pocket. “Maybe… maybe sometimes the test isn’t about winning. Maybe it’s just about surviving to keep believing.”

Jacobs wasn’t sure. His certainty about clear spiritual victories and defeats had been eroded, replaced by shades of grey, by the unsettling understanding that some darkness runs too deep, tied to the very fabric of a place, to sorrows beyond easy comprehension or quick Priesthood fixes.

The bus arrived, and they climbed aboard, sinking into worn seats. As the bus pulled away, heading south towards Bucharest, towards the mission home, towards an uncertain future of explanations and consequences, Jacobs glanced out the window one last time. He wasn’t sure, it could have been a trick of the light on a distant ridge, but he thought he saw a tall, thin shadow standing motionless against the skyline, watching them go.

He closed his eyes, leaning his head against the cool glass. He didn’t know what awaited them in Bucharest, whether they’d face discipline, counseling, or an early flight home. He didn’t know how to explain the Jelitor, the ruins, the soul-deep cold of the valley in a way anyone would truly understand.

All he knew was that he and Elder Davies were alive, and they were out. But the Valley of Weeping had left its mark. They carried its echo within them, a faint, persistent minor key beneath the surface of their thoughts, a chilling reminder that the world held shadows far older and hungrier than they had ever imagined, and that sometimes, the deepest sorrows don’t just fade away. Sometimes, they learn to sing.