

VESPERTINE

ALSO BY
MARGARET ROGERSON

An Enchantment of Ravens
Sorcery of Thorns

MARGARET ROGERSON

VESPERTINE

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TO EVERYONE WHO WOULD RATHER SIT
IN A CORNER PETTING THE DOG THAN
MAKE CONVERSATION AT A PARTY:
THIS ONE'S FOR YOU.



ONE

If I hadn't come to the convent's cemetery to be alone, I wouldn't have noticed the silver gleam of the censer lying abandoned at the base of a tombstone. Every novice and sister carried one, a thurible on a chain to defend ourselves against the Dead, and I recognized this censer by its shape and its tracery of black tarnish as belonging to Sophia, one of the youngest novices, brought to the convent only last winter. When I crouched down and touched it, the metal still felt warm. I had to press my wrist against it to be sure, because my scarred hands weren't good at telling temperature.

I knew right away that Sophia hadn't dropped it while climbing trees or playing among the tombstones. She wouldn't have burned incense unless something had really frightened her; even children knew that incense was too precious to waste.

I straightened and looked toward the chapel. A bitter wind whipped loose strands of my braid around my face, lashing tears

from my eyes, so it took me a moment to locate the ravens sheltering beneath the eaves, huddled against the mossy gray stone. All of them were black, except for one. He sat apart from the rest, nervously preening his snow-white feathers, which the wind kept ruffling in the wrong direction.

“Trouble,” I called. I felt in my pocket for a crust of bread. As soon as I held it out, he launched himself from the roof in a wind-buffeted flurry and landed on my arm, his claws pricking through my sleeve. He tore apart the bread, then eyed me for more.

He shouldn’t be alone. He was already missing a few feathers, cruelly plucked out by the other birds. When he’d first come to the convent, they’d left him in a bloody heap in the cloister, and he had almost died even after I’d taken him to my room in the dormitory and pried his beak open every few hours to give him bread and water. But I was an older novice and I had too many responsibilities—I couldn’t watch over him all the time. Once he’d healed, I had given him to Sophia to look after. Now wherever she went, Trouble followed, especially indoors, where she had a habit of upsetting the sisters by hiding him inside her robes.

“I’m looking for Sophia,” I told him. “I think she’s in danger.”

He fanned out the feathers on his throat and muttered to himself, a series of clicks and grunts, as though thinking this over. Then he mimicked in a little girl’s voice, “Good bird. Pretty bird. Crumbs!”

“That’s right. Can you take me to Sophia?”

He considered me with a bright, intelligent eye. Ravens were clever animals, sacred to the Gray Lady, and thanks to Sophia, he knew more human speech than most. At last, seeming to understand, he spread his wings and flapped to the tumble of earth and stone that shored up the chapel’s rear wall. He hopped along the

length of a slab and peered into a dark space beneath.

A hole. Last night's storm must have eroded the chapel's foundation, opening an old passageway into the crypt.

He looked back at me. "Dead," he croaked.

My blood ran cold. Sophia hadn't taught him to say that word.

"Dead," Trouble insisted, puffing his feathers. The other ravens stirred, but they didn't take up the alarm.

He had to be mistaken. Blessings reinforced each stone of the convent's walls. Our lichgate had been forged by holy sisters in Chantclere. And yet . . .

The passageway yawned beneath a fringe of dangling roots. I had approached it without thinking. I knew what I should do—I should go running back and alert Mother Katherine. But Sophia was too young to carry a dagger, and she'd lost her censer. There wasn't time.

I unhooked the censer that hung from my chatelaine. Gritting my teeth, I forced my clumsy fingers to open the tiny hatch and fumble with flint and incense. The scars were the worst on my left hand, where the shiny red tissue that roped my palm had contracted over time and pulled my fingers into permanent claws. I could close them into a loose fist, but I couldn't open them all the way. As I worked, I thought of Sister Lucinde, who wore a ring set with an old, cracked ruby. The ring had a saint's relic sealed inside, whose power allowed her to light candles with a mere gesture.

Finally, the spark caught. I blew on the incense until embers flared. Then, wreathed in smoke, I stepped into the dark.

Blackness swallowed me. The smell of wet earth closed in, as smothering as a damp rag clapped over my nose. The opening's thin, watery light faded away almost at once, but like all girls taken in by the Gray Sisters, I possessed the Sight.

Strands of light swirled around me like cobwebs, their ghostly

shapes resolving into a contorted face, a reaching hand. Shades. Groups of them congregated in places such as these, drawn to graves and ruins. They were a type of First Order spirit, frail and nearly formless. Their fingers plucked at my skin as though searching for a loose thread to unravel, but they posed little harm. As I hurried past, the smoke that spilled from my censer mingled with their translucent forms. Sighing, they dispersed along with the incense.

Shades were so common that Trouble wouldn't have paid them any mind. Only something more dangerous, a Second Order spirit or higher, would have caught his attention.

"Sophia?" I called.

Nothing answered but echoes of my own voice.

The wavering ghost-light revealed niches filled with yellowed bones and scraps of decayed linen. Nuns were traditionally interred in the tunnels surrounding the crypt, but the age of these remains surprised me. They looked centuries old, crumbling and clotted with cobwebs—older than the Sorrow, when the Dead first rose to torment the living. If this section of the tunnel had been sealed off at some point in the convent's distant past, it was possible a spirit had risen from one of these piles of bones and haunted the catacombs for years without anyone knowing.

A sound shivered through the passageway's thick underground silence, almost too soft to identify. A child's sob.

I broke into a run.

The shades whipped through me, each touch a sudden shock of cold. My censer banged against my robes until I wrapped the chain tightly around my hand. I drew it in front of my face in the defensive position taught to me by Sister Iris, the convent's battle mistress.

A glow bathed a bend in the tunnel ahead. When I rounded the

corner, my stomach turned to stone. Sophia had climbed into a niche to hide, her face buried in the knees of her robes. Hovering just outside, a ghoulish form peered in at her, the crown of its bald head visible over a hunched and knobby spine. A shroud flowed weightlessly around its cadaverous body, shining with an unearthly silver light.

For a heartbeat, I stood frozen. The last seven years melted away and I was a child again. I smelled hot ash and burning flesh; my hands throbbed with phantom pain.

But that had been before the Gray Sisters found me. Before they had saved me—and taught me that I could fight back.

I slid my dagger from its sheath. The spirit whipped around, alerted by the whisper of steel against leather. It had the hollowed face of an emaciated corpse, its lips shriveled back from an oversized set of teeth that took up nearly half its skull, bared in a permanent grimace. There were no eyes above, only empty sockets.

Sophia lifted her head. Tears shone through the dirt on her cheeks. “Artemisia!” she yelled.

The spirit’s form blurred and vanished. Instinct saved my life. I turned and swung the censer, so when the spirit reappeared a handspan in front of my face, the incense held it at bay. A groan shuddered from its jaws. It flickered out of existence again.

Before it could re-form, I lunged forward and threw myself in front of Sophia’s niche, already swinging my censer in a well-practiced pattern. Only the most powerful spirits could pass through a barrier of incense smoke. To reach Sophia, it would have to fight me first.

I knew what it was now. A common Second Order spirit called a gaunt, the corrupted soul of someone who had died of starvation. Though known for their speed, gaunts were fragile. A single well-placed blow could destroy them.

I raised my dagger. Gray Sisters wielded misericordes: long, thin

blades designed precisely for such a strike. “Sophia, are you hurt?”

She sniffed loudly, then said, “I don’t think so.”

“Good. Do you see my dagger? If anything happens to me, promise me you’ll take it. I hope you won’t have to, but you need to promise. Sophia?”

She hadn’t responded. The gaunt reappeared near the bend in the tunnel and flickered closer, zigzagging an erratic path toward us.

“I promise,” she whispered.

She understood the danger of possession. If a spirit managed to gain control of a person’s body, it could break through barriers designed to repel its kind, even walk among the living undetected for a time. Luckily for most people, only the Sighted were vulnerable to possession. Otherwise Loraille would have been overrun by the Dead long ago.

Another flicker. I sliced my dagger through the air just as the gaunt materialized in front of me, its bony hands grasping. The consecrated blade etched a line of golden fire across its shroud. My breath stopped as the fabric dissolved into vapor, laying bare the unharmed sinew beneath. I had only caught its sleeve.

Its hand closed around my wrist. Splinters of cold shot up the nerves of my arm, wrenching a cry from my throat. I struggled to free myself, but it held my wrist fast, captured in the space between us. Past its clawlike nails, its face swam into focus: drawing closer, the huge jaws parting as though breathing in my pain, sampling the taste. Any moment now my numb fingers would no longer be able to grip the dagger’s hilt.

Deliberately, I dropped it. Sophia screamed. As the gaunt’s attention caught on the glint of falling steel, I grabbed my censer in my bad hand and drove it upward into the spirit’s chest.

It looked at me in surprise. Then it coughed up a trickle of

smoke. I thrust the censer higher, barely feeling the metal's heat. The gaunt shrieked, an eerie, echoing sound that sent a shock wave of cold through the tunnel, stirring the brittle bones in their niches. It arched its spine and clawed at its chest, its form blurring in every direction, violently shredding apart, until it suddenly exploded into wisps of glowing fog.

Sophia's uneven breathing was the only sound as the tunnel darkened. I knew I should say something to reassure her, but I could barely move for the pain in my frozen wrist. It was coming alive again in waves of pins and needles, and there were already lines of bruised-looking purple where the gaunt had touched me and blighted my skin.

"Artemisia?" Her voice scratched like a mouse behind a wall.

"I'm fine," I said. I hoped that was true in case I needed to fight again, but I doubted I would. A single gaunt might escape Mother Katherine's notice, but she wouldn't fail to sense the presence of more. I turned to Sophia and let her climb down into my arms. "Can you stand up?"

"I'm not a baby," she protested, brave now that the danger had passed. But as I poured her onto the ground, she abruptly seized my robes, jolting a stab of pain from my wrist. "Look!"

Light seeped into the tunnel ahead, throwing a crooked shadow across the wall. It was accompanied by the sound of hoarse, indistinct muttering. Relief flooded me. I knew of only one person who would be wandering down here talking to herself.

"Don't worry. It isn't another spirit. It's just Sister Julianne."

Sophia clutched me tighter. "That's worse," she whispered.

As Sister Julianne shuffled into view, still muttering, her face hidden by draggled waist-length hair lit white by the lantern, I had to admit that Sophia had a point.

Julienne was the convent's holy woman. She dwelled as a hermit in the chapel's crypt, watching over the holy relic of Saint Eugenia. Her unwashed robes reeked so pungently of sheep's tallow that my eyes began to water at her approach.

Sophia stared, eyes wide as saucers; then she knelt and scooped up my dagger, silently pressing it into my hand.

Sister Julienne didn't seem to notice. We might as well have been invisible. She shuffled past us, close enough that her hem trailed over our shoes, up to the niche that Sophia had just vacated. I strained to make out what she was mumbling as she poked the disturbed bones back into order.

"Heard it down here for years, moaning and wailing . . . finally quiet now . . . Sister Rosemary, wasn't it? Yes, yes. A hard year, a terrible famine, so many dead . . ."

My skin prickled. I didn't know of anyone named Sister Rosemary. But I suspected that if I checked the convent's oldest records, I would find her.

Sophia tugged on my robes. She whispered in my ear, without taking her eyes from Sister Julienne, "Is it true she eats novices?"

"Ha!" Sister Julienne exclaimed, wheeling on us. Sophia started. "Is that what they're saying about me now? Good! Nothing better than a nice, tasty novice. Well, come along, girls, come along." She turned and began to shuffle back the way she had come, the lantern swinging in her wrinkled hand.

"Where is she taking us?" Sophia demanded, following reluctantly. She still hadn't let go of my robes.

"We must be going through the crypt. It's the safest way back to the chapel."

Truthfully, this was only a guess, but as Sister Julienne took us through a series of doors fitted into the roughly hewn tunnels, it

seemed increasingly likely. I was sure of it when we reached the final door, a heavy black monstrosity of consecrated iron. The lantern's light leaped over its banded surface as Julianne opened it and ushered us inside.

The air eddied with ribbons of incense smoke, so thick that my eyes stung and Sophia coughed into her sleeve. We had entered a stone chamber, pillared and vaulted. Robed statues stood in the archways between the columns, their hooded faces shadowed despite the candles that guttered at their feet in puddles of dripping wax. Sophia peered around suspiciously, as though searching for a cauldron hidden in one of the corners, or maybe the gnawed bones of past novices scattered across the floor. But the flagstones were bare except for the holy symbols carved here and there, their shapes worn nearly invisible with age.

Sister Julianne let us gawk for a moment, then impatiently beckoned us onward. "Touch the shrine now, for Saint Eugenia's blessing. Be quick about it."

The shrine dominated the middle of the crypt: a white marble platform with a life-sized effigy of Saint Eugenia lying atop the lid of the sarcophagus, her beautiful stone face serene in death. The candles arranged around her body cast a shifting glow over her features, lending her a faint enigmatic smile. She had died a martyr at fourteen years of age after sacrificing herself to bind a Fifth Order spirit to her bones. The spirit was said to have been so powerful that it burned her entire body to ash except for a single joint of her finger, a relic that now rested inside the sarcophagus in unseen splendor. It wasn't like the minor relic in Sister Lucinde's ring, useful for lighting the occasional candle. It was a high relic, wielded only in times of desperate need.

Solemnly, Sophia stepped forward to touch the effigy's folded

hands. The marble was shinier there, where countless pilgrims had touched it over the past three centuries.

Sister Julianne wasn't watching Sophia. She was watching me, her eyes glittering through a tangled curtain of hair. "Your turn. Go on."

Sweat itched beneath my robes from the heat of the candles, but the chill in my wrist intensified as I neared the shrine, its pain throbbing in time with my heartbeat. Bizarrely, I didn't want to touch the effigy. The closer I got, the more my body tried to strain away from it without my permission; even my hair felt like it was trying to stand on end. I imagined this was the way most people felt at the idea of touching an enormous hairy spider, or a corpse. Meanwhile, here I was experiencing it instead at the idea of touching a holy shrine. Maybe there was something wrong with me after all.

The thought drove me forward like the punishing sting of a whip. I stepped onto the dais and planted my hand on the marble.

I regretted it immediately. The stone grabbed hold of my palm as though it were coated in birdlime. I felt a sudden, stomach-lurching plunge, and the crypt fell away into darkness. I saw nothing, heard nothing, but I knew I wasn't alone. I was surrounded by a *presence*, something vast and ancient and hungry. I had an impression of feathers shifting in the dark, less a sound than a sensation—the stifling weight of imprisonment, and a devouring, anguished fury.

I knew what this presence was, what it had to be: the Fifth Order spirit bound to Saint Eugenia's relic. A revenant, one of only seven that had ever existed, each now destroyed or imprisoned by the long-ago sacrifices of the high saints.

Slowly, I felt its regard turn in my direction, like a beacon sweeping through the dark. Terror squeezed my throat. I tore

my hand from the sarcophagus and blindly stumbled away, nearly singeing my sleeve on the candles. Light and sound flooded back. I might have fallen if a bony grip hadn't caught my shoulder.

"You sense it." Sister Julienne's voice rasped in my ear, puffing sour breath against my cheek. "You feel it, don't you?" She sounded eager.

I gasped for air. The crypt's candles burned on uninterrupted. Sophia was watching me in confusion, beginning to look alarmed. She obviously hadn't felt anything when she'd touched the shrine. I had long suspected, but now I was certain—what had happened to me as a child had damaged me somehow, left an empty space inside. No wonder I had such an affinity for spirits. I had a place carved out for them already, waiting to be claimed.

I stared grimly at the floor until Sister Julienne released me. "I don't know what you're talking about," I answered, so clearly a lie that heat crept dully to my face as I spoke. I moved away and took Sophia's hand. She looked genuinely frightened now, but when she clutched me back I realized with a pang of gratitude that it was Julienne who was scaring her, not me.

"Suit yourself," Sister Julienne muttered, shuffling past us to open another door, beyond which lay the stair to the chapel, spiraling upward. "But you can't run forever, girl. The Lady will do what She wants with you. She always does, in the end."

TWO

News of the gaunt traveled quickly. The next day everyone was staring at me, trying to get a look at the blighted marks on my wrist. Mother Katherine had ordered Sophia and me to the infirmary after we'd come into the chapel, but little could be done for blight; it healed on its own over time, slowly fading to yellow like a bruise. I was given some tinctures for the pain and didn't take them. I told no one what had happened in the crypt.

Life went on as usual, except for the staring, which I hated, but I was used to it. I'd grown skilled at avoiding it by taking convoluted routes through the narrow cobbled paths that wound between the convent's buildings while I went about my chores. Sometimes the other novices shrieked when I appeared, as though I were skulking around specifically to frighten them—I was used to that, too.

But I couldn't avoid them forever. We trained in the cloister's enclosed courtyard three times a week, Sister Iris watching us like a

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hawk as we practiced forms with our censers and daggers, and there were daily prayers in the chapel. Then, every morning, the lichgate opened to admit corpse-wagons into the central courtyard.

For the past three hundred years, the Gray Sisters had carried out the sacred duty of tending to the dead. Souls that failed to receive the necessary rites would eventually corrupt and rise as spirits instead of naturally passing on to the afterlife as they had done before the Sorrow. When the corpse-wagons arrived, the most decayed bodies were rushed to the chapel's ritual chambers, where they vanished beyond a consecrated door curling with smoke. Less urgent cases went to the fumatorium to be washed and wait their turn.

The fumatorium was named for its perpetual fog of incense, which slowed the process of corruption. The lower level, where the bodies were stored, was built underground like a cellar, dry and cool and dark. On the aboveground level, large clerestory windows filled a bright whitewashed hall with streaming shafts of light. We attended weekly lessons here, in a long room filled with tables that bore a strong resemblance to the refectory where we ate our meals. I kept that comparison to myself, however, because the tables were laid with corpses.

I'd gotten a young man this week, perhaps eighteen or nineteen, only a year or two older than myself. A faint odor of putrefaction hovered beneath the smell of incense seeping up through the floorboards. Around me, some of the other novices were wrinkling their noses and trying to persuade their partners to handle the more disgusting aspects of inspecting the bodies. Personally, I didn't mind. I preferred the company of the dead to that of the living. They didn't gossip about me, for one thing.

"Do you think she'll pass the evaluation?" Marguerite was

whispering, or at least thought she was. I could hear her from two tables away.

“Of course she will, but that depends on whether they’ll let her take it,” someone else whispered back. Francine.

“Why wouldn’t they?”

I opened the dead man’s mouth and looked inside. Behind me, Francine lowered her voice further. “Mathilde snuck into the chan-cery last week and read Mother Katherine’s ledger. Artemisia really was possessed before she came here.”

Several gasps followed this pronouncement. Marguerite squeaked, “By what? Did it say if she killed anyone?” Multiple people hushed her simultaneously.

“I don’t know,” Francine said, once the noise had died down, “but I wouldn’t be surprised.”

“I bet she did kill someone.” Marguerite’s voice throbbed with conviction. “What if that’s why her family never visits? Maybe she killed them all. I bet she’s killed lots of people.”

By now I had heaved the corpse over—difficult, without a partner—and was examining his buttocks. I really didn’t want to listen to this. I wondered what I could say to get them to stop. Finally, in the profound silence that had followed Marguerite’s speculation, I offered, “I would tell you how many, but I wasn’t keeping count.”

A chorus of shrieks erupted behind me.

“Girls!”

Everyone stopped screaming at once, except for Marguerite, who let out one final wavering bleat before Francine clapped a hand over her mouth. I saw that happen because I had looked up to watch Sister Iris swoop down on us from the other end of the hall. She looked straight-backed and severe in her plain gray robes,

unadorned aside from a silver oculus pendant at her throat and a small moonstone ring that glinted against the dark-brown skin of her hand. Sister Iris commanded universal fear and respect among the novices, though by our age there was an element of pageantry to our terror. Most of us had figured out that she was a benevolent force despite her stern mannerisms and eviscerating glare. She had once stayed up all night in the infirmary when Mathilde had fallen gravely ill with sweating sickness, mopping her brow and probably threatening her not to die.

She turned that glare on us now, lingering on me for a few additional seconds. She liked me, but she knew I was responsible for the screaming. I almost always was.

“May I remind you all that a priest is arriving from Bonsaint in one month’s time to evaluate each one of you for admittance into the Clerisy. You may wish to use your time more wisely, for you will not,” she said pointedly, “receive a second chance to leave Naimes.”

Looks passed between the girls. No one wanted to stay in Naimes and spend the rest of her life tending to corpses. Except for me.

If I was selected for a higher education by the Clerisy, I would have to talk to people. Then, after I completed my studies, I would be ordained as a priestess, which would involve talking to even more people and also trying to solve their spiritual problems, which sounded horrific—I’d probably make them cry.

No one could deny that I was better suited to the life of a Gray Sister. Administering death rites was important work, more useful than idling away my life in a gilded office in Bonsaint or Chantclere, upsetting people. Then there was the other duty of the Gray Sisters, the one I looked forward to the most. They were

responsible for investigating reports of children with the Sight.

I rubbed the scar tissue on my hands, conscious of the places where I felt no sensation. It was like touching leather, or someone else's skin. If someone had looked harder, found me sooner . . .

I doubted it would be difficult to fail the evaluation on purpose. The priest could hardly drag me out of Naimes by force.

Sister Iris was watching me as though she knew exactly what I was thinking. "I see you've finished examining the bodies. Artemisia, tell me your conclusions."

I looked down. "He died of fever."

"Yes?"

"There aren't any marks on his body to suggest a death by injury or violence." I was conscious of the other girls watching me, some leaning toward each other to trade remarks. I could guess what they were saying. Commenting on my stony, unsmiling expression, my flatly emotionless voice.

Little did they know that this was better than the alternative. I had once tried smiling in a mirror, with profoundly unfortunate results.

"And?" Sister Iris prompted, sending a look at the novices that quieted them at once.

"He's young," I went on. "Unlikely to have experienced a paroxysm of the heart. He would be thinner if he'd died of a wasting disease or the flux. His tongue and fingernails aren't discolored, so poisoning is unlikely. But there are broken veins in his eyes, and his glands are swollen, which indicate a fever."

"Very good. And what of the condition of his soul?" The whispering had started up again. Sharply, Sister Iris turned. "Marguerite, would you care to answer?"

Marguerite's cheeks flamed red. She wasn't as pale as me, but

her fair skin could display a spectacular variety of colors—generally shades of pink, but sometimes an impressive purple flush, and occasionally an interesting greenish cast, when something I said to her almost made her throw up. “Could you repeat the question, Sister Iris?”

“What manner of spirit would this man’s soul become,” Sister Iris said in a clipped tone, “if the sisters did not purify it before it succumbed to corruption?”

“A shade,” Marguerite blurted out. “Most souls turn into First Order spirits, no matter how they died. If not a shade, then—” She cast a panicked look at Francine, who avoided her eyes. She hadn’t been listening, either.

I shared a room with Marguerite in the dormitory, which was so cramped that our hard, narrow beds nearly touched. She signed herself against evil every night before she went to sleep, eyeing me meaningfully the whole time. Truthfully, I didn’t blame her. Mostly I felt sorry for her. If I were someone else, I was sure I wouldn’t want to share a room with me, either.

Lately, I felt even sorrier for her than usual because I didn’t think she was going to pass the evaluation. I couldn’t imagine her becoming a nun, and I had an equally difficult time envisioning her as a lay sister, shouldering the convent’s never-ending burden of washing, cooking, gardening, and mending. But if she failed, those would be her only two choices. The Lady had granted her the Sight, which meant a life dedicated to service. None of us could survive without the protection of the convent’s lichgate, or the incense and consecrated daggers provided to us by the Clerisy. The risk of possession was too great.

Sister Iris had her back to me. When Marguerite’s desperate gaze wandered over in my direction, I raised a hand to my forehead,

miming checking my temperature. Her eyes widened.

“A feverling!” she exclaimed.

Sister Iris’s lips thinned. She cast me a suspicious look. “And to which order does a feverling belong, Artemisia?”

“The Third Order,” I recited dutifully. “The order of souls lost to illness and plague.”

This received a curt nod, and Sister Iris moved on to questioning the other novices. I listened with partial attention as they described causes of death: exposure, starvation, flux, a case of drowning. None of the corpses provided to us had died violently; those souls could turn into Fourth Order spirits, and they got whisked off to the chapel immediately.

It was difficult to conceive of a time when Fourth Order spirits weren’t the most dangerous threat in Loraille. But Fifth Order spirits had been orders of magnitude more destructive. During the War of Martyrs, the seven revenants had raged across the country like storms, leaving entire cities lifeless in their wake. Blighted harvests had blown away as ashes on the wind. There was a tapestry in the scriptorium that depicted Saint Eugenia facing the revenant she had bound, armor flashing in the sun, her white horse rearing. It was so old and faded that the revenant looked like an indistinct cloud rising up over the hill, edges picked out in fraying silver thread.

I could still feel its hunger and fury, its despair at being bound. I imagined that if I listened closely enough to the stillness that yawned beneath the convent’s mundane everyday bustle, past the muffling hush of shadowed corridors and ancient stone, I would be able to sense it festering in the darkness of its prison.

“Are there any questions?”

Sister Iris’s voice snapped me back to the present. We were

about to be dismissed. As everyone else drifted toward the door in anticipation, already beginning to murmur among themselves, I heard myself ask, “What causes a soul to become a Fifth Order spirit?”

Silence descended like an axe. Everyone turned to look at me, and then at Sister Iris. In all our years as novices, this was something no one had dared to ask.

Sister Iris pursed her lips. “That is a fair question, Artemisia, considering that our convent is one of few to house a high relic. But it is not an easy question to answer. The truth is that we do not know for certain.”

Whispering started up again. Uncertain glances traveled between the novices.

Sister Iris didn’t look at them. She was studying me with a slight frown, as though she knew again what was on my mind. I wondered if Sister Julianne had revealed to anyone what had happened in the crypt.

Her expression gave no clue as she went on. “It is, however, beyond a doubt that no more revenants have risen since the Sorrow, Goddess have mercy.” She sketched the four-point sign of the oculus on her forehead, a third eye that represented the Lady and Her gift of Sight. “The scholar Josephine of Bissalart believed that their rising was tied to the cataclysm that brought about the Sorrow—the Old Magic ritual performed by the Raven King.”

Everyone stopped breathing. All of us knew how the Sorrow had happened, but it was a topic rarely discussed and therefore carried an air of the forbidden. When we were younger, a popular dare had involved sneaking a history book from the scriptorium and reading the passage about the Raven King aloud in the dark by candlelight. For a while, Francine had had Marguerite convinced

that speaking his name three times at midnight would summon him.

I was sure Sister Iris knew about all this. She sternly finished over the renewed whispering, “The ritual shattered the gates of Death and reordered the laws of the natural world. It is possible that some souls were uniquely corrupted by this act, resulting in the creation of the revenants. Josephine was correct on so many other accounts”—here she pinned the whispering novices with her gaze—“that I trust we need not fear a recurrence, particularly not while you all proceed in a timely manner to your afternoon chores.”

Weeks later, I sat watching my breath plume white in the cloister, the chill of the stone bench seeping through my robes and into my thighs. Dozens of other novices my age surrounded me, their nervous chatter filling the predawn gloom like early-morning birdsong. Some of them had traveled from as far away as Montprestre for the evaluation, the straw of wagon beds still clinging to their hair. They gazed around in awe at the cloister and stared at the ruby on Sister Lucinde’s finger, most likely wondering if it was really a relic, as their neighbor had claimed. Most of the northern convents were so small that only their abbesses wore a relic, and then just one; Mother Katherine wore three.

Marguerite sat hunched beside me, shivering. In her effort not to sit too close to me, she was nearly falling off the bench onto the ground. I’d moved over earlier to give her more room, but I didn’t think she’d noticed.

“I’ve never killed anyone,” I offered. That sounded less reassuring out loud than it had in my head, so I added, “Or seriously hurt anyone, either. Not permanently, at least. I assume they’ve all recovered by now.”

VESPERTINE

She looked up, and for an awful moment I thought she might actually try to talk to me. I wasn't prepared for that. To my relief, the priest arrived then; brisk footsteps sounded against stone, and our heads craned to watch his dramatic figure striding down the center of the aisle. I glimpsed an imperious sweep of black robes and a flash of golden hair before he disappeared with a swirl of fabric into the evaluation room.

As soon as the door closed, the pious silence that had gripped the cloister dissolved into giggles.

"Girls," said Sister Lucinde quellingly, but a great deal of stifled noise continued as the first novice was called into the room.

The giggles stopped for good when the girl emerged only a minute or two later, white-faced and bewildered. Sister Lucinde had to take her by the shoulders and steer her in the direction of the refectory, where pallets were being laid out to accommodate the visiting novices. As she stumbled away, she buried her face in her hands and began to cry.

Wide-eyed, everyone watched her go. Marguerite leaned toward Francine, seated on the bench opposite us. "Don't you think that was fast?"

It was fast. She hadn't been in there for long enough to answer a few cursory questions, much less take an evaluation. It was as though the priest had been able to judge her aptitude at a mere glance. Out of sight, my hands curled into fists.

Dawn light crept into the cloister as the benches rapidly emptied, its pink glow seeping down the courtyard's stone walls, flashing from the windows and glaring in my eyes. By the time the light flooded across the tamped-down grass where we practiced our forms, less than a quarter of us remained. The last novices filed out one by one until only Marguerite and I were left. When Sister

Lucinde called her name, I tried to think of something encouraging to say to her, but I wasn't good at that at the best of times. I was still trying to think of what I should have said when the door banged open less than a minute later, and she rushed past me where I stood waiting, her face crimson and streaked with tears.

Sister Lucinde looked after her and sighed. Then she nodded to me. As I stepped over the threshold, my eyes struggled to adjust to the room beyond. It seemed dark indoors now that the sun had risen, even with a fire crackling in the hearth, stifflingly warm, and a few lit tapers scattered around, throwing shivering reflections from mirrors and polished wood.

"Is this the girl?" asked a silhouette in front of the fire.

"Yes, Your Grace."

The door's latch clicked. Sister Lucinde had shut me inside.

Now I could see better, well enough to make out the priest. His pale, austere face floated in darkness above the high collar of his severe black robes. He was tall, his posture immaculate, his sharp cheekbones casting his cheeks into shadow. His gaze had already returned to Mother Katherine's ledger, its worn pages cramped with records of each girl admitted into the convent. Without looking up, he gestured formally at the empty chair in front of the desk. A ring flashed on his hand, set with a large onyx gemstone.

"Sit, my child."

I obeyed, grateful for my perpetually blank expression. I was used to being called "child" by white-haired Mother Katherine, but the priest couldn't be any older than twenty, almost of an age with us novices. That explained the giggling.

He looked up. "Is something the matter?" he inquired, in a cold and imperious tone.

"Forgive me, Father. You're the first man I've seen in seven

years.” When he only stared at me, I clarified, “The first living man. I’ve seen plenty of dead ones.”

His eyes narrowed, taking me in afresh, as though I were something unidentified that he had just scraped off the bottom of his shoe. “The correct way to address me is ‘Your Grace.’ I’m a confessor, not an abbot.” The ledger snapped shut with a clap, sending dust motes swirling through the air. “Artemisia,” he said, disapproval clear in his voice.

“It isn’t my birth name, Your Grace. Mother Katherine chose it for me when I arrived at the convent. It’s the name of—”

“A legendary warrior,” he interrupted, looking slightly annoyed. “Yes, I am aware. Why didn’t you provide your birth name?”

I didn’t want to answer. I wasn’t prepared to tell a stranger that I didn’t want my name because the people who gave it to me hadn’t wanted me. “I wasn’t able to,” I said finally. “I didn’t speak for more than a year after I came here.”

The priest leaned back, studying me unreadably—but to my relief, he didn’t ask any more questions. Instead, he drew a silk handkerchief from his robes, which he used to select a small, intricately carved wooden box from a stack on the side of the desk. He briskly slid it between us, as though wanting to get this over with as quickly as possible, and I saw my reflection ripple across the mirrored inlay on its surface: white as a corpse, a dragged-looking black braid draped over one shoulder.

“You may find the evaluation’s format strange at first, but I assure you, it’s a very simple process.” His voice sounded bored, tinged with irritation. “All you must do is hold your hand over the box, like so.” He demonstrated and then withdrew, watching me.

I didn’t understand how this could be a real test. I suspected he might be mocking me. Warily, I extended my left hand, ignoring

the way his gaze sharpened at the sight of my scars. As my fingers neared the box, the air grew colder, until suddenly—

I plunged into cold water, bubbles exploding from my throat in a soundless scream. I choked on the stink of river mud, desperate for air, unable to breathe. Slippery waterweed tangled around my ankles, drawing me downward; and as I sank into the depths, my pulse throbbed in my ears, growing slower and slower. . . .

I yanked my hand back. The torrent of sensation faded immediately, replaced by the cheerful crackle of the fire and the warmth of my dry robes. I focused on the desk, willing nothing to show on my face. The box contained a saint's relic. I could almost picture it inside: an ancient, moldering bone nestled in a bed of velvet, seething with ghostly energy. I guessed that the entity bound to it was an undine, the Second Order spirit of someone who had drowned.

Now I understood. We were being tested on our ability to sense relics. The priest had been able to eliminate the other girls so quickly because to them the box seemed completely ordinary, just as most people touched Saint Eugenia's shrine and felt only lifeless marble. No wonder that first novice had looked so confused.

"There's no need to be afraid. It can't hurt you." He leaned forward. "Just hold your hand in place, and tell me what you feel. Be as detailed as possible."

Now he seemed tense with suppressed energy, like a well-bred sighthound trying not to show its excitement over the presence of a nearby squirrel. I thought back to his exchange with Sister Lucinde and felt a quiet knell of foreboding. He seemed very sure now that I was worth his time, though he hadn't before, not when I had first sat down.

Slowly, I stretched my hand over the box again. This time, I was able to keep the room in focus as the undine's drowning agony

lapped against my senses. “I don’t feel anything,” I lied.

“Nothing? Are you certain?” Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him brush his fingers across his onyx ring. “You can be honest with me, child.”

“I—” That was all I managed to get out before I snapped my mouth shut on the rest. I had almost told him the truth.

Worse, I would have enjoyed telling him the truth. A reassuring warmth filled my stomach at the thought of doing what he wanted, of being virtuous and good—and obviously, that wasn’t like me at all.

The ring’s stone glinted like a beetle’s shell in the candlelight. The polished black gem dwarfed even Mother Katherine’s large amber cabochon. Earlier, he had called himself a confessor. A cleric’s rank was determined by the type of relic they wielded, and each granted a different ability depending on the kind of spirit bound to it. It wasn’t difficult to guess what power this one commanded.

Careful not to let my understanding show, I met the priest’s eyes. I had never liked doing that; it didn’t come naturally to me. I hated trying to figure out the unspoken rules about how long you were supposed to look and how often you were supposed to blink. I always got it wrong. According to Marguerite, I tended to overcompensate by staring into people’s eyes too directly, which made them uncomfortable—only she hadn’t put it in those words, exactly. She had been crying a lot at the time.

“I’m certain,” I said.

Impressively, the priest didn’t react. If he was surprised or disappointed, I couldn’t tell. He only said, “Very well. Let’s continue.” He moved the first box away and slid a different one across the desk.

This time, when I put forth my hand, a miasma of sickness enveloped me: the smell of stale sweat, sour breath, and unwashed

linens. My breath rattled in my chest, and a foul taste coated my tongue. My limbs felt weak, as brittle as sticks arranged beneath a heavy coverlet.

Third Order, I thought. Most likely a witherkin—the soul of someone who had died of a wasting disease.

Unlike the revenant in the crypt, it didn't seem conscious of its imprisonment. Neither had the undine. That would be a useful observation to share with the priest, I caught myself thinking; he might be impressed by my insight, my ability to sense a Fifth Order spirit. . . .

I pinched myself on the thigh. “Nothing,” I reported flatly.

He smiled, as though my uncooperativeness pleased him. When he slid a third box toward me, I thrust my hand over it quickly—and paid for my mistake.

Flames roared around me, licking at my skin. Embers swirled through the suffocating, smoke-filled darkness. And there was the familiar heat, the pain, the stench of burning flesh—the mindless terror of a death by fire.

I flung myself away from the desk. When my vision cleared, I found that my chair had skidded an arm's length across the floor, and my fingernails were sunk into the wood of the armrests.

“An ashgrim.” He rose from his seat, his eyes glittering with triumph. “The same type of spirit that possessed you as a child.”

The smell of scorched meat still lingered in my nose. I locked my jaw and sat in defiant silence, my breath shuddering in and out. He couldn't claim that I had passed the evaluation if I admitted nothing.

“There's no need to pretend, Artemisia. I know everything about you. It's all right here in the ledger.” He came around the desk to stand above me, his hands folded behind his back. “I will

admit, I initially had my doubts that your story was true. Most children don't survive possession, especially not for the length of time described in your entry. But those who do are often known to demonstrate an extraordinary talent for wielding relics. Terrible though it is, being forced to practice resisting a spirit's will at such a young age does yield results."

When I refused to meet his gaze, he sank down on his heels, putting our faces level. I saw for the first time that his eyes were a luminous shade of emerald-green, the color of stained glass pierced with light. "You sensed that it was afraid of fire, didn't you?" he breathed. "That was why you burned yourself. It was your way of subduing it, preventing it from harming anyone else."

Before, I had mistrusted the priest. Now I despised him: his beautiful face, his uncalloused hands, every inch of him unmarked by hardship—exactly the type of person I never wanted to become.

He didn't seem to notice the intensity of my hatred. He wouldn't; I had been told that all my facial expressions looked more or less the same. When I still didn't answer, he gracefully rose and paced back to the desk, his black-robed figure straight as he began to pack the relic boxes in a satchel.

"Nearly anyone can master a relic binding some common First or Second Order wraith. The sisters are proof enough of that. But your talent is in a different realm entirely. I have no doubt that you are destined for great things. In Bonsaint, you will be trained to wield—"

"I'm not going to Bonsaint," I interrupted. "I'm going to stay in Naimes and become a nun."

He stopped and stared at me as though I'd spoken gibberish. Slowly, a look of astonished disgust crept across his features. "Why would you ever want such a thing?"

I didn't bother trying to explain. I knew he wouldn't understand. Instead, I asked, "To be accepted into the Clerisy, wouldn't I need to have passed the evaluation?"

He gazed at me a moment longer; then a condescending, almost bitter smile tugged at his mouth. "The sisters warned me that you might deliberately try to fail. The true test wasn't your ability to read the relics. It was whether you were strong enough to resist mine." My eyes went to his ring. "A relic of Saint Liliane," he explained, with another brief, unpleasant smile. "It binds a Fourth Order spirit called a penitent, which grants me the power to draw truth from the lips of the unwilling, among . . . among other things." Briskly, he tightened the satchel's buckles and turned to leave. "Fortunately, the matter isn't up to you, and the Clerisy must be alerted as quickly as possible. I will have the sisters collect your belongings. We leave for Bonsaint tonight."

"No." I watched him pause with his hand on the doorknob. "If I'm able to resist your relic, you can't force me to tell the truth. How will you prove to anyone that I passed?"

He had gone very still. When he answered, he spoke quietly and with deadly calm. "It would be my word against yours. I think you'll find that my word is worth a great deal."

"In that case," I said, "I suppose it would be embarrassing if you brought me all the way to Bonsaint, only for the Clerisy to discover that I'm completely mad."

Slowly, he turned. "The sisters will confirm your soundness of mind. In writing, if necessary."

"Not if it's a new development. Everyone already knows there's something wrong with me. It wouldn't be hard to pretend that the shock of confronting an ashgrim during your evaluation was the final straw." I lifted my eyes to meet his gaze. "Alas, it seems that

the reminder of my past simply proved too much.”

I wondered how long it had been since someone had last defied him. He flung the case aside and took several great strides toward me, his eyes like poison. I thought he might strike me. Then he visibly mastered himself.

“I take no pleasure in this,” he said, “but you leave me without a choice. Know that this is for your own good, child,” and he clasped his hand over his ring.

At first I felt nothing. And then I gasped. A crushing pressure gripped my heart, my lungs. After a dazed moment I realized it wasn’t a physical force but an emotional one, a despairing, ruinous guilt. I wanted to collapse to the floor in misery, to weep and beg the priest for forgiveness, even as I knew I was undeserving of redemption—undeserving even of the Lady’s mercy.

The penitent.

I clenched my teeth. I had resisted his relic before, and I could do it again. If he wanted me to crawl on the ground and repent, I would do the opposite. Painfully, I stood, fighting against every joint; and then I lifted my head to meet his eyes.

The relic’s influence evaporated. He stumbled a step back, grasping at the desk for balance. He was panting, regarding me with a look I couldn’t interpret, a lock of golden hair fallen loose over his forehead.

There came a loud pounding on the door. Before either of us could react, it swung open, flooding the room with daylight. The person who stood on the threshold wasn’t Sister Lucinde, but rather a terrified-looking young page, clutching a folded missive.

“Confessor Leander,” he stammered. “Urgent news, Your Grace. Possessed soldiers have been sighted in Roischal. Your aid is requested—”

MARGARET ROGERSON

The priest recovered enough to yank the parchment from the page's hands. He unfolded the letter and scanned its contents, then clapped it shut again, as though whatever he'd read had stung him.

I had never heard of Clerisy soldiers succumbing to possession. The priest's face had gone bloodless white, but not with surprise, or even shock; he looked furious at the news. He breathed in and out, staring straight ahead.

"I am not finished with you," he said to me. He ran trembling fingers through his hair to put it back in order. Then, in a swirl of black robes, he stalked out the door.

THREE

None of the sisters said anything to me, but they had to know I'd done something, even if they didn't know what. I kept my head down for a few miserable days, dazed with lack of sleep and dreading going back to the dormitory.

Marguerite had a wealthy aunt in Chantclere who sent her letters and drawings of the city's latest fashions, or at least used to—the letters had eventually slowed and then stopped without explanation. For years, she'd kept them tacked to the wall above her bed so she could look at them every night. I returned to our room after the evaluation to discover that she had torn them all down. Standing in the pile of crumpled parchment, she had looked at me with accusatory red-rimmed eyes and declared, "I would rather *die* than spend the rest of my life in Naimes."

Over the next couple of nights, her weeping kept me awake until the bell rang for morning prayers. I tried talking to her once, which

turned out to be a terrible idea; the results were so harrowing I slunk off to spend the night in the stable, grateful that I couldn't inflict emotional trauma on the goats and horses—I hadn't managed it yet, at least.

Then more news arrived from Roischal, and no one was thinking about the evaluation any longer, not even Marguerite. As the first cold rains of winter seeped into the convent's stones, whispers filled the halls like shades.

Everything would seem ordinary one moment, and then the next I'd hear something that tipped me off-balance: novices in the refectory, heads bent together, whispering fearfully about a sighting of a Fourth Order spirit—a rivenner, which hadn't been seen in Loraille since before we were born. The next day I crossed the gardens where the lay sisters were tearing up the last shriveled autumn vegetables, and I overheard that the city of Bonsaint had raised its great drawbridge over the Sevre, a measure it hadn't taken in a hundred years.

"If the Divine is afraid," whispered one of the sisters, "shouldn't we be, too?"

The Divine of Bonsaint governed the northern provinces from her seat in Roischal, whose border lay only a few days' travel to the south. Kings and queens had once reigned over Loraille, but their corrupt line had ended with the Raven King, and the Clerisy had risen from the Sorrow's ashes to take their place. Now the divines ruled in their stead. The most powerful office was that of the Archdivine in Chantclere, but according to rumor, she was nearly a hundred years old and rarely extended her influence beyond the city.

Newly ordained, the current Divine of Bonsaint had once traveled to our convent on a pilgrimage to Saint Eugenia's shrine. I had been thirteen then. Locals had turned out in bewildering numbers to see her, strewing spring wildflowers across the road and

climbing the trees outside the convent's walls for a better view. But what had left the greatest impression on me was how young the Divine had looked, and how sad. She had seemed subdued on her walk to the crypt, a lonely figure lost in splendor, her attendants lifting her train and holding her elbow as though she were spun from glass.

I wondered how she was faring now. As far as I could tell, the worst aspect of the unfolding situation in Roischal was that no one knew what was causing it. Spirits hadn't attacked in numbers like this in well over a century, and in the past it had always happened in the wake of obvious events like plagues or famines or a city ravaged by fire. But this time there wasn't a clear reason, and even the Clerisy didn't seem to have an explanation.

The day that disaster reached Naimes, I was on my way back from the convent's barnyard, hefting an empty bucket of slops. After an incident in the washing room when I was eleven, the sisters didn't entrust me with any chores that might injure my hands. That day, I had scalded myself with lye and not told anyone—at first because I hadn't been able to feel it and then because I hadn't seen the point. I still remembered how, when at last someone had noticed the blisters, everything had gone quiet and the sisters had given me shocked looks that I didn't understand. Then one of them had shouted for Mother Katherine, who had taken me away to the infirmary, her touch gentle on my arm. Ever since, I had been assigned work with the animals.

Beside the plot where we grew our vegetables, our convent had a small ornamental garden. Roses bloomed there in the summer, their overgrown blossoms nearly burying the garden's half-crumbled statue of Saint Eugenia. This time of year, the hedge around it turned brown and the leaves began to fall. Thus I caught

a glimpse of someone inside as I passed. It wasn't a visiting pilgrim; it was Mother Katherine, her downy white head bent in prayer.

She looked frail. The observation swooped down on me without warning. Somehow, I hadn't noticed how old she'd gotten—it was as though I had wiped the dust from a painting and seen it clearly for the first time in years, after ages of simply forgetting to look.

"Artemisia, child," she said patiently, "are you spying on me? Come here and sit down."

I abandoned my bucket and joined her on the bench. She didn't say anything else or even open her eyes. We sat in silence, listening to the breeze rustle through the dry leaves and rattle the hedge. Dark clouds scudded above the convent's walls. The air smelled heavy with rain.

"I've never sensed them," I said finally. "Your relics."

She held out her hand. The gems shone against her papery skin: a tiny moonstone almost identical to Sister Iris's, a cloudy sapphire with a chipped facet, and the largest, an amber oval that captured the light, illuminating small imperfections within. They were mere decoration for the real treasures: the relics sealed away in compartments beneath. Cautiously, I touched the amber and felt nothing but a smooth, ordinary stone.

"The spirits' auras become dimmer when the rings are sealed," Mother Katherine explained. "This doesn't affect our ability to draw them forth, but it makes the relics much more comfortable to wear."

She was regarding me with one keen blue eye, and at that moment she didn't seem frail at all. I remembered little of the night of the exorcism, but I would never forget the feeling of her prayers tearing through my body, drawing the ashgrim forth in a wrathful whirl of smoke and silver embers. The sisters later told me that it had taken all night, and when she had finished, she hadn't reached

for her dagger. She had merely lifted one hand and destroyed it with a word.

“A tooth of Saint Beatrice,” she went on, tapping the moonstone. “This is the relic I use to sense nearby spirits. It may only bind a shade, but I find it is often the humble relics that prove the most useful.” Next she touched the chipped sapphire. “A knucklebone of Saint Clara, which binds a frostfain. It has weakened over time, but its power does help ease the chill in my bones on cold winter nights, and for that I am very fond of it. And this one . . .” She ran her fingers over the amber stone. “Well, let’s just say I can no longer wield it as I once could. I’m afraid that when the relic’s strength outmatches the person wearing it, there is a danger of the spirit overpowering its wielder. Have I satisfied your curiosity, child? No? If you wish to learn more, these are all things that you can study in Bonsaint.”

She said that last part pointedly, with a twinkle in her eyes.

It was a waste of time trying to hide anything from Mother Katherine. At first that had terrified me. I had been convinced that if she could see into my soul, she would decide I wasn’t fit for the convent and send me back home. But she hadn’t, and then one day a skittish goat had come to the barnyard, beaten by its former master. After I finally succeeded in coaxing it to eat from my hand, she had asked me if I blamed the goat for all the times it had bitten me and whether I thought we should give it back. I’d gotten so angry I had almost bitten her in turn. Then she had given me a knowing smile, and I hadn’t been afraid of her after that.

Now I felt a hand on my braid, stroking it much as I had once patted the goat. I wasn’t sure I liked it, but I also didn’t want her to stop. “I don’t believe you would have found Bonsaint as terrible as you imagine,” she said. “But if you wish to stay in Naimes so