

THE EVIL THAT MEN DO

EIGHT HISTORICAL MYSTERIES

by

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This, and everything, is for Joe.

THE MUTE MONJA, OR THE WALLS COULD TALK

I WOULD HAVE BECOME AN ALCHEMIST'S apprentice if all I wanted was to mix lime and white lead," Ermessenda complained to Ramón, master fresco artist of the school of Solsona. Ramón's only female apprentice, Ermessenda was rarely permitted to do more than that.

He stopped picking tangerines from a gnarled tree through his workshop's window, then gestured with both hands exactly the way the saints in his paintings welcomed the faithful dead into heaven. She could smell the citrus oil on his palms from where she stood all the way across the room. The scent overpowered even the old-egg smell of her tempera paint.

"Now you want me to slop whitewash on old plaster." It was a violation of the first rule Ramón had taught her: Opposites can sometimes be conjured to unite as one, but wet paint will never adhere to dry plaster. "I thought you said your own master painted the Pallarses' portrait."

"Woman, do as you are told. The bishop of Barcelona wants the repairs before Christmas. He already paid me, and one of his knights is on his way to oversee your work."

"Which one? Senyor Taul of Girona? Not that it really matters, I suppose. All the bishop's lackeys are the same." The peeling fresco of which they spoke was in the church at Aristó , a village in the Pyrenees foothills. It was a portrait of Geráu de Pallars surrounded by his family. He was shown stretching his arms toward Sant Juame, who sat on a throne with a woman prostrate at his feet. Beside Geráu, his son Llorenç held a gold chalice. Kneeling before the saint was a toddler, a second woman, and an adolescent girl—striking for her copious blonde hair and intense blue eyes. Everyone in Catalunya knew Geráu de Pallars. Though now senile and an invalid he was once lord over vast lands, with dozens of serfs and Saracen house slaves.

"Of all people, Senyor Guillem should have done the job properly. Or did he leave the background for an apprentice—you perhaps? Even at that age you should have known whitewash over dried plaster will peel," she said.

"Of course his apprentices assisted him," said Ramón. "But we didn't touch the Pallarses' portrait, just the scenes near the confessional."

"The tortured martyrs and saints?"

Ignoring her, he picked another tangerine. "About the time he started the portrait, he sent us all to work on another commission."

"So you say?"

"It was the last thing he ever painted, you know. He was murdered soon afterward on the road to Bigis." With his empty hand, he stroked the drooping strands of his mustache.

"Did you ever wonder how long it would have taken you to finish your masterpiece if Guillem hadn't died then?" She was beginning to think she would never have a chance to paint even a single angel, let alone a whole masterpiece.

He arched his eyebrows, giving his face a look that Ermessenda called “Ego Sum Lux” because it reminded her of the deities he painted. “The only thing I wonder is what technique he used. I always thought there was something odd about it.”

“Now you want me to compound his error and apply more whitewash over dry plaster.”

“Either that or get thee to a nunnery, woman.”

EARLY THE NEXT DAY, ERMESSENDA took Ramón’s donkey cart to the Church of Sant Juame, where tied just outside the front portal she found a huge, black stallion with silver trappings. It forewarned her that the bishop’s knight, Taul of Girona, was already there. Once inside, she quickly spied the thick-set, beady-eyed man sullenly leaning against a pillar.

The two were not alone in the church’s murky light for long. Soon a nobleman entered, a nobleman so wealthy that even his riding boots’ soles were new, as she noticed when he knelt before a shrine. Taul stepped out of sight into a nearby niche while Llorenç de Pallars mumbled prayers for his mother’s delivery from Purgatory. After a decent interval Llorenç rose, adjusted his sword belt with a scowl at the knight, and walked slowly toward Ermessenda as she dragged one of the church’s long oak ladders down the aisle.

“Are you here to clean the painting?” the tall, blond nobleman asked her with a surprisingly kind smile.

“Sí, senyor,” she replied. She dropped the ladder and bowed her wimpled-and-scarved head to indicate a deference she did not feel.

Taul stepped out of the shadows. “The church ceiling is the bishop’s business, not yours.”

“Is that right?” said Llorenç, turning abruptly away. Taul followed him, no doubt to the rectory in search of the priest. Ermessenda wondered what bad blood there could be between Llorenç, the bishop’s nephew, and one of the bishop’s knights. She had never heard the slightest gossip that the Pallarses and the Bishop of Barcelona were at odds. The bishop’s elder sister had been Gerau de Pallars’s first wife—one of the women in the painting. True, Gerau was known to be loyal to the Count de Berenguer. What nobleman wasn’t? And, true, the count and the bishop did not always see eye to eye, but then, what count and what churchman did?

With Llorenç out of the way, she stooped again to pick up the heavy ladder and finished dragging it to the wall near the shrine. She was too short and weak to lift the ladder herself, so she scoured the church’s shadows for a man. The church was empty, not even a priest surreptitiously sipping the altar wine. As she stuffed strands of wiry brown hair out of the way under her scarf, a boot sounded on the stone floor behind her. Taul was back. Llorenç was nowhere to be seen.

“Sir, if you expect me to repair the bishop’s ceiling, you must help me with this ladder.”

Taul grunted his displeasure, but walked over and lifted the ladder with one hand, slamming it against the wall as if he were preparing to stage an assault on a castle. Within minutes she found herself perched on the ladder with her nose not two inches from the ceiling, repairing yet another patch of old plaster. Then the winter sun shot through the clerestory and across the plaster, bringing into sharp relief a field of blisters like a pox victim’s skin. It began to look as if she might be painting white background patches all day long, rather than finishing her work before noon as she had planned. Her first task was to remove the peeling paint.

In irritation, she attacked it with the scraper, wishing she weren't in a church so she could curse Ramón. 'What kind of fresco peels in dry Catalunya?' she thought. Within seconds she answered the question—a fresco that hid something, something far more interesting than old plaster.

"What's that?" Taul asked.

"Nothing," she said, gathering her gown with one hand and with a toe cautiously finding the next rung down.

"What are you doing? Did you deface the painting? Where are you going?"

"To find Father Arbert."

A few minutes later she returned with the priest in tow. "See for yourself if you don't believe me." She edged in under the ladder to steady it for him. "Must I?" asked Father Arbert, looking up at the spot high overhead where the ladder was propped.

"Can you see from here what is hidden beneath the whitewash?"

The priest sighed, glanced at Taul, then bunched his tunic around his knees.

"I suggest you use both hands, Father." Ermessenda was accus-tomed to climbing ladders with one hand, but it took practice.

"I see snakes," said Father Arbert when he reached the ceiling. For almost fifteen years, beneath the whitewash, the prayer clasped hands of the women and girls in the painting had been holding writhing snakes.

"Beautifully rendered," she said. "No rough sketch you would expect to be covered over. It looks to me as if they're offering them to Sant Juame. If the snakes were an error, they should have been chiseled out of the plaster. I don't understand why this was whitewashed. No real artist would have done it."

"Such is the veil of obscurity behind which mortal woman lives," said Father Arbert.

This, Ermessenda had to admit, was true, but she had never liked veils. Veils were the reason she decided to become a painter instead of a nun. How could you study the beauty of God's creation through a veil? Ramón knew this. Whenever she nagged him about a chance to paint something, he threatened to force her to take the veil.

"And what about the chalice with a woman's pap?" she asked. That's what she uncovered in the chalice—a bloody, severed breast.

The priest drew a sharp breath and sniffed as if she had asked him to administer the last rites to an overripe corpse. "Stand back," he said as he descended, apparently afraid she was looking up his tunic. "They were obviously painted over for good reason. Do as you were told. Patch the white. Often what is hidden should remain hidden."

"Revelations have been known to be beneficial," she said. Recognizing how sarcastic that sounded, she added quickly, "I'm afraid to cover up something that must have been part of the original composition. Senyor Ramón may want me to save it."

"Just this morning Llorenç de Pallars ordered me to have the whole scene obliterated," said the priest.

"The bishop won't permit that. This is the only portrait of his sister," said Taul. "What was his reason?"

"Senyor Llorenç thinks it's improper for mere mortals to be portrayed with saints. He fears the sin of pride," said the priest.

Ermessenda loathed to think she might have to destroy the painting and then replaster half the church's ceiling. "I may be able to restore the fresco for less than it would cost to patch it. Surely the bishop would like that," said Ermessenda.

Taul laughed. "Pay to restore snakes and a pap in a cup? Just replace the paint you scraped off."

"Of course, I support His Excellency," said the priest, "but the Pallarses paid for the ceiling in the first place, and they supply us with communion wine."

Taul frowned.

"From their own vineyard?" she asked.

"Sí. Their vineyards produce an especially sweet grape, too," Father Arbert said, "covered in botrytis mold, 'the noble rot': A heady wine. I should not like to have to find another vineyard to supply us."

"Which one is the bishop's sister?" asked Ermessenda.

"We shouldn't gossip about our betters," said Taul.

"Her," said Father Arbert, unconcerned. He craned his neck up at the ceiling and pointed to the prostrated woman. "Llorenç is their son. The older girl is their daughter—the one with the blue eyes. Over there on the left, that's Genau's second wife and their baby daughter."

"The second wife is dead now, too?" Ermessenda asked, so curious about this painting that she could not stop herself from gossiping.

"Sí," Father Arbert said. "She and that little girl died shortly after this was painted. Why have you scraped off their hair and half of Genau de Pallars's face?"

"The paint was blistered. Now I can see an ashen cross mark on the nobleman's forehead and flowers in the females' hair," said Ermessenda. "All are dead?"

"All but the older daughter, Lucy. She has taken the veil and lives in the monastery."

A cough sounded behind them. Ermessenda was startled to see that a few villagers had quietly gathered in the aisle along the wall. They were an ill-looking lot—three laborers with bruises on their cheeks and plucked beards from being bullied by men like Taul, one hulking youth, a toothless old crone, and a gaunt Saracen slave. Only these few of all the villagers had dared to enter the church when the bishop's knight was there.

"These villains are from the Pallarses' estate," said Taul. "Say no more in front of them." He gestured to Father Arbert to follow him.

Ermessenda climbed the ladder. She barely had time to finish scraping off the remaining blisters of paint—revealing that the bishop's sister was lying in a pool of blood—when a messenger arrived asking for Father Arbert. He stood at the base of her ladder while the hulking youth went on his behalf to find the priest. When Father Arbert and Taul halted at a spot directly below her, she pretended to continue scraping.

"The Abadessa wonders, Could old Father Pau come to the monastery until the bishop appoints a new priest?" the messenger said.

"The bishop won't like this," said Taul. "No, not having to appoint two priests in as many months."

"You mean Father Julian is dead? But he was in good health when he left here—not so much as a month ago," said Father Arbert, his bald head gleaming up at her from the shadows. "Is the monastery beset by demons? Does it need to be exorcised?"

Gabriel's trumpet sounded in her head. Old Father Pau would never be able to walk all the way up into the Pyrenees foothills, not with his wooden foot. He would need her to take him in the donkey cart. Naturally, she would have to rest in the monastery. What better opportunity to ask Lucy de Pallars for permission to properly finish work on the fresco? A daughter would be eager to salvage her mother's only portrait. Surely she would pay to have the worst images replaced. Ermessenda would fill the chalice with wine and paint bouquets in place of the snakes.

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING THEY LEFT for the monastery.

'This must be what martyrdom is like,' she thought. It was being pressed shoulder-to-shoulder with an ancient priest. It was the monotonous whack of his wooden foot as it hit the cart's side. It was worrying he might remember her from the time years ago, before she was adept at her craft, when she plastered his church at Solsona and dropped a large blob on the altar. And worst of all, it was Taul of Girona following them on his black steed, both in chain mail. Like Taul, the horse wasn't very clean, and she could smell them even from where she was seated inches from the donkey's rump.

She sighed. "I hear the Abadessa is an ogress. She favors haircloth and self-flagellation."

"I've never heard that," said Father Pau.

She turned around as the orange sun was rising behind them to shoo Taul back a few feet. There on the horizon she spotted a hulking human figure.

"Look," she said, then hastened the donkey on with a sharp rap of her stick.

"What?" Father Pau asked.

She groaned. "I've never seen a church's patrons in a ceiling fresco."

"Gerau de Pallars had many reasons to supplicate Sant Juame, I suppose."

"The snakes in the female figures' hands. The chalice with the pap. What about them?"

"It's obvious," he said. "The severed breast represents St. Agatha and her devotion to Christ. The serpent stands for Original Sin. The ash mark means penitence. The chalice, the Blood of Christ."

"What about the flowers? I can see why someone might want to cover the snakes and the bloody pap, but what could be wrong with wearing flowers in your hair?"

"Every flower signifies something. Find out what kind of flowers they are and you will know what they mean. Perhaps the artist made a mistake. Most flowers stand for the Virgin Mary—it would be wrong to paint them in the hair of a man's two wives."

"The whitewash looks like vandalism to me."

Father Pau thought for a moment. "The Devil's doing? Witchcraft, you think?"

After that, she asked him no more questions. He was either concealing something or he was as senile as Gerau de Pallars. For reasons known only to the beast, the donkey stopped short just then, almost hurling the old priest out of his seat and headfirst into a boulder. Taul pulled his horse up short, too. Ermessenda looked back.

"There," she said, pointing to the silhouette following them. "Don't you see him?"

Taul grabbed his saddle horn with a steel-gloved hand and twisted around to look. "Who?" the knight asked.

"What?" Father Pau asked.

Ermessenda couldn't help but think that women weren't the only people who lived behind a veil of obscurity.

The monastery of Sant Joan de les Abadesses was a squatty, sprawling stone structure built in the time of Guifre the Hairy. A jumble of towers and rectangles, it looked like something giant toddlers might construct from toy blocks—not as ominous as she imagined, but not a place where she would want to spend her dying days.

Taul's metallic knock at the massive door sounded deep inside the building like approaching doom. A *monja* dragged the door open. "Father Pau?" No need to introduce the bishop's knight to anyone in the monastery.

"Sí," the priest said. When she looked questioningly at Ermessenda, he added, "This woman is keeping our church looking nice. She brought me here." The *monja* dragged the door open wider, then asked the visitors to stand in a foyer decorated with crucifixes and family crests of nobles who had taken refuge there over the centuries.

"That's Guifre the Hairy's crest," said Father Pau. "Three red stripes for the three bloody fingers his son streaked on the wall near his deathbed. And there is the Pallarses' crest."

"What do the wavy lines on it signify? Snakes?" asked Ermessenda.

"Silence," said Taul as the Abadessa entered, her silk veils flowing behind her like an angel's wings. Hardly sackcloth or a hair shirt, as Ermessenda had expected.

"Sir," the Abadessa nodded curtly to Taul, "to what do we owe the honor of your visit?"

"The bishop won't like to hear about Father Julian's death so soon after the other priest's," he said.

"Father Pau, welcome." She offered the priest her ring hand to kiss. "Such a tragedy. Mayhap this will convince the bishop we need more priests in the parish." She glanced at Taul. "Let us pray no one else dies suddenly in his sleep." The four crossed themselves and bowed their heads in prayer.

"Father Julian was so young," said Father Pau, raising his head. "Is it true about his drinking? The rumor is you found him dead in the wine cellar."

The Abadessa indicated Ermessenda with her eyes.

Misinterpreting the look as a question, Father Pau said, "Before she leaves, Ermessenda would like to ask the lady, Lucy de Pallars, about repairing the family portrait in the church."

"Oh?"

Ermessenda opened her mouth to speak, but the usually slow old priest for once was quick. "Ermessenda is an apprentice to Ramón de Solsona." The Abadessa knew Ramón. Most of the region's noblewomen knew the handsome master artist.

"The bishop paid him to fix some peeling paint on the church ceiling," said Taul. "I would prefer to discuss this in private."

"And Llorenç de Pallars demands that Father Arbert destroy his family's portrait entirely," said Father Pau.

"Oh? The Pallarses paid for the fresco. Why would they want it destroyed?" asked the Abadessa. "Why did not Senyor Ramón simply write to Llorenç or Sister Lucy?"

"He cannot write," Ermessenda said.

The Abadessa frowned. "All right, then. I'll ask the lady if she will see you, but you know she's taken a vow of silence."

“I suppose that means she won’t be able to help you much, Ermessenda,” said the priest as if catechizing a child.

“She can write, can’t she?” asked Ermessenda.

“Of course,” said the Abadessa. “Father Pau, you may read the lady’s writings to this woman.” She must have assumed that like her master the apprentice was illiterate. She had no way of knowing Ermessenda was a Barcelona merchant’s heiress, a *pubilla*, who could read and write not only Catalan but Latin.

After that, Father Pau went to the wine cellar where Father Julian’s body awaited him, and the Abadessa and Taul left Ermessenda in the foyer. She stood there so long and grew so bored that she actually began to count the cracks in the plaster.

“This must be what *monjas* do all day,’ she thought.

The door opened again and in swooped the Abadessa, her veils flying out behind her like a cormorant’s wings. She glared at Ermessenda, who winced and made a face that Ramón called her raisin look—wrinkled, dry, and dark.

“Lucy de Pallars does not wish to see you,” she said. “Go back where you came from.”

ERMESSENDA DROVE BACK TO ARISTÓT alone, looking over her shoulder all afternoon for Taul or the shadowy man. She was certain she had seen someone—and she liked to think her painter’s eyes never deceived her.

The next morning she returned to the church, intent upon making a copy of the flowers. They were the only pretty images painted over. She would show the copy to her herbalist friend. Hilda de Llosses would know what they were, what they signified, and everything else about them. And there was certainly something about them worth knowing.

“Isn’t the bishop’s knight here to watch you?” asked Father Arbert the instant she stepped into the church.

“I imagine he has gone to inform the bishop. Would you help me lift the ladder so I can get a good look at something?”

“No. It’s time for confession. Have you anything to confess?”

“Sí, but I have work to do first.” After the priest left, Ermessenda looked at the knot of parishioners huddled around a basalt pillar. They were the same bedraggled lot who had been there before. She coughed and smiled at them, hoping one would volunteer to help her with the ladder. Most just stared down at their feet. The hulking churl, who reminded her of a certain silhouette in the morning sun, stared at her unblinking.

Then a bell sounded announcing that the priest had entered the confessional, and they all moved toward it, all but the Saracen slave. She took hold of his sleeve and dragged him back to the ladder. Once atop it, Ermessenda would have liked to lift her skirt and make an ink copy of the flowers on her linen shift. She was a skillful copyist, especially with a pen, and could have forged the Count de Berenguer’s signature. For decency’s sake she drew the flowers in charcoal on a canvas scrap instead.

A few moments later as she put away her tools, she noticed the hulking churl step out of the confessional with Father Arbert, who left the church, despite a long line of sinners. The slave followed the two. Her happiness at being spared confession to Father Arbert was somewhat dampened by the sight.

JUST AFTER SUNDOWN, SHE REACHED Hilda's cottage, with its spikenard and mandrake placard—a gift from Ermessenda—creaking on iron hinges in the chill evening wind. As in all her recent travels, she felt someone must be following her.

She knocked on the low door. Before she could blink twice Hilda drew her in, kissing her on both cheeks. Even tiny Ermessenda had to duck her wimpled-and-scarved head to keep from brushing against the herbs dangling from the rafters. Regrettably, she could identify only the smell of tarragon and basil. She had never been very good at identifying botanicals—not like minerals and chemicals, which she knew well. Besides, she spent so much time breathing church air that she usually traveled in a cloud of frankincense and myrrh, like the Three Wise Men, and could smell little else.

“You say they're bluish purple? Of course I know what they are,” said Hilda, pointing a tincture-stained finger at Ermessenda's sketch. “Larkspur. Can't you see the hooded petals? And the unmistakable shape of the leaves.”

“You mean, it's monkshood?” asked Ermessenda.

“*Sí*,” said the herbalist. “It's sometimes called that and old wife's hood and aconite. You've rendered it so true to nature. As always! What skill you have.”

“Not a very holy plant, then, I suppose,” she said.

Hilda laughed. “The Devil's plant, more like it.”

“What would you say if I told you that Gerau de Pallars's first wife used to wear these flowers in her hair?”

“I'd say those aren't flowers a great lady wears for decoration. A hex sign, perhaps.”

“She was the bishop's sister, you know,” said Ermessenda.

“*Sí*, I know,” said Hilda. “It makes monkshood all the less appropriate for her.”

Only days later did Ermessenda learn that after she left, Hilda's cottage had another visitor. He came on horseback. By the time he was gone, Hilda had lost her tongue.

SHE TRAVELED THE WHOLE MOONLESS night to reach Ramón's house, barely able to control her childish fear of the dark. The next day they stood in the cellar watching a carter unload bags of plaster lime from a wagon.

“The images are clearly part of the original composition. Go see for yourself. That fresco is talking to us,” she said. “Even Father Pau admits as much. He just can't understand it. But I am sure I do—now.”

Ramón looked at her as if she were a brick missing from a wall he was preparing to paint. “I see. While I thought you were working, you were traipsing around from Aristó to the monastery and the Lord knows where else. You caused Llorenç de Pallars to withdraw his patronage from the church. You offended the bishop of Barcelona.”

“No. The bishop insists that the painting be saved. It's the only portrait of his sister,” she said.

Ramón sighed. “All right. I suppose many parts of that ceiling need repainting by now. We'll go to the monastery and tell them what you suspect. But let me do the talking.”

“I have asked many favors of the bishop lately,” the Abadessa said to Taul, who followed Ermessenda and Ramón to the monastery a few days later. “The least I can do is to assist him in preserving his sister's memory. I have some funds of my own for the purpose.”

“Does Lucy de Pallars agree with you?” Ramón asked, unable to conceal his surprise.

“Not likely,” whispered Ermessenda.

The Abadessa led them with Taul to the monastery’s library, a long, narrow room bathed in the watery gray light of windows glazed with alabaster. Father Pau was already there. They all sat on a hard bench, folded their hands before them on a polished oak table, and waited for Lucy de Pallars.

“As everyone knows, by the time Gerau de Pallars inherited his estate, the family was land-poor,” said Ramón.

“This is not the place to gossip about the Pallarses,” said the Abadessa.

“This is hardly gossip, lady. It is a revelation,” Ermessenda said.

“Everyone knew he married the bishop’s sister for her money,” said Taul. “What of it?”

“After the marriage Gerau was surprised to learn her dowry was little more than worthless land and a few gold plates,” said Ramón.

“He should have known,” said Father Pau. “The bishop was already buying his way into heaven by then.” He caught himself and cringed as Taul looked displeased. “Well, where did he think the money came from?”

“Gerau tried to squeeze every last dinar from his tenants,” said Taul. “No one can blame the bishop or his sister for that.”

The Abadessa shook her head. “The Count de Berenguer approved.”

“Their first child was a boy,” said Ramón. “That made Gerau’s situation easier. No question as to whom the estate would pass next. The second child was a girl, the lady Lucy.”

“Of course that was a problem,” said Ermessenda. “No one wants a daughter. We girls need dowries.”

“Why stir up memories of what happened so long ago?” asked the Abadessa.

“That meant Gerau would have to take the money for Lucy’s dowry from his son Llorenç’s inheritance,” Ramón said.

“Then, as if the Lord wished to help Gerau, his wife died,” said Father Pau, chuckling into his fist. “That left him free to seek a richer wife.”

“The Lord giveth, and He taketh away,” the Abadessa said.

“Si,” Ramón said. “Gerau’s second wife gave birth to a girl, too, and the gentleman commissioned the frescoes. A sort of bribe to Sant Juame to favor him with no more female children who needed dowries. While we were working on the ceiling his second wife became ill and the little girl, too. Both died soon after the frescoes were finished. Guillem’s workshop gossiped about little else for days. Gerau never married again.”

“The offering must have worked,” said the Abadessa. “After that, the estate and vineyards prospered. Llorenç is set to marry a niece of the Count de Berenguer, and Gerau has lived to a ripe old age.”

“Senile, though.” Father Pau crossed himself. “A more querulous old sinner I have never known. Bah! You should hear some of the things he says in confession.”

The Abadessa ignored the priest’s indiscretion. “Sister Lucy brought us only a small dowry, but her family has been very generous with gifts. Why, just a few weeks ago they sent two casks of their finest wine.”

“One question, sir knight, if you don’t mind,” said Ramón. “Why did the bishop send someone to follow Ermessenda whenever she left the church?”

“Follow? I know nothing about that.”

The Abadessa turned to the door, through which a veiled figure now passed. The figure glided to a stop in front of the Abadessa, then tossed aside the veil to reveal her Visigoth-blue eyes. Other than those eyes, Ermessenda recognized in the *monja*'s face not a single feature of the girl in the painting. Her golden hair was completely covered by a veil, and a wimple hid her ears and her cheeks.

‘Indistinguishable from any other *monja* on earth, she could be in disguise,’ thought Ermessenda.

“This woman has questions about the frescoes in the Church of Sant Juame,” said the Abadessa. The silent *monja* seemed to shudder.

“I shall read your writing to her,” Father Pau told Lucy. “Her name is Ermessenda. A virgin who has devoted her life to plastering church walls.”

“I am an artist apprentice to Senyor Ramón,” said Ermessenda.

The *monja* sat down beside the Abadessa and picked up a quill and sheet of parchment. Then she dipped the quill into an inkpot and wrote. She handed the page to Father Pau.

“You mean our family portrait? That’s what she wrote,” said Father Pau.

“Yes,” said Ermessenda. “The whitewash has begun to peel off, and—”

Lucy’s face turned alabaster gray.

“What is it, Sister Lucy?” asked the Abadessa.

Lucy gestured for the parchment.

‘How,’ Ermessenda thought, ‘does one interrogate a woman who insists upon remaining as silent as a fresco? She decided to be direct. “Your mother was poisoned, wasn’t she?”’

“Poisoned?” the Abadessa said, her eyes round as tangerines. She looked at Lucy.

Lucy might have clenched her jaw then. Her wimple made it difficult to be sure. She bowed her head in prayer.

‘Are my conjectures correct?’ Ermessenda wondered. The *monja* was denying none of it.

When Lucy looked up again her blue eyes were icy. Then she wrote with shaking fingers for several minutes. Finally, she handed the page back to the priest.

“We don’t have enough parchment in this monastery for me to tell you the whole story,” he read. “I shall begin when a painter named Guillem de Solsona came to our *masia* to draw our portraits. Guillem was an observant man, much as you are an observant woman, Ermessenda. I suppose that is a characteristic of artists such as you.”

Ermessenda ducked her head. She could remember no one ever having called her an artist before, but she did not want to let the *monja* see her smile.

“Why were the images painted over?” Ramón asked through clenched teeth.

The *monja* wrote a few lines.

“My brother insisted the priests do it. He said he disliked the way it looked,” the priest read, then added, “Yes, I remember now. He particularly wanted it corrected, he said, before the bishop should see such a disgraceful depiction of his dead sister.”

“The flowers in her hair are deadly aconite,” said Ermessenda. “Also called monkshood. It’s in all their hair, suggesting to me that your mother, stepmother, and sister were all poisoned.”

Once again the *monja* wrote rapidly. At last she handed the page back to Father Pau, who took it, glanced at the marks covering it, and then read silently. Ermessenda itched to grab the

page from the priest and read it for herself. The priest read: “One day, when Guillem was sketching me, he told me he knew all about it.”

“That’s why you entered this monastery,” said Ermessenda.

The *monja* looked at Ermessenda with those deep blue eyes.

The priest read on. “Guillem said he could tell from a certain purple spot beneath their eyes that they were dying.”

“Guillem could have been a physician, he saw so many things,” said Ramón. “I owe much to his training.”

“Guillem told me to take refuge in a convent,” the priest read. “I agreed, of course. My father had no objection to my choosing poverty. A convent demands a more modest dowry than most husbands.”

“But,” Ermessenda said, as the priest slid the page back across the table’s polished surface, “your father—for all his faults—is not their killer.”

The *monja* shook her head as she dipped the quill into the inkwell. When she finally paused and held the pen aloft, Ermessenda reached for the parchment, but Father Pau was too fast and snatched it first.

“At last I can tell the truth,” he read. “If you mean that my father did not poison the wine, then you are right.”

The priest held the page in front of Ermessenda. “There’s no more room for answers,” he said. “You should stop now.”

“I see,” said Ermessenda. “Unthinkable as it is, her own child murdered your mother.”

“Do you accuse the bishop’s niece?” shouted Taul. He jumped to his feet and drew his sword, ready to behead the next person who spoke.

As she wrote one more sentence in the margin, Ermessenda wondered if the silent *monja* ever wished she could break her vows just once.

“It says, ‘I suppose there’s nothing to be done about my brother now,’” Father Pau read.

“Who?” asked Ramón, as if he misheard the priest.

“Llorenç de Pallars, of course,” said Ermessenda.

The Abadessa uttered a short “Oh,” then covered her mouth with her kerchief. Taul dropped his sword back into its sheath with a grunt. Ramón arched his eyebrows.

“Your brother produced a special vintage, as his first experiments in winemaking—an especially sweet wine to cover the taste of aconite,” said Ermessenda. “He made certain only the women of his family drank of that vintage. Am I right? First your mother. Then when your father bedded a new wife and another child cried out for attention, he killed them, too. I suppose the reason you didn’t die was that you drank your wine well watered. Guillem saved your life at the risk of his own. Was it only coincidence that he died so soon after?”

Lucy shook her head.

“The painting seems to show your brother offering the saint the pap from which he first sucked life,” said the Abadessa, sadly.

“I wish I’d seen that before it was whitewashed,” said Ramón. “I painted my section and then left to work on the frescoes at Bigis. No wonder the priests agreed to Llorenç’s request.”

“I don’t understand,” said the priest. “Why kill his own mother?”

“For the dowry, of course,” said Ermessenda. “Free to marry again, his father would receive another dowry from the second wife’s family. A wealthy stepmother would invest in

improvements to the Pallars estates—a new winery, perhaps, or new vines. He killed his stepmother and sister before another Pallars daughter could further diminish his father’s estate.”

“Your brother sought to hide Guillem’s accusation before the bishop saw it by having the priests whitewash the fresco’s background,” said Ramón.

“This little shrew was right, then,” said Taul. “No artist would have been so foolish as to cover dry plaster with wet paint.”

“I suppose one of the wine casks went missing soon after they showed up at your door,” said Ramón. “And the priest who came to confess you before Father Julian also died then.”

The Abadessa nodded. “*Sí*, Father Joan died in his bed the day after we received the gift of the wine.”

“But a vow of silence?” asked Ermessenda. “Why did you not speak out?”

Lucy wrote on the margins of the parchment and handed it to Father Pau.

“Llorenç insisted I keep silent,” he read. “Nothing could save me from his spies, he said, even in a convent. Nothing but to acquiesce to his demand. I never thought my brother would risk poisoning the whole monastery to get rid of me, though. It’s all my fault. All of it. Just because I needed a dowry.”

“But why now?” said the Abadessa.

“Because he feared the frescoes would reveal his crimes before he could marry the count’s niece,” said Ermessenda.

“Of course. As soon as Father Arbert asked him to pay for the repairs and he refused, Llorenç knew the priest would go to the bishop,” said Taul. “His Excellency would soon hear about the snakes—he always said his sister’s death was suspicious.”

“It seems a shame to let so great a murderer go unpunished,” said the Abadessa.

At Ermessenda’s suggestion, that same day Lucy sent her brother a message claiming that she was slowly dying of a painful tumor in her gut. “My last request is for a cask of that memorable vintage of our youth, the one you produced just for the Pallars women,” she wrote.

Overnight, Llorenç complied with her “last request” and sent her a whole hogshead. The monastery’s pig—the one the Abadessa chose to guzzle the wine on Lucy’s behalf—died within the day, proving beyond all doubt that the wine intended for Lucy was poisoned.

ERMESSENDA AND RAMÓN WERE NOT present at Gerau and Llorenç’s arrest shortly after that, but they could easily envision the scene: it was so like scenes their workshop had painted of Saracens defeated in battle—Taul of Girona’s sword tip beneath the murderer’s bearded chin—the bishop looking on with his self-satisfied smirk—their caparisoned horses breathing smoke in the cool morning air.

Soon after that, the senile old nobleman died under torture without remembering his crimes. Llorenç committed suicide in prison by drinking poisoned wine, brought to him from the Pallars estate by the hulking churl who tended to all his dirty work.

The affair appalled Ramón—especially Gerau’s death on the rack. “We should not have interfered,” he said, peering up at the frescoes in the Church of Sant Jaume through a fog of incense and candle smoke.

“Do you suppose Llorenç would have killed me, too?” Ermessenda asked. “Or simply cut out my tongue as he did poor Hilda’s?”

“Why else have you followed? But don’t tempt me into a remark about your tongue. Do as you were told. Destroy the images. Then hie thee to a nunnery, woman. Whatever possessed me to accept you as an apprentice?”

“My dowry?” Ermessenda asked with a tiny smile. She knew he didn’t mean it—not yet anyway. Maybe in another fifteen years.

Ramón arched his eyebrows as if to say, *Ego Sum Lux*.

So, she chiseled the snakes and other murderous images out of the ceiling, applied fresh plaster, and then, as Lucy wished, painted bouquets of lilies in the female figures’ hands. She was even permitted to replace Llorenç with her first angel. But after Ramón left her alone, she took the liberty of skipping a step or two. She applied a little wet paint over dry plaster on Geráu’s forehead and the flowers in the ladies’ hair. She could not help but wonder whether she would be there in another fifteen years to see it peel or whether by then she would be cloistered in some convent painting frescoes for nuns.

