

## THE ANCHORESS

Sister André says it is time to pray again.

Kneeling, I wince as my knees touch the cold stone floor. They are sore and red.

But I dare not keep her waiting.

The words come easily. I have recited them a thousand times. Out loud, I say the prayers the Sister tells me to. In my heart, I pray that God releases me from this tomb. He had to sacrifice his only son for our sins, but I, too, am a sacrifice. My parents had to give me to the nuns because they could not afford to feed me anymore.

Little Cateline could not go because she was too young. Louis and Robert could not go because they help papa with the farm. Marie could not go because she helps mama with the house.

But me, I could go.

The nuns will care for you, my parents said. They ignored my tears and my pleas. They said the nuns would feed me, but my heart was too broken to eat. They said they would come visit me, but Sister André needed a companion for her five years of confinement. She chose me.

My parents bringing me here was a sign from God, she said.

The girl who was sealed in with her during her last confinement died after less than a year. She was five when they put her in with Sister André.

Now she is nothing.

The girl who Sister André chose for her first confinement did survive. I tried to speak with her, but she hides from people now, broken.

I am strong, but I do not know if I am strong enough for this.

Sister André says it is time to pray again.

I kneel on the floor, spotted with my dried blood. Yesterday, the penance was harsher than usual. My pain is nothing compared to what Jesus suffered at Calvary, the Sister says.

“Fire!” Sister André cries suddenly. She pours what little water we have to share over my red hair. I try to get some in my mouth. Beating me about the head with her hands, she screams that demons play in my hair. She calls for shears through the narrow openings the masons left us at the bottom of the wall. Thankfully, no shears come.

Mayhap God is listening.

“I know you tempt me, like the Devil tempted Christ!” She screams. She knocks over the chamber pot as she hits me. “Wicked! Wicked girl!”

Tears no longer flow down my cheeks. I cannot spare the energy to cry. Every bit of my strength must be saved.

Huddled in the corner with her stained, grey habit wrapped around her, Sister André mumbles, barely above a whisper. I, too, stay quiet, lest her mood rise again.

The Sister cares not about me. Never has she asked who I am or where I am from. She has never listened to a

word I have uttered. I have stopped trying to talk to her. It only makes her mad.

Sister André says it is time to pray again.

If faith were a vessel for holding water, each prayer I am forced to say would be a drop emptying from mine.

“Only through great sacrifice can we bring ourselves closer to the lord,” she says, “to know Christ’s eternal struggle.”

A soft breeze loses its way and enters our tiny chamber, bringing with it the scent of honeysuckle from some faraway dream where I am free and running in the fields again. It disappears and the unwashed stink invades my nostrils.

I wretch.

She slaps me.

It stings.

Sister André says it is time to pray again.

She raises a stone above her head and scratches another line into the wall. Each one represents a sunrise. So many lines are on the wall. So many more need to be scratched before I can be free again.

“Filthy Cathar!” She screams at me.

I tell her my family is Catholic, but she does not listen.

“I was like you,” she says. “My family gave me to Sister Genviève. She ... taught me.” Her face scrunches in pain. “No!”

Her hands swipe at an invisible threat.

Surprised to hear my own name, I ask, “Is that why you

chose me?"

But she is gone again. Hands clasped, she prays and weeps to herself.

I dare not disturb her.

A small loaf of bread is slid into the room at the bottom of the wall. I dive down and put my mouth to the opening.

"Let me out!" I scream. "Please!"

Footsteps scurry down the corridor. "I am sorry," a tiny voice calls back.

"Such insolence!" Sister André cries.

I know the beating will be painful.

Curled up in the corner, she sleeps, like the kingdom's smelliest cat.

I confess.

In these moments, I wonder if I have the strength to be the Cain to Sister André's Abel.

Would God forgive me?

I swear I will not be as vile as her. But I fear if I do not act, I may be Abel, too.

My dress, stained and thin, barely covers a skeleton with but a wisp of spirit.

Only memories keep me alive. I remember running through wet grass, staring at the blue sky, hearing the buzz of bees, smelling mama's fresh bread, feeling papa lift me in his arms.

I open my eyes.

Darkness.

Vileness.

A witch from my nightmares.

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My knees no longer hurt. The skin has grown thick.

I recite the words, empty of feeling.

Hands claw at my dress.

It rips.

"No!" I scream.

"Let the lord see you as you really are," she says.

I stand.

We stare into each other.

"You let me be," I say to her.

She draws up her small frame and raises a hand.

"You let me be," I repeat.

She lowers her hand.

"God will judge you, filthy Cathar."

I step back.

She lunges and clamps a talon into my hair.

"You will be judged! You will be judged!" She screeches, knocking my head on the wall.

We struggle. With every bit of strength, I push her off. My head stings.

Sister André smiles. She holds up a lock of my hair. It drips blood.

"You will be judged," she hisses.

She sleeps. Her slight snoring fills our dank cell as I shiver.

It is time to pray again.

I kneel.

“Dear lord,” I whisper. “I feel I have been reduced to an animal. I have to act as the animals act to survive. Please forgive me for what I am about to do.”