THE BISHOP’S HEART

Russell Proctor



© Russell Proctor 2018. All rights reserved.

“Save us!”

The cry rang through the stone corridors of St Agathe’s nunnery, rousing the sisters from their quiet contemplations, pious readings and welcome sleep. Some cowered at the disturbance and started praying if they were not already doing so, begging their lord’s protection in case their refuge was under attack.

In her cell, Sister Edithna finished her prayer to her own god, Dionysus, and chafed the circulation back into her arms and legs. The stiffness in her limbs was not caused by long hours of kneeling—the lord of wine and theatre didn’t require his followers to kneel at prayer—but by the icy conditions of her cell.

A hammering at the door startled her, accompanied by words between frightened gasps. “Sister! There’s evil come!”

Edithna slipped the gold ring from the forefinger of her right hand and opened the door to a wide-eyed novice. “What is it, Marie? Be quiet lest Mother Gertrude hear you.”

The girl stared, panting. “There’s…there’s…”

“Yes, you said. Evil. But I doubt even the devil himself would be out on a night as cold as this.”

“No…not the infernal one.” The girl swallowed and took a deep breath. “There are *men* here.”

Worse than the devil to this innocent girl.

“Come in.” She pulled Marie into her cell and made her sit on the cot. “Now talk sense. What’s happened?”

It was a few moments before Marie could speak again. “Soldiers have brought a wounded man to the infirmary. A monk.”

Although the nunnery was a day’s journey west of Rennes, travellers seldom sought shelter there on the way to or from Vitré or Montfort. Most chose the monastery a few miles further west, but a wounded man would be brought to the nearest place of assistance.

Marie leaned in close and lowered her voice, but fear still crept in. “He’s badly injured. I saw a wound in his side. So much blood.”

Before seeking sanctuary in the nunnery, Edithna had seen more blood than any innocent person should. Her home town of Fougères had been attacked by Carolingians invading from the east forty years ago. The massacre had left few alive. Only by good fortune had she been able to find refuge here in St Agathe’s.

“I see. A monk you say? Perhaps he was attacked by bandits.” She left the cell and strode towards the infirmary.

Little Marie followed at her heels, clutching Edithna’s robe so as not to trip over in the dark corridor. “I saw his wounds. Horrible they were. He’s been torn open.”

“A wild animal, then. I’ll attend him. Go to your dormitory now and pray to God no bandits may enter the walls of St Agathe’s, and no wolves either.”

“Not a wolf!” The girl shivered. “The phantom!”

“Enough of that!”

“They say he wanders the forest, killing all who cross his path.”

“Be quiet! Don’t suggest that to the other novices, if you value peace and order.”

No good would come of hysteria; Marie’s fears needed to be stifled before they spread. The nuns, sheltered from the world, rightly feared the supernatural.

After the girl had gone, Edithna continued down the dark corridors to the infirmary. No need for a candle, since her eyes penetrated the darkness like a cat’s. All true followers of a deity possessed an ability that set them apart from other mortals. Her night-vision attracted the attention of Dionysus, who had made her one of his maenads many years ago.

In the infirmary, Sister Bernadette, the assistant infirmarian, bent over a man in bed. The smell of blood came readily enough to Edithna’s senses, as did the piteous moans of the writhing patient.

“Hurry,” said Bernadette. Concern, not animosity, made her blunt. She clutched a wad of blood-soaked rags to the man’s side.

He was about thirty, a monk as evidenced by the torn cassock that lay on the floor. He wore now only a pair of braies, his nakedness excused by the need to tend his wound. Worn sandals were still on his feet. His right arm clutched a leather satchel.

Edithna picked up fresh cloths and nodded to Bernadette, who removed the bloody ones. In the monk’s left side was a gaping wound, not something neatly cut with a blade but hacked or torn out. It resembled an injury caused by the teeth or claws of an animal. One thing was plain: the poor man was not much longer for the world. Edithna pushed the fresh rags over the wound and applied pressure.

“What can we do?” she asked. Her own medical expertise extended to tending the aged, bandaging sprains and prescribing for the chills and fevers the sisters acquired from the damp conditions of the nunnery.

A sour grunt from Sister Bernadette. “Prayer might help. I can’t.”

Edithna noticed another man waiting on the far side of the room, a soldier in chainmail and livery, staring intently at her and chewing the end of his long beard. One of the monk’s escorts on the road.

“Get that man out of here,” she said to Bernadette. “He’ll disturb the other sisters.”

As if on cue, one of the elderly nuns in another bed woke up and started moaning.

Bernadette hurried across the room to shuffle the soldier out. The man seemed reluctant, but when Edithna glared at him he followed the nun.

Lifting the cloths to examine the wound, she winced at the shredded meat. The man threw his head back in agony and Edithna noticed dark bruises on his neck. She had seen the neck of a hanged man back in her secular days: this monk’s bruises were made by no animal—someone had tried to strangle him.

She tugged at the leather satchel clasped under his right arm, but the monk, although only half-conscious, tightened his grip.

“I won’t steal it,” she said.

“No!” he gasped, blood-shot yellow eyes turned on her. “Please…”

“I can’t bind your wounds properly unless you release it.”

Not that there was much point: the man would be dead in a few minutes.

“Better...to pray.”

Edithna leaned in closer to him and whispered, “Don’t try to talk. My god can’t help you. He isn’t one who has power over the dying. But he blesses you, and wishes you a peaceful journey.”

“Which…journey?” Even a monk might fear his destination to be Hell rather than the Paradise his god promised the pious.

“The one due to all good men,” she said. No god, not even Dionysus, knew what happened to human beings after death. Such things were not the concern of the immortal.

The monk moved his arm slightly, causing a fresh gout of blood from his wound. “The heart.” he groaned.

“What heart?”

But he said no more, and a minute later had closed his eyes forever.

\*\*\*

The singing rose to the roof of the chapel and echoed back, full of the resonance of wood.

The nuns sang to a god Edithna could never know, but the words still thrilled and rumbled and lifted her heart beyond the mere confines of the mundane. Fifty voices harmonising, each driven by a soul and mind united with the others, each feeling a truth and universality that gave impetus to their devotion.

Edithna closed her eyes as she added her voice to the others.

After the hymn finished she kept her eyes closed, waiting for the last echoes to die, for the last tremble of the rafters to settle. Only then did she look around once more. No ornate stained glass or golden fittings here in this simple chapel, only the wooden crucifix above the altar and hard benches for the rows of praying nuns.

At the end of the service, she waited until it was her row’s turn to leave and shuffled out with the others, hands clasped in front, taking small steps only, her slippered feet hardly feeling the icy stones beneath, so full was her heart with song and reverberations.

“Sister.”

Mother Gertrude, the Abbess, lurked at the door of the chapel. Edithna bowed and waited for the other to speak—it was not the place for a mere lay sister to initiate conversation with her superior.

“Your choir was most transcendent. The Lord indeed blesses your efforts.”

Edithna didn’t smile, but her heart felt relief. It was not the deity the Abbess worshipped who had made the hymns sublime, but long practice, weary hours in the chapel, cozening and encouraging the singers, badgering them in the most gentle way to improve. Music and her own innate love of art inspired Edithna’s efforts.

“There is something I must speak to you about. Sister Bernadette told me of the monk who died last night in the infirmary.”

“Yes, Mother. Unfortunately, his wound was mortal. In the end only prayer could ease his passing.”

“Did he tell you what happened?”

“No. He could hardly speak, and his only words were of proper concern for his immortal soul, not his earthly body.”

A sour grunt. “You would know about immortality, wouldn’t you?”

For ten years the woman had been Abbess at St Agathe’s, and had been a nun there for twenty years before that. Over the time she had aged from youthful beauty to wrinkled woman, while Edithna, who had been there longer, still retained the appearance she always had. True followers of a deity did not age, although they were still subject to death by other means.

The Abbess sighed. “I’m sorry; I spoke harshly. All the sisters here respect your agelessness. They know it is a gift from God.”

“Yes, Mother.” Living in the nunnery assisted Edithna to hide from inquiry. As long as she pretended to worship the Christian god, and put her changelessness down to divine favour, she could hide from the inquisitive.

“The monk was Brother Antoninus from the Abbey of St Germaine in Rennes,” the Abbess continued, taking a seat at the end of the nearest bench. “The soldier you saw was the leader of his armed escort, guarding him on his journey to Loudéac. He told me that last night Antoninus wandered off from their camp a little way, presumably to pray in solitude. The escort heard sounds of a struggle and ran to assist. The sergeant—that’s the man you so casually dismissed last night—saw someone bent over him, someone wearing a monk’s robe and cowl. At the arrival of the guards the figure fled. The soldiers bore the monk here for assistance.” She crossed herself and muttered a benediction. Edithna copied the motion but not the words. “The sergeant asked me, was there anything in his satchel?”

The satchel, along with the monk’s clothing, had been returned to the escort. Edithna had handed them over personally.

“No. Sister Bernadette had—”

“I have already questioned her. She didn’t inspect the satchel before he died, but you had some words with him.”

“As I said, only about his immortal soul. He died unshriven.”

“Yes. Most unfortunate.”

All the other nuns had left the church now and returned to their cells. They were alone in the quiet chapel.

“The Archbishop of Rennes sent me a letter some weeks ago to expect Brother Antoninus,” said the Abbess. “We were to give him and his escort shelter if needed. He was conveying something important to Loudéac. A relic.”

Relics often made procession around the country as they were valuable to believers, being capable of miracles. They were usually body parts of the saints and the blessed, but also pieces of the true cross or clothing.

“What was it?”

“The heart of Bishop Gaston Moutiere of Rennes.”

“I have heard of him.”

“So you should. He died fifty years ago and his heart, blessed may it be, has been a source of faith and healing ever since. Some whisper already that Bishop Gaston should be made a saint. His heart was to spend some time in the church at Loudéac. You did not find it among his things? Then whoever attacked him must have taken it.”

“Perhaps,” said Edithna. “But no bandit would steal a relic, even if he knew Antoninus carried it. He could not sell it, for it would be too well known, and such a thing would not perform miracles for thieves and sinners.”

The Abbess coughed in the icy draft that blew into the chapel. “There are many legends about Bishop Gaston and his good works in life. But other tales, too. Apparently his body vanished shortly before his burial, leaving an empty coffin. Fortunately his heart had already been removed and placed in its reliquary in the cathedral. Some say he was taken to heaven by the Lord himself, body and all, so blessed was he.”

Edithna did not dare to ask what Mother Gertrude thought of that tale.

“God knows all,” she replied, an answer that often satisfied to fill a gap in her conversations with the Abbess.

“Do you think robbers attacked Brother Antoninus?” the woman asked.

“Perhaps.” To see the reaction, Edithna added, “I heard one of the novices fear a supernatural assailant.”

“You mean the phantom the meek-minded believe haunts the countryside?” the old woman replied. “The ignorant blame any violence on that cause. Pay no heed to such gossip.” But she shuddered nevertheless.

“There are such things that wander the world,” persisted Edithna. “And you must know that mutilated bodies are found a few times a year either beside the road or in the depths of the forest. The common folk hold that a phantom goes forth in plain black habit and hood and seeks the souls of the righteous.”

“They do,” said the Abbess. “But the *wise* say it is no more than a child’s ghost story.”

“Of course, Mother,” Edithna said. To persist with what her superior regarded as a mere folktale would not carry favour, but she could not help adding, “There is one thing about the stories intrigues me, however. Those who have seen the phantom and lived say it wears a bishop’s ring upon its bony finger.”

The reaction of the Abbess startled Edithna. She rose from her chair, fists clenched, and threw a dark glance behind softly spoken but emphatic words. “I have heard that lie. How can it be true? No bishop’s ghost would attack the living.” She settled back. “I have tolerated many things about you, Sister Edithna. Your refusal to take your nun’s vows distresses me always. Do not add blasphemy to that refusal. If the phantom is real, and does indeed wear a bishop’s ring, then it must have stolen it and sports it as a mockery to all good Christian souls.”

Edithna bowed her head. “Yes, Mother.”

She didn’t look up as the Abbess stalked away and left her in the silence of the chapel.

\*\*\*

By the light of a single candle in her cell, Edithna took out the chest that contained all her worldly goods and removed from it the small, locked wooden box she had taken from the monk’s satchel and smuggled out under her habit.

The soldiers had collected his corpse and his few possessions for burial in the morning, but she had kept his satchel’s contents. It was, of course, stealing. Sister Bernadette would not have done it; Marie would have rather cut off her own fingers than purloin anyone’s possessions. But as long as remained a lay sister, Edithna did not feel bound by the rules of their god. Dionysus had other responsibilities, other priorities. Out of curiosity after the monk’s death, she had looked in the satchel he had been so desperate to retain, and took the small box within.

She suspected what was inside, but still hesitated to open the box. It was wrong, surely, to interfere with the beliefs of another religion, particularly one that protected and sheltered her. But her suspicion about the true nature of the phantom and why it might have attacked the monk nagged at her. After a minute’s prodding with a knife taken from the kitchen the lock opened.

Inside, on a velvet cushion, lay what appeared to be a black stone. She lifted it out and it fitted neatly into the palm of her hand.

A human heart. Shrivelled, hard, preserved. A relic indeed.

The heart twitched, and the faintest red glow came from it. At first Edithna thought it a trick of the light, but the candle burned steadily. With more twitches and tics, the heart began to beat as if truly pumping blood. The movement soon became a steady throb.

She set it down on the floor, where it continued to pulse and glow.

*O Dionysus!*

What a damned thing that could beat alone, outside of its body, so withered and old and yet filled with a supernatural life.

Lifting it again in her palm, the heart throbbed harder when held closer to the outside wall of her cell. Drawing it further away, the throbbing slowed and the light diminished slightly. When she held her hand in another direction, the heart became still again until returned to towards the outer wall.

That wall faced the forest a mile away. So the heart acted as a compass to its original owner, the bishop of Rennes, the man revered for his charity and care in life, and miraculous wonders after death.

Forty years Edithna had lived a lie hiding in St Agathe’s. The real world was full of death and war. Here there had been sanctuary from its perils and some acceptance of her secret long life. But now she held in her hand a beating, undead heart seeking return to its owner. She wondered what was to be done now.

She closed her eyes and prayed to Dionysus for guidance. He hardly ever answered. As lord of wine he spent much of his time drunk. Although he dwelt among men, was indeed half-human himself as the son of Semele, he usually kept aloof from the ways of mortals. He didn’t answer now.

She stared again at the heart and thought of the bishop seeking it through the years, hoping perhaps to reunite with it and be once again complete. Some longed to leave the sinful world and move to another place of existence, looking for something better than earthly pain and trial.

“It is up to me,” she said aloud. “Very well, then. I will give the bishop back his heart, for Dionysus and my sisters and brothers.”

\*\*\*

The buildings of St Agathe’s were surrounded by a wattle and daub wall, outside which lay the fields that provided the nuns with food, the stables where the few workhorses were kept, and one or two outhouses and barns. Beyond those a more impressive stone wall blocked out the sight of the secular world. The only door through that wall was locked, but the wall itself, worn and ancient, could be scaled by anyone determined enough.

Edithna’s hands and toes were sore after the scramble, and she sat down on the edge of the road to put her shoes back on. Fresh snow had fallen that day, which helped her night vision by lightening everything under its white blanket. Of course, that meant many details of the terrain itself were hidden.

She walked across the road and over rough fields to the edge of the forest. The cold penetrated her cloak and the thick wool of her habit and coif so her teeth chattered as she sought a path into the tangle of undergrowth. The only warm part of her body was her right hand, thrust under her cloak, partly wrapped in the cloth in which she had secured the heart. It was warm, as if it still pumped the life essence. When it pulsed strongly, she walked in that direction—when the beat weakened, she turned and stepped off again until it once again beat hard.

At the edge of the forest she took it out and saw its red glow had waxed a little. It showed most life when held slightly to her left, although no path lay there. Her night eyes peered between the trees and discerned nothing but undergrowth and twisted roots.

The cold worsened as she stepped under the branches.

The pall of cloud that had settled over the face of the world obscured the moon. Had she not been able to see clearly enough to find her own feet, Edithna would have tripped over tree roots many times and possibly sprained an ankle. The deepest shadows could still deceive even her cat’s eyes.

Before leaving the nunnery she had slipped the gold ring that was the sign of Dionysus’ order onto her right forefinger and prayed—not to her god this time but to her fellow maenads and satyrs. Fifty years ago she had attended a revel, one of the orgiastic ceremonies in praise of Dionysus. There she had met other followers of the wine god, and had indulged in rites that would have shocked Mother Gertrude into stunned silence. Some years after, when ordinary people first started to notice her ongoing youth, she secluded herself in St Agathe’s and had not stirred since. Sometimes it seemed her little god had forgotten her completely; perhaps he would answer her prayers more often if she did something to prove herself worthy.

She halted, listening. Wind in the trees; the soft patter of snow on leaves; somewhere, the soft thump of a hare, the hollow call of an owl. Night noises, forest noises, all expected.

A phantom would make no sound at all. Nevertheless, something had caused her to stop.

In her right hand, the warm heart throbbed strongest straight ahead. She stood in a little hollow ringed by broom and gorse bushes. The top of the hollow was at head height, so she could not see above the ring of shrubbery. A fallen tree at the bottom of the hollow prevented her easy progress, so she turned left to walk out and edge her way around.

A shadow lurked at the top of the bank, something that carried no warmth, shunned by even the faintest whisper of light. Not even her eyes could make out any details.

“Who’s there?” she called, but cold and uncertainty made the words come reluctantly, lacking any power or authority.

The shadow slipped away.

She ran towards it, tripped on an outflung root and fell sprawling. The heart tumbled from her hand into the snow. Ruby red, pulsing. Edithna scooped it up and thrust it once more under her cloak, but by the time she looked again the shadow had gone.

Fool to call out! A phantom would not respond, and the forest might hide any number of bandits.

She put a finger to her lips to remind herself not to speak again and walked up the slope to where the shadow had appeared. Nothing there now but low bushes and snow-covered branches of holly. The heart held next to her own throbbed and pumped warmly.

Edithna went forwards like a night-creature, peering alternately at the ground and through the tangled woods ahead, the sound of her steps louder than the other night noises. After several minutes she halted and fumbled at her belt for a flask acquired from the nunnery’s store of sacramental wine. The alcohol cleared her thoughts. Madness to be out here, pursuing a phantom that could kill her as easily it had Brother Antoninus. Madness to think that she, a mere maenad, might have any influence over whatever creature as the former Bishop of Rennes had become.

Noises ahead as a forest animal pushed through the undergrowth. A fox dashed past her feet, fleeing something. A fox was a good sign, perhaps: one of the sacred animals of Dionysus.

The heart grew warmer, felt more alive in her hand. She fancied real blood dripped between her fingers. Drawing the heart out, she held it up and stared ahead.

Something came towards her out of the darkness. Only her night-vision saved her, giving enough warning to duck as a dark form rushed from between black tree trunks. Her left foot dug into a snow-filled hole, trapping her for a moment. The thing turned and shoved her in the back, crushing her face down into the snow. Hard fingers grabbed her head and pulled it back. Bony fingers snatched at her face.

Edithna’s right hand holding the heart was trapped under her body; her left pressed into the snow as she tried to twist to one side and break the attacker’s grip. For three seconds neither prevailed until the creature let go of its own accord and fell at the foot of a holly tree.

She rose and looked at it. A leering face, no more than a skull under a monk’s cowl, yellow teeth set in gaping jaws. Yet in the eye sockets, a gleam of living light, the shred of undead vitality that still clung to the ghoul. A skeletal hand reached out, the bishop’s ring clearly visible on the third finger. Edithna knocked the hand away, felt the rage of a maenad rise within her.

With a clatter of bones, the thing staggered to its feet and Edithna could now see it clearly. Slightly shorter than herself, given extra height by the ragged black monk’s cowl and robes. On its bony feet a pair of slippers suitable for the carpets of a church rather than the forest floor.

All that was left of the former Bishop of Rennes, his funeral clothing a humble monk’s habit rather than ornate bishop’s garb to signify his humility before God. An animated skeleton held together only by willpower and desire.

“There’s no need to attack me,” she panted, holding the heart in view. “I want to return what your followers took.”

The eyes gleamed and the skeleton hands twitched a little.

The heat of maenad rage still burned inside her, roused by the attack and not yet sunk back to embers. Only once before had she experienced it, when the invading Carolingians had ransacked her home town. Then she had killed one of them, a murder that haunted her still, many years later. The rage would make her reckless; she sought to control it.

The being reached out a hand, then drew it back, fingers clawing the air.

“Take it,” Edithna said.

Again the hand groped for the heart, and again was withdrawn as if stung.

She bent down to place the heart on the ground, but didn’t let go. The bishop also knelt to grasp the heart, then shook in a rage and rolled aside into the roots of a tree. For a moment it thrashed there, bones clattering against wood.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “You are Bishop Gaston…”

It rose to its feet, hunched over, hands twisting together in front of its face. After a moment it turned, the cowl slipping off to fully reveal the yellow skull. The eyes burned more fiercely, twin diamond-gleams of desire.

But not desire for the heart—only to kill.

“You aren’t just Gaston Moutiere,” she said.

Something fought the bishop’s own will within his animated remains. There were many malevolent spirits in the world. One of them might inhabit a corpse to ridicule existence and slake a blood-lust born of envy for living things—and what more sinister mockery than to do so in the body of a venerated bishop? Perhaps a draugr or revenant forced him to walk abroad in this undead existence. That was why it had released her rather than continue its attack—the bishop must have asserted his own will. If Edithna gave the heart back, his human soul might be freed and find peace. The struggle within its bony frame had raged for fifty years. Long enough even for the dead to despair of release.

The revenant ran for her, groping. She held the heart out, but its bony hand knocked her arm aside, sending the heart flying from her grip into a mound of snow at the base of a tree. Too late to halt its onward rush, the thing staggered past Edithna, who retreated once more, slamming hard into a tree trunk.

The creature fled, leaving the heart where it had fallen, pulsing weakly, its heat melting the snow around it. A strong desire came over her to leave it there. If the bishop wanted it he could have it. But the thing that possessed him—some fiend from Hell or somewhere worse—might win their struggle, and that would mean more deaths, more fear on the road to Rennes. With a heavy sigh, Edithna picked up the heart and replaced it under her cloak.

Although the skeleton had no eyes to see with, some infernal sense beyond that of normal men guided it through the forest. Its slipper-shod feet left a clear track. Edithna followed. More than once she brushed against a limb and snow tumbled down her back. The third time that happened she almost resolved to return to the nunnery and damn the bishop. But again, the thought more innocent people might fall victim to the revenant’s blood-lust kept her moving.

At last, a sound ahead—the cracking of branches heavy with snow. Edithna hurried forwards, tearing a long gash in her cloak on a thorn bush, and arrived at a low bank of earth between two tall, dead trees. At the foot of the bank, piled in a rough jumble, a heap of white objects. As she drew closer parts of the pile came more sharply into view. Bones and skulls, both human and animal. Trophies, perhaps, the revenant’s killings. A horrible stench of decayed meat hung over the place. At her feet was a leg bone, still with traces of rotten flesh clinging to it. A half-decayed body lay further off, stiff with cold. That was the source of the stench. Perhaps the revenant brought all its victims here for some arcane purpose.

She listened intently, anxious not to be taken by surprise again. Nothing but the whisk of branches stirred by the subtle breeze. Clouds passed from the moon and for a minute the world became almost too bright for her night vision. She cast her gaze under the trees. No ominous shadows.

Something gripped her left arm. Bony fingers clapped across her face, then moved down towards her neck. With her left hand Edithna sought to prise the fingers away, but not even her maenad’s rage gave her the strength to unbind those relentless fingers of bone. No muscles gave the creature strength: it was unremitting will, supernatural yearning for her life that empowered it. The fingers closed on her throat, the ends digging into her flesh.

Others might have prayed. A monk or a nun so attacked would surrender to their god and die with good grace, perhaps also with a silent entreaty begging for forgiveness of sins. But Edithna was a maenad, and her god was a rebel and a lunatic. His followers were the fringe-dwellers of society, the starving actors and romantic poets and drunkards of the world.

They had nothing to lose.

The rage burned within her, gave her the strength to push backwards hard with her feet. Both she and the skeleton fell with her on top. Her skull connected with its own bony head, the pain forcing a cry from her lips.

But the fingers around her neck let go, allowing her to suck in a glorious breath. The rush of cold air into her lungs revived her instantly. She rolled aside, although the revenant kept its grip on her left arm. She took out the heart, still firmly clutched in her right hand, and let it fall into the snow.

The skeleton reached for it, but then pulled its hand back.

“Take it!” Edithna gasped to the bishop’s soul trapped within the grisly creature.

Instead of reaching for the heart, the skeleton’s right hand began to pry the fingers of its left away from her arm. With a savage twist, she managed to free herself and grabbed the heart.

“Here!” She plunged the heart into a gap in the monk’s rags and pushed it up into the into the chest cavity.

*Take it back!*

For one horrible second the creature’s right hand found her throat once more and gripped hard. Then it fell away with a clatter of bones as the hellish force that bound them together dissipated. The skull toppled from the spine and struck Edithna’s shoulder, but it was nothing but dead bone now. The rags collapsed around the pitiful pile.

The bishop’s soul had gone, and so had the demonic thing that had usurped his corpse.

Edithna lay gasping for a minute, swallowing back the bile that had risen in her throat at the harsh choking it had received. Then she knelt and said a prayer to Dionysus, not in thanks, because he had done nothing to help her, but to let him know she was all right and hoped he approved of what she had done.

And an answer from her little god came back.

*You have done well, my dear. I am proud of you, a true maenad.*

Cold air stung her smile as she retraced her path back to the gorse-lipped dell, and the way to St Agathe’s.

She would leave the nunnery again soon, this time for good. Too long she had remained hidden there, counting endless days, pretending faithfulness to one god over another. Death had come close tonight. But she could not hide forever. A maenad only flourished when she walked free, unfettered by fear, brazenly facing the adventures of the wide world.

The wind died between the trees as fresh snow tumbled from the sky.