

Virgin in the Ice - Plot Summary

In November 1139, the Empress's armies have attacked and pillaged [Worcester](#). Among those who fled the city were two noble children in the Benedictine Order's care and a nun. They have since vanished. The children's uncle and guardian, a supporter of the Empress, is refused permission to enter the King's lands to search for them.

As the first snowstorms of winter sweep the countryside, Brother Cadfael of [Shrewsbury Abbey](#) goes to the Benedictine Priory at [Bromfield](#) near [Ludlow](#) to treat a monk who has been attacked by robbers and left for dead. The injured Brother, Elyas, babbles about a party of refugees who might well be those sought. Cadfael sends word to Shrewsbury and rides into the snow-covered countryside to search for them. He finds one, the boy Yves Hugonin, sheltering with a forester. As they ride back to Bromfield, Yves tells Cadfael that his headstrong sister Ermina eloped four nights previously, and he became lost in the woods when he tried to pursue them.

As they cross a frozen stream, Cadfael sees the body of a young woman frozen into the ice. Fearing it is that of Ermina, he conceals his discovery from Yves. Joined by his friend, Deputy Sheriff Hugh Beringar, he retrieves the body from the ice. It does not match Ermina Hugonin's description and Yves identifies it as Ermina's tutor, Sister Hilaria.

The smallholding where the children and Hilaria had sheltered has been attacked and destroyed by brigands, although the smallholder escaped to nearby [Cleeton](#). He says that his place was destroyed on the night of the first heavy snow. Sister Hilaria had left with Brother Elyas a few hours before. Beringar also hears of a dark, armed stranger dressed as a commoner who has been enquiring after the Hugonin children.

The king's retainer in Ludlow tells Beringar that the brigands have attacked other isolated settlements, committing indiscriminate murder. Cadfael surmises that Elyas and Hilaria were two of their chance victims. One of the destroyed settlements was the [manor](#) of Callowleas, which belonged to Evrad Boterel, Ermina's suitor. He and Ermina were able to flee to Ledwyche, another manor he held. He relates that Ermina, concerned for her brother, left to search for him. He rode after her, but collapsed from a knife wound in the shoulder.

Overnight, another snowstorm blows up. When Yves tells Elyas that Hilaria is dead, he becomes distressed and walks purposefully out of the priory. Yves tries unsuccessfully to turn him back. They reach a shepherd's hut, where Elyas appears to confess to Hilaria's murder. As dawn approaches, Yves hears noises nearby and goes to seek help, but runs into the arms of the brigands, who take him prisoner. He contrives to leave a trail of wine drops in the new-fallen snow.

At the same time, Ermina appears at Bromfield, accompanied by a stranger who immediately vanishes. She is filled with remorse that her reckless conduct led indirectly to Hilaria's death, but Cadfael insists that the guilt belongs to her murderer. She tells Cadfael that the stranger is Olivier de Bretagne, a Syrian-born squire in her uncle's service, with whom she is clearly in love.

Cadfael wonders why Elyas was first attacked more than a mile from where Hilaria's body was found. Near the stream, he finds the shepherd's hut. Inside he discovers Elyas's cloak and Hilaria's blood-stained habit and wimple. Casting about, he finds the trail of Yves and the bandits, and follows it to the brigands' fort on [Titterstone Clew Hill](#).

Cadfael guides Beringar's armed men to the fort. They attack but le Gaucher, the brigands' leader, forces them to withdraw by threatening Yves. As night falls, Olivier de Bretagne enters the fort by stealth and overcomes the brigand guarding Yves on the tower. They are unable to escape but Yves realises that Beringar and Cadfael must be nearby and raises a racket to alert them. Beringar and his men attack again, and set fire to the fort. As the fire threatens them, Yves and Olivier try to break out

but Yves collides with le Gaucher and is taken hostage again. Brother Elyas wanders into the battle and confronts le Gaucher who, unnerved by the sight of a man he had left for dead, lets go of Yves. Olivier then kills le Gaucher in single combat before disappearing. The leaderless brigands are captured or killed.

At Bromfield, Yves tells Cadfael of Elyas's apparent confession but Cadfael realises that when Elyas and Hilaria sheltered together in the hut, Elyas, tormented by desire, left her alone but with his cloak for warmth. He then fell victim to the brigands. His failure to protect Hilaria has tortured Elyas but Cadfael reassures him that he did all for the best.

Evrard Boterel arrives at Bromfield. Cadfael invites him into the chapel where Hilaria awaits burial. Dressed in Hilaria's wimple and habit, Ermina confronts Evrard, forcing a startled confession from him. She then tells Cadfael and Beringar that she turned against Boterel when he fled Callowleas rather than defend his people. At Ledwyche, he tried to take her by force but she wounded him with a knife, and ran into the woods. She saw Boterel ride out and return with his wound opened. Boterel confesses his crime. He came upon Sister Hilaria in the hut, raped her and smothered her to stop her screams.

Ermina tells Cadfael that Olivier will come for her and Yves after [Compline](#). When Olivier arrives, Cadfael suggests waiting until [Matins](#), when they can leave undetected. Olivier tells of his early years in Syria and of his mother, Mariam. Cadfael realises that Olivier is his own son. Elyas is recovering his peace of mind, Hilaria's murderer is in prison, the brigands are exterminated, and Yves and Ermina are on their way to their uncle's care. With their tasks accomplished, Beringar and Cadfael return to Shrewsbury, with Cadfael dazed.
