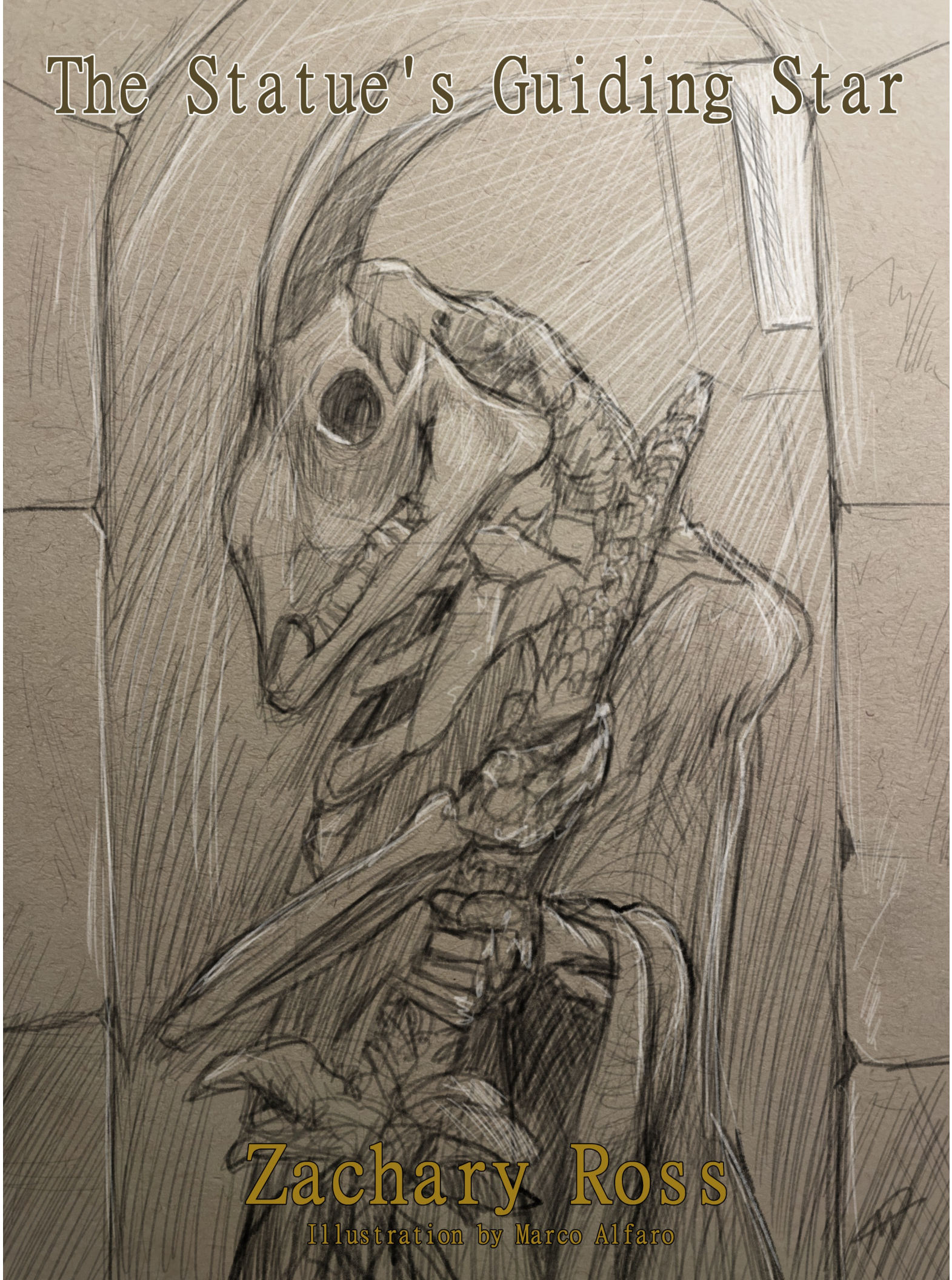


The Statue's Guiding Star

Zachary Ross

Illustration by Marco Alfaro



The Statue's Guiding Star: the Testimony of Mullein to Elder Colm of Redlamp

By Zachary Ross

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The leaves were just beginning to turn when I met Father Jonas. I had just arrived in Redlamp from Margh Men at the beginning of the tenth month, with a letter of recommendation from my master to one Father Diggory nesting snugly in my fat leather satchel, but I was not thinking of that at the moment. Instead I was thinking of the gilded dome I saw, and its Tree, and the Wheelhouse to which I knew both belonged, though I had never seen it. The wind was against me, I remember, because I had forgotten to fasten the bottom button of my green woolen coat, and so it billowed out behind me like a mendicant's cloak. I smiled then, thinking of some of the holy metings I had seen back home, the ones brought up from the hill country that have such bright colors and big eyes like those from over the King, then chastised myself for comparing myself to one of those Holy Folk, then immediately questioned whether I should not in fact be trying to imitate them, then at last decided to fasten the button.

For this digression, worthy Elder, and for all the rest I am sure to make, I beg your forgiveness; for digression is how I have always made my points, a terrible flaw in a healer. Thankfully my paws do more work than my tongue, as should always be the case, and in writing this account I shall strive to keep both reined in.

For though I had never been there, I had heard much of Redlamp and the folk who lived there, as most folk on Mount Arzkoroll have. As a kitten I exchanged tale after tale with my fellow apprentices, all of which we would have sworn upon the Tree were true, and for my part I only ever embellished when I thought it a true embellishment. All of us at that time wanted to go and study with the halsers; for the life of a halser's healer was the most romantic, they said, full of interesting ailments with interesting cures, and not merely an endless train of gout and hemorrhoids like the life of any village healer.

In time, however, it became abundantly clear to us that the spiritual disciplines required of those who wished to do battle with the powers of the Abyss were too steep for most, and with every prostration the romance of it died a little more. It died for me too, I should confess, though faith did not; faith grew alongside the hardship, in fact, until, though I knew I did not want to become a halser, I never once doubted that I wanted to become a halser's healer. For this I blame my sister Maudlin, whose death taught me early that disappointment may still follow any endeavor worth pursuing, and indeed that I should pursue it with the same fervor regardless; and to a lesser extent the persistent ache in my scarred pawpads, which taught me to disregard pain when it is merely a hindrance to those endeavors.

Redlamp was for me, then, a source of fascination that never grew stale: her fold of halsers, one of the oldest north of the King, her architecture, the peculiarities of her thanings even within Genipweg, the Holy Folk who seemed to spring from her like flowers. A thousand times I had pored over drawings of the Wheelhouse of Holy Hillary; and now that I had seen the top of his head I wanted nothing more than to put off my business and see the rest of him. I did not, however, for I had been on the Mistway all day and was hungry and pawsore, and I feared that I would not get a bed at all that night if I did not deliver my letter to my new tutor before he himself retired.

As it turned out, I need not have worried, for Father Diggory was one of those who need little sleep in old age, who take the odd nap in the afternoon and sit awake at night. I would have surely missed him if he had gone to bed at a reasonable hour, as I spent more time than I care to admit lost in the vermiculate redwood halls of House Redlamp, halls accumulated over whole Days of the world. I thought that simple spoken directions would suffice, fool that I was, until I was out of the correct wing entirely and had to be led back almost by the paw by a gracious, though visibly amused, catfolk queen who noticed me pacing as she scraped a stony crust from a little feathered-serpent fountain in the

middle of a foyer. She was a Gift by her mantle, a plain brown woolen affair with a conical hood hanging behind it, and therefore neither a halser nor a Shepherd.

"Forgive me, Sister," I said, tail dragging behind me. "I'm new to Redlamp, and it's bigger than I imagined."

"Everyone says that," the Gift grinned, sounding to my ears to be from Margh Men herself. "I've been saying it for years. You can't be from Earnhrost, then, unless you're the least adventurous Tom there is."

"My father was," I answered, guessing what she meant. "I'm from Margh Men, on the west side by the big rise outside the wall. I'm here to study under Father Diggory, and hopefully to get myself into a dorm tonight."

"Ah, you're a healer!" said the Gift, slapping her chisel in her palm. "I guessed it by the bag."

"An apprentice, actually," I said more softly.

"And here to learn devilsbane, no doubt," the Gift nodded, turning me left, then quickly right again. "Well, Father Diggory can teach it to you if anyone can. He's the best there is. Holy Evensong herself would whistle, watching him at work."

I smiled then, forgetting some of my embarrassment. "Holy Evensong is my Mother."

"You're in good company," my companion confirmed. "Her bones are in Holy Hillary's, but I suppose you already know that."

"It's been consuming my thoughts all day," I said. "I almost went straight there to see them. I'm glad now that I didn't."

"Plenty of time for that," she replied, lazily waving her chisel. "Latesong isn't for a few hours yet. Father Diggory is always there, so I'm sure he could take you, or you could go yourself if you can't wait."

"My master seems to think highly of him," I ventured, entering a hallway both quieter and dimmer than the last, with ashen doors more widely spaced. Only then did I realize that I had not been paying attention to the way my guide was leading me, and then that it would not have mattered if I had been. "What's he like?"

"I don't have a bad word to say about old Father Diggory, and you won't either!" the Gift announced; then, in a lower voice: "But if you do, just say it quietly and it won't get back to him."

Father Diggory's study was attached to his room, as I learned afterward was often the case for the older Halsers. Its size, as well as its healthy library and worthwhile, told me right away that he saw students there, if not patients as well. The Tree hanging on the wall behind his stout chestnut desk was one of those budded ones you see so often in sickrooms, very similar to the one my sister had held and stared at and whispered to near the end and which I now carried in my satchel. On a stand to the right of the desk stood an ashen staff capped by the Great Badger's head, to the left a tall window overlooking a dusky garden; I craned my neck to see even a corner of Holy Hillary's, to no avail.

My companion was gone with only a shouted introduction and a bow, returning no doubt to her laborious chiseling, and I was alone with the old boar himself. Suddenly I felt very lonely indeed.

"The Lord blesses," sighed the boar, drawing the Chiasm in the air from his seat behind the desk. He held out his paw to me, thick and blunt as all badgerfolk's are. I kissed it, then sat down in a creaking sack-back chair on the other side of the desk at his direction.

"Mullein, was it, my son?" he sighed again, looking at me through round glasses perched precariously on the tip of his gray snout. How much good they did him, I could not tell, for his eyes were so muddled with cataracts that I was not sure whether they had once been brown or hazel.

"Aye, Father," I answered. "I'm one of Master Culpeper's, here from Margh Men to sit at your paws."

Moments passed where he said nothing else, but only smiled at me with an airy, almost distracted look on his face. I fidgeted in my chair and said nothing, afraid that he was trying to recall who I or Master Culpeper were, and that reminding him of either would seem rude. I was just about to fish the letter out of my bag when he cleared his throat and spoke again.

“It is Mullein, aye?”

It was then that I realized what the Gift had meant when she told me to ‘say it quietly’ if I wanted to criticize Father Diggory: the old boar was not only mostly blind, but mostly deaf. “Aye, Father, my name is Mullein,” I answered much louder, nodding vigorously as I opened my bag and pawed him the folded square of paper. “I have a letter here recommending me to your tutelage.”

“Ah, you’re that one of old Culpeper’s,” said Father Diggory, in a breathy lilt which conveyed almost nothing about the folk to whom it belonged. His nose was almost touching the paper as he read. “Very exciting. Very fitting! Haven’t had one of his in Redlamp in years.”

“No, Father,” I said, afraid to speak as loudly as my guide had and yet wondering if I should by the way he bent his ear toward me. “At your service, Father.”

“And I yours, I hope,” he sighed, making a seated bow that caused his thick trunk to disappear under the folds of his red halser’s mantle. “Your master speaks very highly of you in this letter, my son. Did you know that?”

“No, Father,” I said, praying he could not see the way I grinned as I said it. “I’m glad to hear it, Father.”

“So am I,” Father Diggory sighed, a whistle escaping his throat. “Master Culpeper is, er, a buck of...high standards, is that fair to say?”

“Indeed,” I agreed, choosing to say no more lest I bring attention to the understatement.

“Ah, and yet maybe not,” Father Diggory hummed, seeming to change his mind. “No higher than mine, I’m sure. Certainly no higher. You’ve chosen an, um, arduous path, my son, arduous and...” Here he paused to close his eyes for several moments. “Unglamorous, to borrow a word from our friends down in the hills.”

I did not know why, but hearing those words from his mouth then, words I had already been telling myself for years, made me feel that I was a bloated wineskin and he a naked knife. I know now that I still possessed a great deal of self-importance at that time, and every day I find still more hiding in some corner of my foolish ghost; but though neither of us knew it then, Father Diggory was to cure me of much of it quite by accident that winter. All I could think about in that moment, however, was an endless succession of gout and hemorrhoids. “I just want to be of help, Father,” I said.

“Good,” he grunted, more seriously than before. “In that case, we shall get along fine, my son – better than fine, aye, er...the Lady of Copper herself will applaud us, don’t you think?”

“I hope so, Father,” I said, bowing my head.

“Ah, and speaking of which,” sighed Father Diggory, standing from his chair with an effort, “it is Coppersday, isn’t it? I’ve been expecting you all day. I wanted to take a bath earlier, but then thought better of it, fearing that there would be no one to show you to your room. Er, unless you’ve already spoken to Lamb’s Ear?”

“No, Father,” I said, rising after him.

Father Diggory stepped around the desk to retrieve his staff, one of those that may have once been white ash, but which was now so tanned by the Flame that it could have been black. “Ah, er, n-not to say that you’ve inconvenienced me, my son,” he appended with a hiccup, circling around the desk with a pleading paw held up. “You’ve done no such thing. I can take my bath any time, be assured.”

I confess that I stared at him for a moment after this, wondering first what his comment had to do with my coveted room or this Lamb’s Ear I had never heard of, then why he seemed so intent on making sure I did not take offense at his desire to bathe. Such an obsession with tact was so foreign to

Master Culpeper that I had long assumed bluntness – even harshness – to be an ideal of healers. Father Diggory cured me of that misunderstanding as well, but to this day I am not sure who was worse.

“Thank you for your patience, Father,” I said.

“Not at all, not at all,” he answered. “But being Coppersday, your studies won’t begin until Moonday. You may come straight here after Mornsong – ah, er, or any time before that, of course. My door is always open to you, my son. In the meantime, you’ll want to see your room and the mess hall, I’m sure. I can take you to both.”

“If it’s no trouble to you, Father, I would be grateful for it,” I told him; I think he liked that answer, judging by the way he showed his yellow teeth.

“Not at all, not at all,” he repeated, putting a paw on my back and leading me out of his study. “You’ll stay with the Greenhorns in the Fall House, which is what we call the southwest wing of House Redlamp. This northwest wing is our Winter House, where the halsers and Shepherds live and the Greenhorns receive their training. East of here is the Spring House, wherein sits the mess hall, and south of that is the Summer House, which contains both the library and some extra rooms for the aged and infirm among our fold. It’s the great hearth, you know: it’s always burning, and the warmth is good for the sick. You’ll be spending a good deal of time there, my son, but I’ll tell you more about that later. Ah, I hope I’m not already overwhelming you?”

“Not at all, not at all,” I said, imitating his breathy cadence wholly by accident. “The house, aye, but not you.”

“Only a short travail, my son,” Father Diggory trilled. “I know these halls better blind than most do seeing, and in time so shall you, but for now you really mustn’t be afraid to ask for help.”

“Of course, Father,” I said, shocked by my own shouting voice in the silence of that hallway.

“Ah, er, not to cast aspersions!” the halser amended, positively flushing with shame. “The House is simply old, you see, and has rings like a great tree. One can hardly blame another for getting lost.”

“Only the builders for building a maze,” I muttered, just loud enough that I felt my first guide would have laughed, though Father Diggory did not.

2

After this Father Diggory led me south, and this I only knew by the windows to my right which revealed the rosy dusk. I will not bore you with overlong descriptions of House Redlamp – you, worthy Elder, hardly need them; and if by some miracle this testimony is shelved for a future reader, you are most likely reading this at some table in the library if you have not passed over it for something more interesting. I will say only that Father Diggory was right in comparing its halls to the rings of a great tree. I could feel it while I walked, the immense oldness, the reverend stillness, the collective memories of ages seeped into the walls just as the Flame had seeped into the Great Badger’s wooden head. It was all of redwood, every layer, but each layer toward the garden older, until when the east windows appeared on my left I knew that my paws trod boards older than any building in Margh Men. The smell of incense was everywhere. The walls were thick, and often hung with weavings of the Tree or the Sun, yet occasionally I could hear prayers being chanted through embossed doors. Whoever saw me on that walk must have thought me a happy idiot. Perhaps I was.

My room was on the first floor of the Fall House, removed in a corner away from the traffic (and the warmth) of the common room nearest the garden. It was the size of a matchbox, but so sparsely furnished that it seemed larger than it was. A bed, a desk, a basin, and a little table with a hanging lamp and a meting of the Lamb Enthroned were all it contained, though the closet hid a little chest for my meager belongings. I knew, of course, that I would have to live like a mendicant until my

studies were complete, so this did not surprise me. I set my satchel down on the desk, memorized the location of the room as well as I could by the clump of purple asters clinging to life in the garden outside my window, then followed Father Diggory to the mess hall.

I had never seen so many mantles in one place in my life. The floor was a sea of red and brown, halsers and not-quite-halsers intermixed, with spots of white for the Shepherds and the occasional unmantled poor who often came up from Genipweg to be fed. I felt like one of them, and fed indeed I was, better I think than I had ever been fed before, while I and Father Diggory – but mostly Father Diggory – conversed with a few of the older halsers. I was too occupied then by the bears standing out in relief on the walls, bears with faces uncannily folkish.

Then the bells for Latesong rang, and the dome and Tree I had earlier seen peeking over top of House Redlamp sprang to the fore of my mind again. I excused myself without another thought, and would have run out the door at once if Father Diggory had not stopped me.

“May I bless you at least, Mullein?” he asked.

Sheepishly I obliged, kissing his paw with a burning face, then promised once again to come to him after Mornsong on Moonday before bowing low to the table and making my exit.

I was in no danger of being late, of course; there was still half an hour before the Shepherd made the acclamation ‘Worthy is the Lamb.’ But to deprive myself any longer of the one thing I wanted most to see was intolerable, and so I walked out into the garden and beheld it at once in the light of a hundred burning lamps. It did not disappoint.

And now I must check my pen mercilessly, for I could write of Holy Hillary’s for pages upon pages and run out of ink before I ran out of words by which to praise it, and this account would be no better for it. Suffice it to say that I fell in love, and I will be so in love until my last breath. Its dome and Tree still gleamed the faintest red in the last shreds of dusk. White wooden tiles scaled its redwood vaults, sitting foursquare in the midst of the garden atop a wooded hill still green with the late grass. There are larger Wheelhouses in Margh Men, someone may say, made of more impressive materials, and so there are; but there are none so lovely.

There was no door on the north side, but folk were filing in on the west, and so I circled around to follow them up the hill to the Outer Threshold. Beneath its portico, in a little half-dome above its triple doors, was a lamplit meting of the Lamb fashioning the Sun, rayed without and winged within, staring with his unblinking eye as he always is in such depictions. It was a meting I had never seen before and have rarely seen since, but like the rest of the Wheelhouse I loved it at once. Passing underneath, I drew the Chiasm with my scarred right paw and went to look for Holy Evensong.

Being in fact a concentric structure like House Redlamp, I had to poke my head into several of the little houses before I found her, wheels-within-wheels added over time on either side of the godboard. Her meting met me on the third attempt, eyes as blue as the winter sky staring serenely at me as she held out her unstoppered phial of healings. The meting hung on the back wall of an alcove marked by a pillared arch and flanked by rows of Trees, its red floor inlaid with white ash leaves and all polished in that dull way one can only achieve by means of countless paws over countless years. Beneath that meting, of course, were her bones: not the bones of the tiny thing I had always imagined, but of a vixen who must have been magnificently hale. I suppose the humble are always small in imagination.

I prayed there, happy to have a friend in my studies already, until the bells rang once more and I heard a Shepherd’s clear tenor begin Latesong. Then rising, I returned to the largest and oldest part of the house just under the great dome and sought for a place to stand. I did not see my first guide through House Redlamp as I had hoped to, though with so many hooded alike she may well have been there; who I did see, however, was Father Diggory, standing in one of the many open stalls flanking the left side of the ornate roodscreen. I could not have gotten his attention if I had tried, of course, but the stall

beside him was empty, and seeing at least a few unmantled folk among the halsers I decided to pretend confidence that I belonged there and took up the empty stall. If Father Diggory recognized me, he made no motion to acknowledge it.

To my left stood a tall meting of the Great Rooster just beside the Stars' door. Over my head was the belly of the great dome, the magnificent Wheel of Time surrounded by the Twelve with the King of All looking severely down from the center. It was then, as I stood there, that I finally began to pay attention to the prayers. The Shepherd was on the other side of the roodscreen, before a high, carven godboard I could just see between two close branches, chanting in a serene Latesong hush the plea to one's Guiding Star:

*"Aye, O holy Star, my feeble ghost is in your charge,
My body likewise, wretched, wandering sheep am I
And thou my shepherd, to the door of life my poor steps turn,
Guard me with thy crook, make me upon the Lamb to look"*

It commonly happens, or at least I would like to think it does, that when one is in an unfamiliar Wheelhouse amidst unfamiliar folk, with a great deal on his mind and a great deal to do in the near future, his ghost will wander away from prayer whether he wills it or not. Never all at once, of course; most often he turns from the prayer to a thought about the prayer, then a thought about the thought about the prayer, then so on and so on until he is trying to remember which of the seven Heavenly Lords governs chickweed or how much coca one should administer per pound to a stallion for lethargy.

That is often my experience, at least, and that night I could no more resist it than I could the faces of the Moon. I tried, though not very hard, until a rhythmic ache began to drum on the scar of my right palm after I drew the Chiasm. Such a twisting of my claws has always been likely to spur pain; but while I can usually ignore it, that night it pulled my thoughts from the prayer to my Guiding Star to a line of the prayer: 'wretched, wandering sheep am I,' then to an idea of wandering, then to a memory in which I wandered, a memory I must relate to you now.

I was eight years old, not far free of kittenhood, though I would have had ninety-nine reasons for why you were wrong if you had pointed it out. It was the middle of the first month in the depths of an unusually vicious winter, and I was out hunting for interesting mushrooms. There was little I liked to do better back then, and my eye for them has doomed me to do it ever since, though I no longer like it. For there are mushrooms that grow best in winter, a secret which sometimes surprises folk, and which have virtues hard to find anywhere else at that time of year. It was for such virtuous mushrooms I hunted that day, but my ill luck led me farther from town than I usually walked and kept me out later than I should have been. I lost my way, and by the time I realized I could simply walk down the mountain until I met the cliff and look up to see Margh Men above me, not only had night come, but a storm.

And what a storm it was! Never on Mount Arzkoroll have I seen so deadly a blizzard, so clamorous a wind, or so sudden a snow. I was blind in ten minutes. In half an hour I was shivering violently, though bundled in my warmest clothes. Before an hour had passed I had ceased to shiver, and lay in the leeward hollow of a creaking oak with my paws tucked under my arms, frozen and yet burning with pain.

I cannot remember how long I lay there. I was half-drowning in malicious sleep when at last I saw a light bobbing toward me, red as a halser's lamp and every bit as warm. A pair of strong, hard arms picked me up and cradled me. A red mantle covered me, I think, for the wind seemed less as he walked, though for some reason I remember still seeing the light of his lamp the whole time. Strangest

of all, however, I could hear doves singing, a low, cooing song belonging neither to the night nor to the blizzard.

I never spoke to him, or at least I do not remember speaking, yet somehow he knew where I lived and brought me home. Laying me down on the porch mat, he rapped three times on our front door with what I assume was his staff – for it was harder than flesh, judging by the sound – and left before my hysterical mother could run across the house, fling open the door, and scream when she found me lying there. My father screamed exactly the same way when he returned with our neighbors two hours later. It was the only time I ever heard him make such a sound.

I was minutes away from death, they told me afterwards. How on earth I had managed to make it home as I was, cold as ice and carved up by frostbite, only the Almighty Lord knew. I never told them about my rescuer. At first I could not have told anyone why I kept it secret, but as I grew older I began to realize that so much about him made so little sense, and that even as a child I had known it. Why would a halser have been walking in those woods at that time of day? An alchemist I might have understood, but he did not stink like the alchemists. There are no villages in that direction either, nor any Wheelhouses; he would have met a bare cliff if he had continued on his course. How had he seen me? I was dressed in gray and green against the base of an oak tree, no different from any other frozen root, and far too cold by then to cry out. How, in addition, could he have known where I lived? I am certain that I did not tell him. We established immediately that none of our neighbors found me. And why would one of them have simply set me down on the front porch, knock, and walk away? I could go on, and often after that night I did, chasing my unknown savior around and around in my memories but never catching him. Here it is enough to say only this: I hinted earlier that he was a halser, but I no longer believe it.

3

What any of this has to do with Father Jonas, worthy Elder, I'm sure you are wondering. I proceed to that now, begging your patience one more time; for while it was necessary to insert my digressions at the beginning of this testimony, their full import will not become obvious until the end.

I spent Leadsday and Sunday as I wished, having no obligations until Moonday morning. I hung my sister's budded Tree on the wall of my room beside the meting of the Lamb. I attended as many thanings as I could, loathe to be away from Holy Hillary's until I was satisfied that I had explored every one of its many alcoves, lofts, and little houses. I explored House Redlamp as well, trying and failing to master the confounding rings of its halls. It did not help, of course, that asking for directions earned me equally confounding explanations; for as Father Diggory had stated with such comical brevity, House Redlamp was four houses joined into one house, each of its four wings being called a house, and each of those four wings called houses having wings of their own. When I asked then, for instance, "Where might I wash my laundry?" and was told "There's a tub and a spigot on the garden porch at the northwest wing of the house," I confess I only stood there in dumb silence as I thought about how to ask the question again.

By Sunday night, however, I had succeeded at least in learning to walk toward and away from the central garden without trouble, using the age of the redwood as my guide. All else failing, I could then find a door leading outside and cut straight through the garden to some other door closer to my destination, thereby saving myself both time and embarrassment.

Then Moonday morning came, and after Mornsong ended I walked straight – or mostly straight – to Father Diggory's study. Other students were there already: halsers as yet unfolded, my fellow apprentice healers, and two or three Gifts. They greeted me warmly, and we made small talk until Father Diggory shuffled in, tapping ahead of his paws with the butt of his staff until he was at his desk.

He did not sit down, however, nor go looking for notes, but drawing the Chiasm over us and tapping his chin only said “Ah, hmm, we were going to talk about resin today, weren’t we? Well, if that pleases you all, my children, let us begin.”

If I have managed at all to convey Father Diggory’s disposition so far, I can only imagine that future readers will share a little of the surprise I felt at what happened next. For that reverend halser, whom I am ashamed to have called “mousy” in the privacy of my own room, caught fire during his lecture. All tactful calculation ceased when he spoke of holy things; and when he was obliged to discuss the act of halsing as it related to the use of resin, that blind, deaf boar was positively formidable.

“For it has pleased the Almighty Lord to make the world in such a way that life can be brought out of death, healing from wounds, fire from water,” he exclaimed, gesticulating wildly at a pan of still-viscous pine resin. “And so He has made resin, both the blood and the scabs of trees, among the most hateful things on earth to the fiends. They can’t abide it. It reminds them too much of the Wounds for how it bleeds. It reminds them too much of the Flame for how it burns. Just a whiff of it sends them running, which is why there is no better cure for fetid air. You can’t use it enough, I say! Be glad, at all times, to remind the fiends that they’re licked six ways from Sunday. It lifts my ghost just to think of it, and it will lift the ghosts of the sick in almost every case – ah, well, except for those with swelling of the lungs, in which case steam is better than smoke.” I can’t remember when my jaw fell open, but I shut it then.

And then, as quickly as he had left, mousy Father Diggory returned just in time to discuss the practicalities of the topic with us. Where and how one might gather the many resins native to the Eastern Lands provoked him less, it turned out, than which Abyssal afflictions they availed against and why. The first half of the day passed, then, in this way, with calm periods of instruction and technical training supplemented by fiery sermons which I found, to my happy surprise, tremendously helpful. For Master Culpeper, while passionate to a fault, was that bilious sort of passionate I find so disagreeable.

The second half of the day we spent in the sickroom honing our craft, caring for patients and engaging in case studies, though in a place like House Redlamp it was a thankful – though perhaps impractical – rarity that we would ever get to see firstpaw a folk beset by the Foe. That bath in Flame would come, Father Diggory warned us, when our studies in Redlamp were done and we went wandering as mendicants in the wide world, where halsers sought out the Foe to do battle with him and their healers tended to the wounded. Until then the peculiar vein of my trade would remain purely theoretical.

Father Diggory kept me in his study after he dismissed the other students for the day. He pawed me then my brown mantle, marking me as a Gift, and there at last gave me that fateful appointment which is the subject of this account.

“In addition to your practical studies in the sickroom, Mullein, my son,” he began, sighing once more in his thin, inoffensive way, “apprentices are expected to perform some measure of, ah, labor for Redlamp, to the tune of twenty hours a week or so. What your fellows call ‘donkey work,’ aye? Not to say that there’s anything at all dishonorable about it, of course – quite the opposite, especially in your case. I hope you don’t object?”

“Of course not, Father,” I said, fastening the mantle’s ash leaf clasp about my neck. I ran the fabric between my claws, so much softer and suppler than it looked; it smelled of sunshine, as do all garments newly blessed by the Flame. “Master Culpeper told me what I should expect, and for once it seems he hasn’t left out anything important.”

“A reward for your service to him, perhaps,” Father Diggory nodded, “which brings me to my next point. The work dispensed to Gifts in Redlamp is not often, well, wholly related to their native

skill or field of study. There can't only be herb-grinders with no one to scrub outhouses, can there? Ah, but forgive me! That was a coarse comparison."

"I understand, Father," I smiled, "and I'll scrub outhouses if you want. Heaven knows I've done worse for Master Culpeper."

"It would at the very least help you to, er, harden your constitution. But that isn't the work I have in mind for you. Master Culpeper detailed in his letter, and I have confirmed myself simply by watching you in the sickroom today, that your skills exceed your age. You nurse with a practiced paw; and while I would never wish to downplay the many admirable virtues of your fellows, it isn't often I can put my younger apprentices to practical work so soon."

"Practical work, Father?" I said, raising an inquisitive eyebrow though he could not see it.

"There are rooms set aside in a certain wing of the library," he continued, "for the, er, um, elderly and...and the infirm of our fold. The deeper silence is soothing to them, as is the heat of the hearth, which is kept burning all year. Some are bedridden, or nearly so, and it is to the service of one of these that I would put you."

"Just one, Father?"

"You may think of it as a test," Father Diggory smiled, only to frown a moment later, "and I pray that you'll forgive me if it's a hard one. Father Jonas, the halser who lives in the room beside the library's great hearth, is terribly ill – dying, really, may the Ewe-Lamb comfort him." Here he drew the Chiasm, and I a moment behind him.

"You want me to take care of him?" I asked, mostly to move him along.

"Not to treat him yourself, my son," he answered, with a pale shadow of the emphasis he displayed in his earlier lecture. "I already have Lamb's Ear doing that, but Father Jonas is so involved a case and poor Lamb's Ear is already so swamped that she has been begging me for an apprentice who can spend two or three hours a day with him, feeding, clothing, washing, giving wort as she directs you. I almost hate to ask you, Mullein, I really do, but I confess I'm reluctant to ask someone with less experience."

I am not often grateful for what Master Culpeper put me through at so young an age, but I was glad then. "Before you go any further, Father, I'll do it. Just order me to do it, and I'll obey you."

"You really are from Margh Men, aren't you?" Father Diggory laughed, showing his yellow teeth again. "You almost sounded like a knight."

"I wonder now if you've ever met a knight before, Father," I smirked. "May I ask, though, what this Father Jonas is dying of?"

Here his face fell again, and as if a weight had settled on his shoulders he shuffled around his desk and sat down. "If you could only tell me that, my son, I would give you my study and everything in it today. Bear's basin, I would do it if you could only tell me how to cure it, or even how to treat it."

"I thought you said that someone named Lamb's Ear was treating him?"

"Trying to treat him, I should have said," he sighed. "Forgive me, Mullein. I fear that no matter what I say, it will ultimately prove misleading. Simply put, we don't know what he's dying of. I've never seen anything like it. None of my brother halsers have ever seen anything like it. Lamb's Ear knows more about bones than an undertaker, and *she's* never seen anything like it. She has all she can do to halve his pain some days."

"But it is his bones, then?" I asked, sitting down after him.

"It, ah, isn't so much a problem with the bones he has," he answered, bobbing his squat head from side to side, "as that his flesh seems to become more bone every day."

I heard the Evensong bells begin to ring outside the window then, and I waited until they had ceased completely to speak again. "I don't...I don't think I understand."

“He’s turning to stone, Mullein,” said Father Diggory, rapping a knuckle on his desk. It sounded nothing like stone, and nothing like my rescuer’s knocking on my snow-crustrusted front door. “Misleading once again, but you’ll say the same when you’ve seen him. His flesh, through some hellish work invisible to us, has been slowly turning to bone for years now. It began with tumors, hard lumps at the base of his horns and his hooves, then along his spine, and more lately in his arms and legs. Some days he can just manage to walk with the help of his staff, others he can’t rise from his bed. Speaking and chewing are difficult, and breathing is becoming a concern. The pain, I gather, is immense. Do you see now why I call him an involved case?”

For the length of this explanation Father Diggory paused not a single time to weigh words, but was as decisive as his sermons, though shockingly cool. “I feel like a fool for asking if you’ve taken the Flame to him, Father; but you called it hellish, and I don’t think I’ve ever heard of anything that more deserves the word.”

Father Diggory just barely smiled then, enough that I knew we were both equally at a loss, and the realization made my stomach ache. “You aren’t a fool, Mullein, unless I am, then heaven help us both. It was the first thing I tried, I myself, and many more things beside. I even – Holy Hillary help me – I even took him to touch the bones of Holy Evensong early on, thinking there might be a heavenly jest at play. I was wrong about that. No, the King of All permits this for reasons I shudder to contemplate. Best, I suppose, not to contemplate them too much. We can nurse him, and that will do more good for him and us.”

“I hope so, Father,” I said, then pursed my lips. “When would you like me to begin?”

“Now, if I may be so bold,” he replied; and then, as if his frankness suddenly proved too heavy to bear, put a self-reproving paw upon his muzzle and dipped his snout. “Er, ah, I mean to say after Evensong, my son. There isn’t such a dire hurry, and Lamb’s Ear will almost certainly be there if you visit him afterward. She will tell you everything you need to know.”

“I’ll go as soon as the thaning is over,” I nodded, already beginning to fiddle anxiously with the clasp at my neck. “I’ve been to the library once already; it seems to be one of the few places in House Redlamp that isn’t trying to get me lost.”

“A library, of all places, must be well-organized,” said Father Diggory, “and Redlamp has had some of the finest librarians who ever lived – strictly in my opinion, of course. I’m sure Margh Men rivals us, or even surpasses.”

“I very much doubt that,” I smiled.

Father Diggory cleared his throat. “The great hearth is against the outer eastern wall of the Summer House. You’ll recognize it immediately, I’m sure. Ah, and thank you, Mullein. It’s a relief to me to have another pair of paws helping poor Father Jonas. He used to insist upon taking care of himself, but lately...well, you’ll see what I mean.”

With that Father Diggory blessed and dismissed me; and I, now so abuzz with clinical questions and ghostly foreboding, wandered to Holy Hillary’s half in a daze and spent all of Evensong praying only that I would not make a fool of myself. I thank the Almighty Lord that he did not grant me that prayer.

I have heard it said that rabbitfolk had something to do with the additions to House Redlamp. Certainly Redlamp has had its share of Elders from down in the hill country. If that is true, the Redlamp library at least was designed by minds more like my own. It was mercifully square and symmetrical, with none of the queer bow-shaped hallways or whorlish common rooms so plentiful everywhere else.

Because of that, I had no trouble finding the great hearth at the far eastern end of its deepest wing, burning with a fire that has not gone out since it was first blessed in antiquity.

Unfortunately, my newfound clarity was soon replaced by another confusion. Father Diggory had told me clearly enough that Father Jonas lived in the room beside the hearth; what he had not told me was that there were two rooms beside the hearth, one on either side. Their doors were identical, each embossed with a bear standing on its hind legs, paws clasped in prayer toward the hearth, save only that the door on the left sported a little red hanging lamp which valiantly flickered beside the hearth-fire. Both were closed. I stood there for almost a minute flicking my tail, hoping that this Lamb's Ear whom Father Diggory had mentioned would appear, or that anyone else would enter that wing of the library so I could ask them which was Father Jonas'. But nobody came, and eventually my fear of being late overcame my fear of disturbing the wrong folk. I chose the door on the left, making the reasonable guess that the burning lamp at the very least indicated occupancy, and knocked.

When no answer came after half a minute I knocked again, and then once more half a minute later. It seemed strange to me that the lamp on the door would be burning with no one inside; but as I was sure by then that I would have awoken any sleeping folk, I shrugged and made to try the other door. I had not taken a step, however, before I remembered what Father Diggory had said about Father Jonas having trouble moving. I tried the knob, which turned without resistance.

"Father Jonas? Lamb's Ear?" I called, opening the door so slowly that anyone would have had time to notice and shout at me to leave. What it revealed was a statue, gray as flint and amateurishly carved, its pitiful face so close to mine that I jumped and yowled as soon as I saw it. It stood a full four inches taller than I before its curling horns, sported a beard white as driven snow, and wore a red woolen shirt and suspenders of a style so antiquated that it might have been the memorial of some figure who lived before the Chiasm. It was not until I noticed the wet, rheumy, amber eyes that I truly realized at whom I was looking.

Standing before me was no statue at all, but a living billy goatfolk as stiff as one, leaning heavily on an ashen staff around which wound the Great Dragon. He seemed hardly able to stand, his knees bent, his thin wrists trembling, and yet his declined back was as straight as an arrow. His head was bowed somewhat, so that he looked at me out of the top of his eye sockets. For several deep ticks of a grandmother clock somewhere in the room I dared not speak, seeing that his mouth was open, until by a pleading look on his dull, taut face I guessed that he either would not or could not say anything. The whole effect, as I stared, nearly convinced me a second time that the poor creature before me was a statue. But then his eyes, still liquid and mobile, flitted from my face to my mantle and back, and his brow furrowed so trivially that it would have been imperceptible in anyone less rigid, and I knew that I had guessed the right room.

"Forgive me!" I begged, bowing so low that I almost fell forward. "I didn't mean to intrude, but I was afraid that you might not be able to rise to answer the door, and so I thought it would be better to check for myself if you were here." Straightening up, I looked at his dull face again, struck afresh by how miserable it seemed; but though there was curiosity in his black-bagged eyes, he made no response whatsoever.

"Y-you are...you are Father Jonas, aren't you?" I said, asking the question more to gauge his ability to answer than out of any doubt.

He nodded, though the motion was so small and strained that I first thought it some kind of spasm. For the first time then I looked past the billy goat, drawn to the flicker of a pot-bellied woodstove in one corner, and spied before it a large, plush chair and a low bed. There was a thick quilt, orange and white, hastily draped over the arm of the chair. I can only imagine how flushed I looked then, as mortified as I was.

“And I made you get up to answer the door, and it’s taken you this long just to cross the room,” I said, ready to pull the clasp of my mantle from its seams and throw the whole thing on the ground when I had only just put it on. “Some healer I am, making my patient get the door for me. I beg your pardon, Father, let me help you back to your chair.”

The same intense confusion was still in his face; but he let me gingerly take his arm nevertheless, and leaned on me as he hobbled slowly, slowly back across the room. He weighed very little, though he was larger than I: a consequence, as I guessed at once, of shriveling muscles. In this way I was able to absorb his furnishings before undertaking any work, a veritable treasure trove of priceless antiques as perfectly preserved as his clothes. I decided then that I liked Father Jonas, and I hoped he would forgive me for the exertion I had demanded of him.

“I’m sure you’re wondering why I’m here,” I said, leaning his staff against the bed and lowering him onto the chair. His limbs folded more like a wooden screen than any living thing, his back not at all; he winced as he settled, then thinly groaned as I covered his lap with the quilt. “My name is Mullein, I’m one of Father Diggory’s apprentices. He sent me to help Lamb’s Ear take care of you, but it looks like I’m either too early or too late. You haven’t seen her, have you?”

For the first time Father Jonas’ eyes betrayed a shade of irritation, and I wondered if he was not angry with me after all. A second later, however, they darted three times over to a smaller wooden chair on the other side of the stove, almost facing his own. On its seat was a pad of paper and a half-spent pencil. Picking up both in one paw, I moved the chair closer to his and set it down, then placed the items in his lap. Even now, though I should have known that it was only causing more inconvenience, I refrained from sitting down, accustomed to standing in the presence of a halser until given leave. Father Jonas stared at me for a moment, breathed hard through his nose, and then jerkily, with pain in every movement, folded over a new sheet on the pad of paper and scribbled something on it. Turning it around, he pointed his pencil at a single word I did not understand until I realized that it was in the Low Tongue.

“Sit,” he had written, in a way which conveyed, like everything else in the room, his antiquated tastes. I bowed, then sat.

“I hope I’m not unwelcome, Father,” I said, sensing for the first time just how warm the room truly was. The stove, with its low fire bathing my right side, was no doubt supplemented by the great hearth burning just beyond the opposite wall. “Father Diggory only thought that I might be able to help you when Lamb’s Ear isn’t around: bring you supper, help you into the bath, things like that.”

Father Jonas furrowed his brow more tightly, a strange thing when combined with the dull, pain-stricken face. He scribbled on his pad again, pausing, I thought, to choose his words, then showed it to me.

“Can’t you speak the Low Tongue?” it said.

I confess that I was puzzled then. Father Jonas was in pain, I had no doubt about that. I could see the hard, irregular tumors crowding the base of his horns where they protruded from his flesh, the same at his ankles where his hooves began, and hints of them under the collar of his shirt. I had seen the same dull agony in the faces of folk exhausted from fever or fractured bones in Master Culpeper’s sickroom. And yet here, I thought, was just such a patient joking with me, doing what halsers often did to Greenhorns.

“I, er, ah, a-aye,” I replied in the Low Tongue, feeling suddenly like Father Diggory, “if that’s what you want, Father.”

He did not quite smile then, but his brow relaxed, and I took the stillness of his pencil as an invitation to continue. “Has Lamb’s Ear come around yet? I was supposed to discuss your treatment with her.”

Father Jonas shook his head the slightest bit. “No Lamb’s Ear has been her yet,” he wrote.

“Ah, then I suppose I’ll wait for her, if that’s all right,” I said. “In the meantime, is there anything you need? Anything at all?”

This the old billy goat did not have to think about for a second. Keeping a thumb on his current page, he flipped all the way to the front of the pad, which was covered in rows of words and short phrases. He pointed his pencil at “catmint tea,” then at “willow bark,” two very simple requests.

“Of course, Father, right away,” I said, rising and bowing my head.

There was a kettle atop the little stove, a fine old thing of speckled glazed iron, as well as a tea set ornamented with doves in a crockery cabinet against the warm wall closest to the hearth. Terrified that I might have to remember where the worthwhile was amidst those winding hallways, I scoured the lower drawers of the cabinet until, mercy of mercies, I found both catmint and willow bark. Breathing a sigh of relief, I filled the kettle with water from a stone pitcher in a cooler pantry, then carried both out into the library in order to boil the kettle over the white-hot coals and to refill the pitcher from the spigot just outside.

We both had tea shortly, his with honey to temper the willow bark, mine only catmint. Observing his unwieldy body I thought too much already, I noticed as soon as I pawed him the cup that his thumbs, thick and calloused as all goatfolk’s naturally are, were crooked, hooked just enough to hinder his grip. He compensated expertly, however, even in spite of his stiff joints, so that I think he noticed my interest.

“They’ve been that way for a while, haven’t they?” I asked.

Father Jonas nodded, closing his lips around the rim of the cup and sipping. Even his swallowing seemed laborious.

“Were you...were you born with them?” I added on a hunch, hoping that it would spare him the effort of writing if I kept myself to yes-or-no questions when I could.

He nodded again.

If this testimony proves to be any use to you, worthy Elder, so that you choose to shelve it somewhere, it may be that a healer will read it, and therefore I can only anticipate that he, being also a part of my venerable tradition, will have the same inkling of an idea that I had then. “May I ask, Father, when your illness began? When you first noticed your body start to stiffen? You may refuse to answer me, of course; knowing that you already have a healer treating you, I can’t pretend anything more than curiosity.”

The smallest shade of a smile came to Father Jonas’ mouth for the first time, and I felt I caught a glimpse of an unbearable lightness hiding somewhere beneath that pitiable dullness. He set down his cup and scribbled on his pad: “I was twenty-one. The first tumor at twenty-eight.”

He could not have been younger than seventy, I thought, and looked even older, although pain so intense for so long can cause one to appear much older than he is. The numbers could not have made more sense, in any case; I did not comment, thinking that it was not my place, but resolved at least to ask Lamb’s Ear about it when she arrived.

She did not arrive. Evening turned to night one tick of the clock at a time. I carried in firewood for Father Jonas. I swept the ash out of the stove and fed it. I fed him as well, learning that he was ravenously hungry in spite of his pain, and with a prayer to my Guiding Star picked my way through the corridors to the mess hall to make him porridge with a soft-boiled egg, a meal he said that he could chew. I made some for myself too, having missed supper, and carried both bowls on a tray all the way back as fast as I could, satisfied when I arrived that the oats had not turned to glue. Then we both ate, exchanging the same slow, sporadic conversation, until it became clear that Lamb’s Ear was not coming and I could not in good conscience keep the old halser up any longer. I helped him step over to the bed, intending to lower him down onto it; but before I could, he did perhaps the strangest thing I had ever seen a halser do.

“May the Stars keep you,” he mumbled through clenched teeth, placing his right hand upon my head, “and may the Sun shine upon your head.”

I did not know what to make of it at first. It was an old blessing, older than the Chiasm, and given with a gesture I had never received before. I knew it, of course – as will you, worthy Elder, for you have seen many halsers and Shepherds enfolded – but not as a blessing for a simple Gift. I kissed his hand, at least; and making sure that there was nothing else he needed, helped him into bed.

“Thank you, Father,” I said. “I’ll be back before Mornsong tomorrow, and hopefully Lamb’s Ear will be too. I apologize for her, I’m not sure what happened.” Inwardly I was fuming, to tell the truth, and I’m sure it showed on my face, but Father Jonas seemed unmoved.

“Strange child,” he muttered, and closed his eyes.

5

Lamb’s Ear was not with Father Jonas the next morning as I had hoped. It was very early, mind you, so early that the eerie ghost of the fall night still hung in the air, and so I thought little of it; but I felt so much the fool returning alone and idiotically ignorant to my patient’s room that I confess I hesitated a second time before knocking softly and entering unbidden. Father Jonas, at least, seemed a bit better now. As is common to folk of a certain age who suffer pains, he was awake early, and had raised himself from bed to pray before a stunning, multiflorous hanging of the Great Dragon. Standing still, it seemed, was easier for him than any change of position, for he did not sway as he remained rooted to the floor with arms stiffly upraised in a pleading gesture. Facing eastward, I could not see his face, but there was a nobility in his sad form that nearly bowled me over. He turned around when I closed the door, looking the tiniest bit less wretched, and welcomed me with a stiff nod.

“Good morning, Father,” I said with a bow. “How are you feeling?”

“Low Tongue,” he mumbled, retrieving his staff from where it leaned against the wall.

“Ah, my mistake,” I smiled, and repeated the question.

“Better,” he said, hobbling over to his chair. “I slept.”

“That’s good,” I said, beginning to feed his fire and make his bed. “Is there anything I can get you? Some breakfast, perhaps?”

“Willow bark,” he said, driving a knuckle into his own shoulder. “And yaupon. Make them separately, I can’t stand them together.”

“You really should eat something with willow bark,” I said.

“Then something soft,” he replied tersely. I bowed again and did as he asked.

There was soft bread in the great kitchen of the mess hall, enriched with milk and eggs to make pudding with later, which I was allowed to take with a great lump of butter. Returning to Father Jonas, I toasted it while the teas steeped, and was astonished to see him drink the unmasked willow bark with nary a grimace. After this I swept his floor, finding it a short job for how much of the space went unused, helped him to undress, brush his hair, and dress again, making a mental note to wash the laundry later that day, and performed a few other minor chores. Then instructing him to tell Lamb’s Ear when she arrived that he had already taken willow bark that morning, I received his archaic blessing again and left him in his chair to read in peace.

I passed the day in my studies, returning again after Evensong, and then at last I began to be truly puzzled. For Lamb’s Ear was still not there, and Father Jonas was that evening just talkative enough to supply my confusion with even more.

“No healers have been by all day,” he told me, “thank the Stars.”

“But that can’t be right,” I said, veiling my vexation as I had been taught. “Father Diggory told me specifically – or as specifically as his temperament allows – that I was to meet a healer named Lamb’s Ear here.”

“They don’t see me every day any more, you know,” said Father Jonas. “They did for a while, but I finally made them stop when we both agreed that it was more taxing than fruitful.”

“Well, then, when was the last time she saw you?” I asked.

He closed his eyes and thought for a moment, pulling gently at his snowy beard. “There are days when I’m too ill to think clearly,” he muttered at length. “A healer came by three days ago. I don’t remember whom.”

“Three days!” I cried. “And were you left to yourself until I came to see you yesterday?”

“Hardly,” he said, looking at me with the same odd confusion I had already seen. “There are folk in and out of that door all the time, each looking for a job to do. I don’t begrudge them, it’s only natural.”

By now I was puzzled enough that I sat there, furiously twirling my whiskers, for over a minute without speaking. “B-but...but...” I stammered. “The healers haven’t given up on you, I’m sure. Father Diggory didn’t make it sound that way.”

“Ah, that’s right, you aren’t from Genipweg,” Father Jonas hummed.

“No, Father. I just arrived from Margh Men on Coppersday.”

“Then you have yet to understand the way things stand,” he sighed, “and my ache is swelling enough that I know not to try to explain. But you’re sharp, Mullein, I can tell. Experience, no doubt, will teach you the lesson others refuse to learn.”

I did not know what to say to that, and Father Jonas no longer wanted to converse that night; and so, after helping him to bathe and dry and dress, I did what little else remained to do and left him, so turned around within that I once again lost my way in the house and had to cut through the garden in the dark to find my room. Some critical piece of information, I thought, had been similarly lost somewhere, and it would be best to consult Father Diggory about it in the morning to ensure that I did not dig myself any deeper into a hole out of which I could not climb.

Perhaps it would have been best, aye, and yet that is not what I did. Years under Master Culpeper had taught me to resolve problems myself if I possibly could, preferably without him knowing, and I had earned his special respect by doing so skillfully. Besides, he had apparently spoken of me so highly in his letter to Father Diggory that my new master must expect the same – no doubt that was why he put me to the service of Father Jonas. I resolved, therefore, to give it one more day. I would go looking for Lamb’s Ear and demand an explanation, proving myself as adaptable as I thought Father Diggory would wish. If she somehow still eluded me, only then would I reveal it to him. It was a terribly irresponsible strategy, one that I heartily discourage in my own apprentices; but as I wrote earlier, I had scarcely begun to be cured of my vanity.

That day came and went in unbroken rain, a fitting gloom to accompany my failure to find her. Folk knew who she was, of course (though I dared not ask the other healers for fear that it would get back to Father Diggory) and most had some idea of where I might look for her; but half of those ideas were either in Father Jonas’ room or in the lazaret, and the rest revealed no more than that she had been around the house that day. I went to see Father Jonas in the morning, searched through Mornsong until studies began, again through Evensong, then finally returned like a whipped dog to the library as the sun set, a tray of lamb’s liver and onions in my paws. I did not even have to ask the question when I opened the door to find Father Jonas sitting by himself once more.

“No luck?” he mumbled, suffering more than he had been that morning – from the rain, I guessed, that being common to folk with bad bones.

“I can only beg your forgiveness, Father,” I said. “I’m as puzzled as you are, I imagine.”

“About different things, perhaps,” he replied, a kind of hollow sarcasm in his voice. “Don’t fret. I’m fine.”

“Well I’m going to have to fret very soon,” I sighed, setting down the liver and filling the kettle without being asked. “In the meantime, I would like to see more done for you than simple willow bark, and it looks like I’m going to have to do it. What do they usually give you?”

“You shouldn’t waste your time” said the old halser; I got the impression that he said those words often.

“I’ve wasted enough time since Coppersday,” I frowned. “With your blessing, I won’t waste any more.”

Then Father Jonas heaved a sigh full of more weariness than I have ever heard in my life. Retrieving a notebook and pencil from a pile of books on a little table beside his chair, he flipped through several pages, scanning all that he had written, until he found what he was seeking. Scratching brackets around the relevant passage, he handed me the notebook.

“Sage, marjoram, chamomile, and goldenrod. What else do they expect of a decoction like that? I fell asleep at six, and was up every half hour to do what everyone does who takes goldenrod.”

I could not help but grin at this. The heavy hand with which it had been penned told me everything. “Do you take notes like this on everything they give you?”

“I like to know what we’ve tried,” he muttered. “I have an interest in that sort of thing.”

“I can see why you would,” I said, pawing back the notes. “I know that brew myself. The goldenrod is in there for spasms. It, well, does that to you.”

“That’s all it did,” he grunted.

“You know, some folk add mullein to it,” I said, “or at least they do in Margh Men. It’s something of a heal-all there.”

For the first time that day, Father Jonas’ ears pricked up. “Mullein is for coughs,” he said.

“Among other things,” I nodded. “But is that really all you took? There are better brews for bones.”

“You don’t understand,” he frowned.

“No I don’t,” I grumbled, “but I’m going to make a point to.”

“They don’t understand either.”

“Who?” I pressed. “Lamb’s Ear?”

“None of them,” said Father Jonas.

“How...how many healers have you seen?” I asked, feeling a sudden prickle climbing the fur on the back of my neck.

“Lost count,” he mumbled, and by the way he hid his face in his hands I knew that I could coax no more out of him that day. So be it, I thought to myself. First thing tomorrow I would eat crow and confess my failure to Father Diggory, then request a full account of Father Jonas’ treatment. Someone with sense, I swore, had to look after this poor halser.

Father Diggory was not in his study the following morning. A note on his door indicated that he had been called down into Genipweg to shrive one of the dying, and knowing that such things cannot be rushed I knew also that I could not sit idly in the hallway waiting for him. I think I might have screamed if there had not been other folk in the hallway; as it is, I almost ripped my own fur out of my head for as hard as I pulled at it.

Dejected, I went to see Father Jonas as usual, bringing breakfast with me. I knocked thrice on his door, a purely symbolic courtesy, and made to turn the knob; before I could, I was stopped dead.

“Come in!” came a voice from within, thin yet jovial, like the cooing of doves.

It was the first time another ghost had been in his room with me, or so I thought it. Hoping against hope that it was Lamb’s Ear, that I would be able to avoid explaining my now lengthy blunder to Father Diggory, I threw open the door and stepped in, scanning the room for a new face.

I found one, but not the one I expected. There was no healer there, neither Lamb’s Ear nor any of the others to whom Father Jonas had alluded. Neither were there any of the kind souls who apparently came by to wait on him. Only Father Jonas was there, standing on a low stool in front of his bookshelf while a calloused finger searched the spines; but just as I had first supposed that he could not possibly be Father Jonas for how like a statue he seemed, now I supposed that he could not possibly be Father Jonas for how like a living folk he seemed.

“Why are you just standing there, Mullein?” he asked, eyeing me with a familiar alacrity which suddenly fit him much better. “Is that bread pudding? It is, isn’t it? Well hurry up, then, bring it in! I’ll kill for a good bread pudding.”

Very nearly he would have had cause to kill me, for I almost dropped the tray on the floor in my shock. Gathering up my wits, however, I crossed the room and set it down on a little table beneath a window looking out at the dawn-gray eastern slopes. I paid the view no mind, but kept my eyes glued on Father Jonas the whole time, hurrying over to the bookshelf as soon as my paws were free.

“Paw me that, would you son?” said the old halser, pointing to his staff which leaned against the bookshelf just out of his reach.

“Can I help you down, Father?” I asked, as nervous as I would have been if he had been standing at the edge of a cliff.

“You can help me by pawing me my staff.”

It was then, I think for the first time, that I realized how odd it was for Father Jonas to possess a Great Dragon staff. I suppose that so many things about him were already odd that I had simply not taken notice.

“Are you going to make me stand here forever, Mullein?” he asked. “It’s not going to bite you.”

“Ah, of course!” I said, plucking the staff from its place and giving it to him. “Forgive me, Father, I was...I was just surprised.”

“Surprised about what? Surprised that I still have a shred of personality left?” he taunted, planting the butt of the Ash on the floor and using it to help him hop down in tremendously caprine fashion. It was not a graceful movement by any means; he was still terribly stiff, and the impact of his hooves on the floor seemed to jar him by the wrinkling of his weary face, but it was a movement I had considered him wholly incapable of only a moment before. “You’re not the only one,” he panted.

“No no, not at all,” I said, still reaching out to catch him though it was no longer necessary. “You’re just so much more chipper than you were, I didn’t expect it.”

“Once in a great while I still have days like this,” he said, shuffling over to the table, “though I suspect the last of them will come before too long.”

“Should you really be climbing onto stools like that?” I asked. “Wouldn’t it be better to ask someone else?”

“Sit down, would you?” Father Jonas huffed, lowering himself laboriously into a chair at the table and motioning to the one across from him. “I warn you that I’ve lost most of my manners. I’m not above eating without you.”

Dumbly I obeyed, pulling out the chair and sitting down as Father Jonas began in strained rapture to savor his breakfast. Knowing how slowly he ate, I picked at mine as slowly as I could.

“It’s my responsibility, you know,” he commented after a lengthy silence.

“To eat without me?” I wryly replied. “Or to climb onto stools where you could fall and break bones I wouldn’t know how to set?”

Father Jonas snorted, then bleated with laughter belonging to someone forty years younger. "You're sharper than you let on," he said. "Cutting. You could really let me have it if you wanted to."

"I wouldn't, Father," I replied.

"A shame," he sighed. At once all of the joy went out of his face, leaving behind the dull expression I was used to, but I got the impression that the change was only in his face. The same lightness still danced in his eyes.

Another pause stretched on, then: "To act like a living thing whenever I can. To laugh and to dress myself, and to climb on stools and risk cracking myself open like an egg. That's my duty."

"I understand," I nodded. "My sister used to say something similar."

"But not anymore?"

"No, not anymore."

"I'm very sorry to hear that," he said.

"It's all right," I replied, "it's past. Please go on."

"I'll regret this, you know," he said. "The pain will be all the worse tomorrow for what I do today, but today is the only day I can do it, and I'll be damned if I don't."

"And damned if you do," I added, knowing as I said it that I would never dare speak so to any other patient.

"Exactly," Father Jonas nodded, tackling another modest mouthful of his pudding. "You're from Margh Men, aren't you Mullein? I seem to remember you saying so."

"Aye, Father, I am."

"Never been myself, but there are knights there, they say," he began. "I'm sure you've seen one before, all shut up like a crayfish in his armor."

"Many times," I nodded. "They protect the north side of Mount Arzkoroll."

"All shut up, and yet no folk is more exuberant than a true knight," he continued, "more willing to put his hard parts to hard use. Don't you agree?"

"I suppose so, Father," I said, noticing the growing light outside the window. Something about the hills seemed new that morning; perhaps it was the effect of Father Jonas' own exuberance.

"We must be willing to expand, Mullein," he said with a jerky gesture reminiscent of a puppet on strings, "upward and outward, mustn't we? Like a cake. Better than shriveling up like a raisin."

"I can't say I've ever thought about it in those terms, but you're right," I shrugged. "Living things grow. When they stop growing, they begin to die."

"The secret, Mullein, is that one may continue to expand even after the process of death begins," Father Jonas whispered, stabbing his fork at me. "You know, when you first said you were from Margh Men, I thought the poor healers had sent for someone who might know what to do with folk who turn to stone. Of all the places on Mount Arzkoroll, I would expect Margh Men to have folk who turn to stone."

"Not that I'm aware of, Father," I said. "I'm only studying to be a healer. A halser's healer, I should say."

"But not a halser?"

"Ah, no, I'm not brave enough for that," I said, feeling my ears burn. "Curses are one thing; possession is entirely another."

"And yet you've been brave enough to come back here four times now."

"But you aren't possessed, Father," I smirked, "unless I've been severely misled."

"You know that I'm dying, don't you Mullein?" he asked. The way he said it, so simply, with his spoon scraping the corner of his bowl, caused me to reel.

"A-aye, Father, at least that's what I was told," I said.

Father Jonas shrugged, winced, then paused to take a breath. “Staring death in the face is exactly what we halserers do. It’s why our callings are so compatible. Pursue yours as singly as you like, Mullein, I don’t mean to suggest that you should pivot now, but don’t say that you aren’t brave enough.”

“I...I’ll try, Father,” I said thinly, unsure how else to respond. To tell the truth, his comment struck an unexpected chord in me. I found that I was thinking about my sister, something I had learned to stop doing in the presence of patients. As a child, when I had first put myself under Master Culpeper’s tutelage, every dying folk brought her to mind, until at last I determined that none of them would. Here, however, was someone who seemed to care about that determination as little as he cared about tomorrow’s sufferings.

“Have you ever seen a haunt, Mullein?” he asked, wrenching me back into the room.

“I...I...a haunt?” I repeated. “As in a wraith?”

“Or anything of the sort,” he nodded.

“But what does that have to do with-” I closed my mouth before I could finish, having almost said “*Maudlin?*” and instead said “No. No, I don’t think so; or at least if I have, I didn’t recognize it as one.”

“They can be hard to spot sometimes, especially if the interactions are short,” he nodded knowingly.

“Have you?” I asked, looking up from the table at him in some surprise.

“I...I don’t know,” he hummed, narrowing his eyes at me and tugging his beard. “I may be in the same boat as you: if I have, I didn’t know it as a haunt. You know how they form, don’t you? Or how some of them form, at least?”

“Ghosts are beyond the help of healers, I’m afraid, so I’m sure I don’t.”

“So am I!” he laughed. “We have that in common too. But a haunt forms – or may form – from crystallized thought, be it of folk or – less commonly – other sorts of creatures. Do you follow me?”

“What is ‘crystallized thought?’” I asked.

“Imagine someone with a fiery disposition,” said Father Jonas, “someone with a great deal of forcefulness in his thought, a great deal of sharpness and clarity. Now imagine, as I warned against earlier, that this folk has turned all his thought selfishly inward, has given up on expansion in order to cement what he already has. We would say, among other things, that he’s become recalcitrant, wouldn’t we?”

I nodded.

“Imagine then that he persists in this recalcitrance his whole life, pouring all of his thought back into his ever-hardening ghost.”

I leaned forward, finding myself drawn in. “If all the force of his thought were spent on himself, he would be giving up growth in a way, hastening the process of death.”

“Aye, aye aye aye,” said Father Jonas, growing almost childishly excited. “No more a cake, he would be turning himself into a raisin through sheer will. And while a cake must either be eaten or rot back to soil shortly, a raisin may persist for years and years after its parent vine has died.”

“So then a haunt is the hardened raisin of a folk’s undying ghost?”

“Either that or something entirely separate,” Father Jonas nodded. “Both may be possible. In fact I’m sure both are possible.”

“Isn’t this exactly what the Foe did, Father?”

Father Jonas grinned, or at least tried to; I saw the flawless white teeth in his mouth for half a moment. “See? Sharp,” he said.

I sat back in my chair, strangely dizzy all of a sudden. “I see. That’s fascinating, I admit, though I can’t help but think you brought it up to make me regret not wanting to be a halser.”

“Nothing like that!” he assured me. “I’m far too frank to beat around the bush, Mullein, I promise you.”

“May I ask why you brought it up, then?”

“You looked like you didn’t know what to say,” he shrugged. “That’s what I always ask folk when they don’t know what to say: ‘Have you seen a ghost?’ They always have an answer, I find, even if they haven’t.”

“That isn’t why,” I pushed back. “You were talking about yourself, weren’t you?”

For the space of a breath he stared hard into my eyes, so hard that I nearly looked down into my lap, then shrugged again. “I’m only trying to prepare you for what you might find someday when you walk into this room,” he said. “It’s very likely that your studies here will outlast me, and I have this strange feeling every time you enter that it will be you who discovers my death.”

“What I might find?” I balked. “You? A haunt? You hardly strike me as a recalcitrant folk, Father.”

“That’s kind of you to say,” he replied. “Better to have hard flesh and a supple ghost than the other way around, aye, or at least that’s what I’m hoping, but you can’t deny that I’m recalcitrant in a way. That’s what’s killing me, after all. Ah, forgive me! Did I say something wrong?”

“What?” I asked. “No, not at all. What makes you think that?”

“You look troubled,” he told me.

I would not be surprised if my ears flushed red enough then to be seen even in the soft light of the woodstove. “I-I do? I’m sorry, Father Jonas, I’m not supposed to let you see that.”

He laughed at me for this, slapping the table with a much feebler hand than his callouses implied. “Stars, Mullein, you’ll make me crack a rib! I’m a halser, child, don’t you have any idea what that means? You couldn’t hide a troubled face from me if you tried.”

“It just doesn’t seem fair to me, Father,” I said. “I know I’m only an apprentice, and new to Redlamp at that, but...but just look at you! You dressed yourself today. You fed the stove. You’re talking and laughing. I don’t understand why the healers have given up on you so soon.”

“Ahhhhh,” Father Jonas breathed, as a look of intolerable pity came into his face. “So that’s what’s bothering you, is it? I suppose they haven’t told you *why* they’ve stopped trying to cure me?”

“They’re all at a loss, I think,” I ventured, “but that’s not enough reason to-”

“I told them to stop,” he interrupted me, holding up a hand. “I made them. They would have only continued to throw their vile decoctions at me until I dropped dead, and we both would have been the more miserable for it. My ribs are already fused, Mullein. I can’t even bend down to pull on my own pants without the wildest acrobatics, and that’s on the best days. They can’t stop it, and they can’t slow it down – forty years have proven that. Now we focus on pain, and they get to see more success that way, and so we both walk away more encouraged. You may find that a silly way to think, being a healer, but I assure you...oh, Mullein, are you crying?”

I held out as long as I could, which in truth was a pitifully short time; but in defense of my bedside manner, all of the things that Father Jonas was saying I had heard long ago from Maudlin. She too had feared, even more than death, the slow breaking of my mother’s and father’s hearts. She did not know, I think, to fear mine, and I am glad for that, but the things she confided in me near the end had left wounds into which Father Jonas was now casually probing one of his calloused fingers.

“It’s not right,” I said more forcefully, desperately reining myself in. “It’s not right to give up like that, Father.”

What happened next nearly brought me to tears again, and the surprise of it still strikes me like a hammer on a bell at the most unexpected times: Father Jonas rose and embraced me, with arms as stiff as boards and a breast like the body of a ringing dulcimer.

“It isn’t giving up to prepare for death, child,” he said. “Exactly the opposite.”

"You aren't dead," I replied, suddenly so indignant that I pushed him away, "and you have no way of knowing that this will kill you."

"Do you have some knowledge that I haven't gained in forty years?" he asked with a wry smirk. "How many folk have you seen turn to stone?"

"I have a will to heal," I said, "and I've followed it all the way here, and I'll be damned if I let it go now."

Then Father Jonas pursed his lips, and into his formerly bright eyes came a shadow of something like grim resignation. "You have horns, Mullein, as surely as I do," he sighed, "and I can see already that I don't have the strength to butt heads with you."

"Then don't," I said. "Let us try to help you, at least."

"No," he answered, shaking his head as forcefully as he could manage. "No, I won't let them start spinning in circles again, no matter what you say."

"Then let me try," I insisted, knowing what a stupid thing it was to say, but by now so carried away by my own passion that I did not care.

"You'll be disappointed no matter what you do, you poor wretch," he mumbled.

"I'll be more disappointed if I do nothing."

"Oh, curse everybody's goodwill," Father Jonas huffed, sinking back down into his chair and putting his head in his hands. "Fine. Fine! I'll let you take a stab at it for your own sake, if it will make you feel better. But you must give it up the moment I tell you to, as soon as I see that you've run out of ideas."

"You have my word, Father," I said, almost bursting from my victory. "I'll do all that I can for you."

Before I go on, I must say here that I knew, as you must also know, worthy Elder, that I was making a promise I likely could not keep. I had no assurance whatsoever that Father Diggory would allow me to treat Father Jonas, be it on my own or under Lamb's Ear's supervision, and in fact I suspected the opposite. I made the rash promise even so, for the simple reason that I intended to hide my efforts from them both. My master's oversight thus far had been slight to say the least, and Lamb's Ear's nonexistent – what harm could I possibly do?

Vain, vain, vain! Was there ever a vainer wretch than I? I'm ashamed of myself as I write this; and yet, to tell the truth, I'm not sure I would act any differently if given the same chance again.

"You said you've taken notes on your treatment," I continued, standing up from the table. "Are they all in one place?"

"Aye, up to a certain point," he nodded, letting me lift him up by the hand. "I used to copy them all down in my notebook. Feel free to consult them; it will stop you from reinventing the ones that didn't work, and it might cure you of your stubbornness sooner."

The notebook was on his desk, an exquisitely old piece of chestnut with a lectern to one side. "Do you keep a star chart anywhere, or would Lamb's Ear have it?" I asked, then added "Or perhaps you have yours memorized?" when I realized that I would not be able to ask her for it if I was to treat him secretly.

"Aye, in one of these drawers," he said, trying several before he found a yellowed sheet of paper at the bottom of a stack and held it out to me with a trembling arm. It was folded in half; briefly I glanced at it, curious as to whether my suspicions were well-founded, only to be puzzled again.

"It's square," I said, holding it up to the light.

"Of course it is," said Father Jonas. "What did you expect?"

"I've only ever seen square charts in old journals," I said, struggling to remember how to read them. "Very old journals. I wasn't aware that they still used them in Redlamp."

"Do they look different in Margh Men?" he asked.

“We’ve used circles for many years,” I answered, folding it up again after I confirmed at least a few of my suspicions. “To be honest, I never understood why folk ever used square charts. The world is a wheel, after all.”

“And yet it has four corners,” Father Jonas smiled. I could see then that his smile pained him, and knew that I could not in good conscience demand any more from him that day. Bowing to him, I put the chart in his notebook, then slid both into my healer’s satchel.

“I’ll do all that I can for you, Father,” I repeated, “you’ll see.”

7

I was walking on air as I left Father Jonas’ room that day. The chafing thrill of deception already buzzed in my head like a swarm of bees, but I justified myself by saying that I would at least attempt to get Lamb’s Ear on my side – if I ever found her. Father Jonas might request that I be given leave to treat him under her auspices, and his sudden change of mind might impress her; if not, I had lost nothing but sanctioning.

Absorbed in these thoughts, I was not paying attention as I left the library on my way to my room. I rounded a sharp corner on the left, almost clipping the wall, then collided head on with someone rounding it on the right. We both fell sprawling, I with my open satchel scattering all over the floor. The moment I realized that I was unhurt I began to profusely apologize, extending my paw to the other party; and seeming similarly unscathed, she took it and rose with my help. A bright red mantle fell neatly around her. I screamed silently.

She was a rabbitfolk doe just shy of middle age, with a chestnut coat very much like mine of that pattern which they call agouti. Her face was stunningly beautiful, in that elfish way that the Three Ears sometimes are, and I thanked the Great Rabbit that she was one of the taller ones. Had she been much smaller, I may well have hurt her when we collided.

“Please forgive me, Mother!” I panted, making a sloppy bow before frantically bending down to scoop up the contents of my satchel. “I shouldn’t have taken that corner so tightly.”

“Here, let me help you with that,” she said, kneeling down. “You were so quiet, I had no idea anyone was coming. You appeared in front of me like a ghost.”

She laughed as she said this, picking up Father Jonas’ now open notebook before I could get to it myself, then stopped and furrowed her brow. The star chart had nearly fallen out, its antiquated square laid bare for the reading.

“Are you...are you one of the healers’ apprentices?” she asked, glancing at my brown mantle for the first time.

“A-aye, Mother,” I said, taking the notebook from her as casually as I could. “I’m under Father Diggory. My name is Mullein.”

She stood up with a gasp as if struck, her clear blue eyes now doubled in size. “You!” she squeaked. “Where on earth have you been? I’ve been waiting for you to show up since Moonday!”

I knew then whom I had bowled over. My silent screaming redoubled, but now there was anger in it. “Where have I been?” I retorted, standing up just as forcefully. “Where have *you* been? I’ve been searching for you since Moonday, but you never seem to be where folk say you should be!”

“Excuse me?” she scowled, putting her paws on her hips. “I perform my duties every day, thank you very much, unlike some of us who would rather go where their whims blow them!”

“Whims? What’s that supposed to mean?” I growled, dangerously close to losing my temper.

“I know that Father Diggory asked you to help me with Father Jonas, Mullein,” she said.

“Neither of us can figure out why you’ve failed to show up all week, and what with the poor old boar losing his sister I’ve had to reassure him a dozen times that I would find out-”

“That’s a-” I interrupted her, biting my tongue before I could finish the thought. “That’s not true. I’ve been visiting him twice a day, every day, doing whatever work needs doing while I wait for you.”

“Mullein, I visit Father Jonas every day,” she scoffed. “You were never there, and he never mentioned you.”

All of my anger dissolved in an instant, leaving me dizzy with confusion. I must have opened my mouth three times without speaking, for by the time I managed a cogent thought her reproachful face was slightly less so. “W-when?” I whimpered. “When were you there?”

“Every afternoon before Evensong,” she said, “at exactly this time.”

“Father Diggory...he said that you would be there *after* Evensong,” I replied. “I’ve been staying with Father Jonas until Latesong.”

A spark of understanding flashed in her eyes. “Well now we’re getting somewhere at least,” she grumbled. “In that case, I suppose I can swallow my pride enough to apologize. With so much on his mind, Father Diggory must have forgotten that I’ve been tutoring some of the lazaret nurses after Evensong. I started seeing Father Jonas in the afternoon a few weeks ago.”

“But...but that still can’t be right,” I said. “Father Jonas told me that he hasn’t seen you all week.”

Then the fight went out of my opponent too, escaping with a sigh as morose as any of Father Jonas’. “Oh dear Rabbit’s antlers,” she groaned, “he’s playing a trick on us. He has to be.”

“I beg your pardon?” I asked.

“Mullein, how did Father Jonas seem to you?” said Lamb’s Ear. “How did he act, I mean?”

“Stars, he’s a different folk from day to day,” I shrugged. “Sometimes hour to hour. Why?”

“Did he seem aware of what was going on around him?” she pressed.

“Again, that depends,” I said. “At first he was very dull – I suppose he was in too much pain to think clearly. Today he was as sharp as a tack, though; I had all I could do to keep up with him.”

“Was he really?” Lamb’s Ear beamed. “That’s fantastic news! I haven’t seen him like that in months.”

“Aye,” I nodded, “but I’m not sure where you’re going with this.”

“Father Jonas’ pain is agonizing at times, Mullein,” she said. “That alone causes him to forget things, but more and more often he needs something stronger than willow bark to soothe it, and it makes his forgetfulness worse. This wouldn’t be the first time he’s forgotten that someone has visited him.”

That revelation felt to me like a first taste of death, and I believe that Lamb’s Ear knew it. “I see,” I said. “Now that you mention it, he did tell me something like that. I didn’t realize...” I trailed off, shrugging limply.

“He hides it rather well most of the time,” she nodded. “He has incredible stamina, but don’t be fooled: he’s very ill, Mullein.”

“I know, Mother,” I said; then mustering a bit of my courage: “but I confess it seems wrong to me that we’ve stopped trying to cure him when he can still stand up and walk.”

“How much has Father Diggory told you about his condition?” she asked.

“Enough to give me a good idea of it,” I answered, “especially with what Father Jonas has told me himself.”

“Then you know how baffled we are,” she shrugged, “and how precarious his health is. We’ve tried removing the tumors before, did you know that? They grow back as normal bone, sometimes bigger than they were. The rest of his flesh does the same. If he gets a cut, bone grows in to fill it. We haven’t given up, although I think that he would like us to. We simply don’t know how to proceed.”

I sensed then that I had come to a crossroads – or rather a corner. I could beg her then and there to let me help her treat Father Jonas, just as I told myself I would, and perhaps together we might find a solution. But the full scope of his illness was now so wide to me, and my own fumbles, culminating in the clumsiest kind of collision, seemed so great, that I was convinced she would laugh in my face. She had not recognized Father Jonas' notes, it seemed. I decided not to bring them up.

"In that case, Mother, I beg your forgiveness for the misunderstanding," I said with a bow, "and I'll be sure to beg Father Diggory's as well. Just tell me what you would like me to do, and I'll do it."

She smiled then, just enough to tell me that I was in the clear, and sighed. "Thank you, Mullein. You know, I was so puzzled all week about you. Father Diggory told me that you were a natural with the patients in the sickroom, but I almost didn't believe him. I'm not ashamed to admit that I thought you were the laziest, stupidest wretch in all of Redlamp when you didn't come to see me three days in a row. But if you got Father Jonas to talk to you that much, I...well, I'm glad I was wrong."

"Thank you Mother," I nodded.

"He takes willow bark three times a day," she told me. "I give him poppy with it in the afternoon, but if he's in a lot of pain at bedtime you can go to the workhouse and ask for more. Swelling can still be a problem, but he suffers more often from cold dryness, so try not to chill his aches unless you have to. Aside from that, I need you mostly to nurse him: feed, clothe, bathe, whatever he needs done. Can I trust you to do that?"

"Aye, Mother, of course you can," I said. "I'll be happy to."

"Good," she said, smiling even wider. "That's a weight off my mind. Fall is always a whirlwind in Redlamp, you know: all of the mendicants are coming back from their wandering with Greenhorns in tow, we have to find rooms for them, mentors, on top of all of the folk catching cold. One less thing to keep track of is a mercy."

"Happy to help, Mother," I said.

"By the way," she added, "my room is on the top floor of the Winter House, in the northwest corner of the she-folk's wing. Please, for the love of the Ewe-Lamb, come to see me the next time you're confused."

"I will, Mother," I said, then after an exchange of bows returned to my room to examine Father Jonas' notebook.

8

I did not go to Evensong that evening, nor to Latesong after I left Father Jonas: partly from shame, and partly from a ravenous desire to learn all I could about my secret patient. I stayed up for much of the night scouring his notes, concluding therefrom much that I will not bore you with here. What I must mention, however, is his star chart, the first place to which any baffled healer turns for illumination. It continually caught my eye, both that night and afterwards; not for any technical reason, but because some elusive quality in it seemed wrong somehow. At first I assumed it only the result of its antiquated square shape; but I had learned under Master Culpeper to read such charts, and when I was confident that I had read it correctly I still could not shake the prickling feeling that either I or the chart was making a mistake that neither of us guessed. In retrospect the answer was simple, but it was an answer so preposterous that I would have never conceived of it if not for what happened soon after.

What I did discover, both in the chart and in the notebook, was what I (and many of his previous healers) had already guessed: that the Lord of Lead was frowning over him. Cold dryness, shriveling and hardening were all his domain, and so Father Jonas' treatments at first had focused on remedies for these. The healers had wandered down other alleys as these proved ineffective, but I had an instinct to retread the old ground, to employ wort that I had seen Master Culpeper use for similar ailments to great

effect. This I did, raiding the worthwhile every day for all I needed; and while at first I feared that someone would ask me why I wanted so many diverse herbs, I need not have worried. Nobody bothers to question even a healer's apprentice when he works in the sickroom as often as I did. Nobody is that bored. Even when I requested Father Jonas' poppies, it took only the mention of Lamb's Ear's name to brush off the obligatory curiosity once and for all.

So my efforts began. Father Jonas declined almost overnight from his burst of good health, just as he had warned. His joints, especially his backbone and the hinges of his jaw, were swollen and aching when next I visited him, as if his own body were punishing him for moving and speaking. The overgrown bones, I learned, were grinding against his flesh, irritating it, and would likely cause the growth of even more bone as it healed. Against those spots I laid one of Father Culpeper's remedies, cloths damp and reeking of vinegar in which I had boiled some wild purple irises. I laid them also upon his bony tumors, to the old halser's chagrin, hoping that their virtue of dissolving growths of all kinds would avail here.

As you might have guessed, it did not. The soothing of the swelling was well within the power of the willow bark and the poppies, and the bony tumors changed not a bit. After a week of that I switched to an ointment of elm, hemp, and mullein, at the same time beginning to add mullein, mallow, and hawkweed to his willow bark tea. He hated this for the bitterness, but sucked it down dutifully when the tea proved more effective against his deeper aches than the willow bark alone. That, I think, was the only victory I had until the twelfth month.

I added to the back of Father Jonas' notebook all of the failed remedies I employed. Every moment I was not studying – and many even when I was – my thoughts were bent upon him, upon the nature of his disease and what earthly powers could possibly avail against it. I did not attend the thanings as much as I had at first, as much as I had wanted to when I first learned that I was to study in Redlamp, but rather used that time to dwell more and more on the uninterpretable riddle I had willingly undertaken to solve. I could not see at the time that it was consuming me, just as Father Jonas feared it would; but I could sense, with every Evensong I skipped in favor of the worthwhile and the beaker, that I was becoming by degrees more recalcitrant. There was no one to check me on it, unfortunately. Father Diggory never inquired into my duties very deeply; and whether it was due to a strict schedule on her part or else a level of slackness (which I personally suspected), I never saw Lamb's Ear in Father Jonas' room.

And all the while Father Jonas continued to decline. The onset of winter tyrannized him such that he had more days like our first meeting than any other, and none even close to his brief and unexpected rally. His dullness returned with force, a slowness of thought and a thickness of speech I detested forcefully for how it buried the alacrity I knew he possessed. While the leaves remained on the trees we conversed at length about topics we both enjoyed, about history and old lore and the kind of wisdom folk trade in low voices around campfires, either with both of us speaking or with Father Jonas furiously scribbling his thoughts on his pad of paper. It surprised me how much he, even dressed as he was and surrounded by so many flawless antiques, knew of the old world, of the founding of Margh Men and things older still. It surprised me also how much of his alacrity shone through even in his greatest pains, when he could hardly hold a pencil long enough to write ten words. I admired him for it, and found in time that I loved him.

But the leaves fell, as they must always do, and with them fell my hopes. The first sign that something was turning awry came on the very first day of the Twelfth Month. It was a Sunday, and so I brought lamb to Father Jonas, roast lamb that was just tender enough for him to chew given enough time. This meant that we spoke little while he ate, and given his condition lately I thought it likely that we would hardly speak at all; but the lamb seemed to cheer him somewhat, and in time our conversation began in earnest.

"Can you tell me, Father, why it is that you'll only speak in the Low Tongue?" I asked him. I cannot remember now how the subject arose; it may be that it was entirely out of the blue, for I had been dying to ask the question for a while.

"I hardly speak the Bear Tongue," he replied, slowly and thickly. He slurred everything he said now, even on his best days; I knew what that meant, but chose not to think about it.

"Really?" I balked. "How have you managed that after so much time?"

"It's easier than you think, child," he said. "Haven't you noticed yet that everyone in Redlamp uses the Low Tongue? Genipweg folk only use the Bear Tongue with each other down in the village, and your particular flavor of it is even more inscrutable to me."

This was patently false. Every article of it, in fact, was false. The Low Tongue is, of course, common knowledge in Redlamp, for most books are written in it and the rabbitfolk in the hill country still make use of a form of it. But everyone I had met so far in Redlamp could and did speak the Bear Tongue, and the Genipweg dialect was negligibly different from my own. I was, therefore, so baffled by Father Jonas' answer that I merely sat there for thirty or forty ticks of his grandmother clock, wondering how to respond.

"I suppose...I suppose I lived all my life in Margh Men, so it's possible I've misunderstood something," I mumbled at length, choosing to play the coward in my confusion.

"Aye, I think that's likely," said Father Jonas tersely, in a way that told me he would not pursue the topic any further.

The second such sign occurred at the end of the following day, a frigid, windy spell which froze the old halser's tongue and compelled the two of us to sit quietly and read in chairs beside one another. I was absorbed in my work, which Father Jonas called my 'torments,' and he a series of hymns musing on the wonders of the Sunlit Lands. Then the clock struck nine, and amidst its chimes I put him to bed, receiving his antiquated blessing before gathering up my things and opening the door to the library. It must have taken me longer than usual that night, for the bells were faintly tolling Latesong through an open outer door, deep and deliciously harmonious. I remembered then with a sting how long it had been since I had attended Latesong; and as I lingered in the threshold, loath to move, I heard Father Jonas stir behind me.

"Is that the Spring House calling for supper?" he slurred, shakily propping himself up on an elbow.

"What?" I said, turning around. "No no, it's only Holy Hillary's, Father. It's almost time for Latesong."

I will never forget the way he looked at me then. Such a mixture of bewilderment – almost alarm – and aching dullness brought to my mind the misery of the dying whom I had seen so many times both in Master Culpeper's sickroom and in Redlamp's. My obsession had so far proven a wall between myself and the implications of Father Jonas' decline; but as the grizzled old goat was so skilled at doing, he poked a brick out of its mortar with a single finger. He did not answer me a word, only nodded stiffly and lay back down, leaving me to linger once more in the threshold until I could bring myself to go.

The last and most damning of these signs occurred the next night. Father Jonas was in a queer mood, more sullen than usual, and uncharacteristically reluctant to share any of his thoughts. I assumed at first that his pain was swelling again and offered to try the next in my increasingly desperate succession of remedies; but he, having been as patient with my prodding as a Holy Folk until now, refused me for the first time. He took only his willow bark, shunning even the poppies, and would I think have foregone conversation entirely if I had not tried to coax it out of him. I wracked my brain for some cursory topic to broach; as I did so, my eyes settled upon his staff.

"If you don't mind my asking, Father, I've always wondered why your staff bears the Great Dragon," I said. "I was under the impression that only Shepherds and Elders are allowed to carry those."

His bewilderment returned trebled at that. He looked to his staff, then to me, his rheumy eyes as wide as a wraith's and his mouth agape, and I knew even before he spoke that something was terribly wrong.

"Mullein," he mumbled, pausing a little too long, "I am the Elder of Redlamp."

Need I say that he was not? Even I, who had been truant to Holy Hillary's too often lately, knew at least that much. I had seen you, worthy Elder Colm, chanting before the roodscreen. I had seen you swinging your censer, holding aloft your lamp. I had seen the Great Dragon winding around your staff, a different staff and different paws than Father Jonas'. I could not say a word, and my silence must have confirmed my patient's suspicions.

"You think I'm losing my wits, don't you?" he snapped, slurring so badly that I could hardly understand him. "Don't try to deny it, Mullein, I'm no fool."

"Father Jonas," I said thinly, "I've seen the Elder of Redlamp. I've kissed his paw. What answer can I possibly give you?"

"When?" he pressed, wincing as he leaned toward me. "When did you last see him?"

"Does it matter?" I evaded, unwilling to lie to him.

"I know you've been avoiding the hours," he smoldered. "You're here halfway through Evensong some days, and if I could stand long enough to serve it myself I suspect I wouldn't see you there. Is it because of me?"

"That has nothing to do with who the Elder of Redlamp is," I pushed back, writhing inwardly at the pain of his probing finger.

"Answer my question, Mullein, if you love me," he said.

I am not one to weep often, dear reader, I promise you. I can count on two paws, in fact, the number of times I have done it outside of kittenhood, and Father Jonas accounts for half of them. Hot tears stung my eyes when I heard him say that, wrung out by brute, bodily pain; and all at once, like the Holy Doors opening, I saw for the first time why I had really stopped attending the thanings.

"Why should I bother going to Evensong?" I barked, standing up and throwing down my notes. "So my prayers can be ignored there too? Am I the only one who hasn't given up on you, Father?"

"You don't believe that," he tutted. "I know you don't, and you know it too, and you would realize it if you would only complain to the one you're really angry with."

"I just don't understand, Father," I said, hating how much like a child I sounded. "I don't know what to do."

"Admitting it is a start," he chuckled, and for the first time in days I saw a spark of his old cheer return to his eyes. "You're not to try and cure me any more, Mullein."

"What?" I yelped. "But I've barely started! You can't give up that quickly!"

"It isn't quickly," he chided, "and it isn't giving up. But I've let you torment yourself long enough, child. What do I care about having supple flesh if I have to watch your own ghost harden?"

"Give me to Yule, at least," I pleaded. "Just one month, and then you can tell me to quit. Less than a month, even!"

"Mullein, open your eyes," he answered, in a low, soft voice. "I doubt I'll be here for Yule."

"Then...then let me try just one more thing," I croaked, digging for scraps now. "Just one, and if it doesn't help you at all I'll give it up on my own."

Father Jonas pursed his thin, pale lips, drawing his sunken cheeks even tauter against his skull. "If I grant you that, will you swear to take up the hours again? Will you swallow your stubborn pride and go to pray for me tonight?"

“Aye,” I said, bowing low to him. “Of course, Father. Anything you want.”

“Then I suppose I have no choice,” he sighed, “though it’s against my better judgment. You may try one more thing – *one*, Mullein – before Yule. If it doesn’t substantially help me, you must give it up and content yourself to be solely my friend. Will you do that?”

“Heaven forbid I lose your friendship, Father,” I said, gingerly taking his hand and kissing it. “I’ll do as you say.”

“Good,” he panted, giving me his blessing. “Then let’s not talk about this any longer. I’m short of breath and wretchedly tired.”

9

Latesong was done when at last I left Father Jonas’ room for the night. House Redlamp was still, as it always is at that time, and the snow-strewn garden as silent as the heavens. Even with the purple Hithercoming lamps to show me where Holy Hillary’s stood against the overcast sky, I could hardly find the path there, and halfway up the hill I slipped and tumbled back down to its base, bruised and soaked. I had scarcely felt so wretched in all my life as when I shuffled through those doors, drawing the Chiasm beneath the Lamb with his fingers fashioning the Sun, and found the whole Wheelhouse empty.

I was relieved about that, for my pride would have quailed me if any eyes could see what I knew I was about to do. Only a few lamps were lit, as well as a number of taper candles burning down to the sand in their stands; but I have always seen rather well in the dark, so I found my way beneath the black dome to the little house north of the roodscreen with no trouble. There I laid eyes again on the bones of Holy Evensong, resting so serenely on their bed, and the sight of bones brought me face to the floor before I knew my knees had buckled.

I will not tell you how I prayed then, for it is nobody else’s business; suffice it to say that there was old sorrow in it which I did not know still remained. It told me at once why I did the things I did, and cured me of any delusion that my motives were wholly pure. I felt as if a thorn had been pulled from my heart, freeing a torrent of blood and pain onto the floor. Only then could I pray for Father Jonas, begging for what I had callously supposed heaven would not give, and at once a strange peace fell upon me, the kind I had always only thought pious poetry. There was heat in it, and a light both like and unlike the red lamps in the little house. I thought at first that it came from within, a brightening of my own eyes; but when the warm currents began to tickle the fur on the back of my neck I knew differently and turned around, stumbling up on numb legs.

A Star stood before me, almost blinding in its brightness. I could not see for the light of its face what shape it wore, but there was a familiarity in it so sharp that I assumed it one of my own shepherds. Its flesh – or what my eyes perceived as flesh – can hardly be described, at once as hard as stone and as liquid as flowing water. The best I can do after so many years, pitiful though it is, is to say that it seemed cut from living gemstone which slid over itself more gracefully than a serpent’s winding whenever it moved. Colors innumerable were in it, split into their individual hues in additional stones set into a pure, golden crown atop its head. And whether it was some sort of garment, or only the Sun’s fire enrobing it as I have heard enrobes all Stars, I thought I could see a cornelian mantle rippling behind it as if in a light wind.

You may be excused, worthy Elder, if you think I was afraid then. Heaven knows I read these words as I write them and wonder that I was not. I felt no fear then, only a strange security, as if I lay in its arms even as I stood there. “I know you,” I said.

“You asked for me,” said the Star, in a voice as sonorous as scores of cooing doves.

“Did I?” I asked. “Are you...are you Holy Evensong?”

I thought it laughed then, but the sound was like no laughter I had ever heard. “Why are you crying, child?” it asked in return. I wiped my eyes, and found them still wet with tears which glittered on the back of my paws.

“It’s Father Jonas,” I answered, assuming that it knew the folk by his name as heaven supposedly does. “He’s going to die, and I haven’t been able to do a thing for him.”

“Which would you prefer?” said the Star. “That he live, or that you are able to help him?”

“Can’t I have both?” I asked.

“Not if you ask for both,” said the Star.

“Then I would rather he live,” I said. “I want to say that I would rather he live and that I never get to see him again, but that would be a lie.”

“And we’ve had enough of those,” it nodded. “But you’ve spoken truly, and for that I may grant that you see truly as well. Hold out your paw, Mullein.”

I did as it asked, only to find that my arm was trembling so much that I could hardly hold it up. In answer to this the Star reached up to touch its crown, pulling from it a white stone; either crown or stone rang like a bell when it left its setting. Then the Star dropped this stone into my open paw, and I flinched, expecting by the radiant heat of its presence to be burned. But the stone was cool against my scarred flesh, no larger than a black walnut in its shell, and proved perfectly clear now that it was not held up to the Star’s light. In shape it was a lozenge, but strangely seemed uncut, as if the jeweler who had set it thought that it had grown too perfectly to improve upon.

“In the Healer’s Wing of the library there are shelves stacked with healers’ journals,” said the Star, returning its hand to the folds of its mantle. “I believe you know them?”

“I’ve seen them, aye,” I said, admiring the flawless surface of the gem.

“There are journals there that will tell you how to help Father Jonas,” it continued. “Hold this stone up to your right eye and scan the shelves; you will see them at once. Only don’t do it now – if you look at me that way, the virtue will leave it.”

My paw was already halfway to my eye. Flushing, I clutched the stone and held it at my side. “Th-thank you,” I stuttered, searching for an honorific only to find that I could think of none.

“Have no fear, child,” it said. “I have been sent to help you, and to assure you that heaven has heard you. Nurse your bitterness no more.”

And just like that, the torrent in my heart ceased. The wound still stung, but the bitter blood had left it. I wanted then to ask the Star if Father Jonas would live, and yet somehow I knew that it would not answer me. “I’ll do my best,” was all I could think to say.

“I know you will,” it answered, “and your efforts are not in vain. Go, then; let me no longer bar your way.”

With that the Star vanished, and once more I was alone. I could have fallen down and wept again, overwhelmed with a new understanding of where I stood, if dreadful urgency were not already moving my legs. I ran out of Holy Hillary’s, remembering to stop and give thanks only when I was halfway through the door, then threw myself at the library as fast as I could. I tripped and fell a second time, sliding to the bottom on my coat, but rose again without paying any mind to my own condition.

That coat was soaked when I entered the Healer’s Wing, heavy as lead and dripping on the floor. I flung it off my shoulders and onto the back of a chair in my excitement, setting my satchel atop a square table in the middle of the room; and possessed of an agonizing impulse, placed myself between a brightly burning stove and my gifted glass, holding the latter up to my right eye as the Star had instructed me.

I do not think a wizard could have seen the virtue in that stone unaided. It was so clear, so flawless, that it changed nothing about the room at all. The bookshelves stood as straight as ever; the

colors were neither changed nor dimmed; my right eye saw the same as my left, save for one subtle exception ascertained only after a minute or so of hard staring. I had to take the stone away twice, in fact, before I was certain the effect was not only in my imagination. For sitting on a shelf high up on the second floor balcony, something was glittering, a point of light uncannily like a star.

No folk live in the Healer's Wing, thankfully, or else I must have awoken every soul there with how I pounded up the stairs and across the balcony. It smelled sublime up there, and so I knew before I touched a single volume that I was among the oldest books in the wing, works whose copies of copies are older than this Day of the world. The books on that wall were just as the Star had told me, thin journals bound by waxed thread, each marked on its spine with a date, a pair of initials, and sometimes a number indicating which in a series it was. Putting the stone to my eye again, I spotted two twinkling journals, then wheeled a ladder over and held them in my paw within a minute.

Nothing about them betrayed their significance without the stone; they were covered in thick, stiff, dull red paper, not important enough for leather, and because of their age I did not dare to open them where I was. Carrying them gingerly down to my table, rather, I slipped the stone into my pocket and read the spine of the first: 'Fortieth Year of the Badger, M.M. No. 3.' The other was the same, save that it read 'No. 4,' and so I chose the earlier volume to open first.

I was not paying attention when I climbed the ladder to retrieve the journals. I knew that they were among very old books, but I would have never guessed just how old. The year betrayed that it belonged, not merely to some earlier octave, but to an earlier Day of the world entirely. Even if it had been unmarked, however, I think I would have guessed it by how stiff and yellow its pages were. Here was a truly ancient work, one of hundreds in Redlamp which are well-maintained and yet deemed unworthy of copying, possessing a virtue – either inborn or newly-bestowed – bright with the light of heaven. I opened it carefully, cursing my own tremors.

Its first page was headed with the same designation as the spine, save that the initials were now written out as Mesen Morcant, and seemed to be a weekly record of the author's practice. Mesen was a healer, one of the lazaret which Lamb's Ear now oversaw; and while her notes might have been mildly interesting to me at any other time, they seemed at a glance to hold no relevant wisdom now. There were only fevers and infections, part and parcel of any lazaret, for pages upon pages in small, conservative script. I tried flipping through from beginning to end with the stone against my eye, hoping that the needful entries would sparkle as the spines had on their shelf; alas, they did not, and so I was left to patiently scrutinize every line.

My patience soon paid off however, in the middle of an entry written in the fall. As is often the case in such journals, the names of the patients were omitted, and so I did not notice that I had found what I sought until my eyes were halfway down the page:

"...until the ribs began to fuse, and the joints to lock, not stopping even now, as the eyes sit hard-pressed in their sockets."

I held my breath, unable to read any farther for the span of a minute or so, until my shock abated. Then I returned to the beginning of the entry and combed through every word, my whiskers almost brushing the stiff yellow paper:

"I was called away from the lazaret, after two weeks to ensure good health, in order to nurse a patient in his own room; not because he is sick with any catching disease, but because his condition is as puzzling as any the lazaret sees. Tumors crown his head, all hard as stones, and he is rigid as a rod and wracked with great pains. Removing one of the smaller growths, my own eyes confirm his report: that his flesh has turned to bone. Cuts lately suffered have also scarred over in bone, painful to move and

unyielding to the touch. No sudden onset was this, however, but a matter of years: first appeared the tumors, then up and down the spine the supple flesh hardened, until the ribs began to fuse, and the joints to lock, not stopping even now as the eyes sit hard-pressed in their sockets. Long has he suffered so, even during mendicancy, and now at seventy-five years of age he can no longer stand upright for the length of Mornsong. There is no wisdom regarding his affliction among the healers in Redlamp; but according to the nature of the ailment, I proceed thus...”

Subsequent entries provided a methodical record of Mesen’s treatments, all of them similar – if not identical – to those Father Jonas had recorded in his own notebook. So similar were they, in fact, that I assumed at first that one of Father Jonas’ previous healers had consulted these very notes, or a copy of them. This seemed unlikely, however; for if the notes were known enough to be consulted they would have been copied, and if they had been copied then the copy would have been shelved for reference instead of the ancient, crumbling volume I now held in my paws. The wisdom had found its way down through the years nevertheless, such that I began to doubt that I would find anything in the journals more useful than the baffled trial and error through which I had already put myself.

My faith, clearly, was even weaker than I thought, for of course I need not have doubted. The first volume ended in disappointment, its entries – proceeding intermittently until the end of the eleventh month – following beat for beat the failed attempts both I and other healers had made to halt the growth of bone. But the second, to my indescribable thrill, began with the tenderest quiver of hope:

“A visiting master from Margh Men, whose notes I have agreed to copy alongside my own, has made perhaps the first fruitful discovery in the whole sad case of the Statue. It seems that a piece of sunstone – that rare gem which allows one to see the sun through clouds – when held over the breast or the forehead, dispels some of the persistent dullness of the patient’s thought and speech. This, when combined with things warm and wet, opens up his inner channels delightfully to willow bark, given lately at such strength and to so little effect that I feared for his stomach. The master seems encouraged by this, and recommends a new and unexpected vein be tapped for treatment.”

No doubt, worthy Elder, you read these notes – copied word for word, upon my honor – with some surprise, if not outright suspicion. I can assure you that I was more surprised, so much so that I did not understand at the time just how shocking they were. I was too excited by the word ‘encouraged’ to think of anything else but Father Jonas. My eyes wandered over to the stone lozenge resting on the table at my paw. I puzzled over it; it was wholly unlike the sunstone I knew, that bright red flare of chalcedony which often encircles the heads of certain Holy Folk in metings and carvings, and yet I could not help but see a certain overlap in their qualities. Being now very late at night, I could not test my theory, but I vowed to do so come morning as long as the clouds persisted.

After that I spent several hours copying every single entry on the Statue in that journal, too afraid of missing something to content myself with shorthand, filling most of the empty space at the end of Father Jonas’ notebook when I realized I had brought nothing in of my own on which to write. If I had been paying attention, I might have noticed at once the tack this master had chosen to take; as it stood, I cared only that I had a complete list of worts to give to the worthwhile tomorrow.

In time I wrote it all down, then paged through the journal twice more to be sure I had not missed anything. It bothered me, all told, that the final entry in the volume made no mention of the patient’s ultimate fate, enough that I returned to the shelf and searched for Mesen’s other journals. There were many written before the two I found, but not a single one written after. This vexed me almost to the point of despair; but having been given a glimmer of hope, I chose not to despise it. I

would follow this new advice as far as I could, surpassing it if Father Jonas allowed me, and heaven would hear from me all the while.

10

I did not sleep that night. I could not have done so if I had tried. What I could do, however, was to prepare all the wort I could while the rest of Redlamp slept, then retrieve what remained when the first bleary-eyed Gift unlocked the door of the worthwhile. It was an unfair challenge to him so early in the morning, for my requests were mostly out of season, dried and squirreled away in cells awaiting the gray gloom of the early year. But everything was there, and so laden with my materials I brewed what I wished to try first, stuffed the rest in my satchel, and went gladly to Mornsong.

On my way out I stopped in the garden. The sky was still overcast, but I knew by the light that the sun was over the higher slopes now. Feeling my heart begin to race, I reached into my pocket and pulled out the smooth stone with which I had fiddled all through the thaning. I held it up to my eye, looked in the direction I thought the sun must be, and my breath caught in my throat. There hung a pale white disk beyond the murky veil, as plain and unimpressive as the winter sun can be. To me it was the eye of the Almighty Lord himself.

I entered Father Jonas' room that day full of confidence I had by no means earned, but by no means could restrain. To any other eyes I am sure that nothing would have seemed different. Father Jonas was leaning listlessly in his chair again, seeming by the robe he wore to have been unable to do any more than rise from bed and prop himself up there. The stove burned low, the clock still ticked against the wall, and yet to me that antique room seemed wholly refreshed.

"Good morning!" I said, with enthusiasm that made the old halser's miserable eyes, housed in their taut and gaping face, brighten with curious amusement. He nodded at me, unable to speak, and I went to work as I always did on the less glamorous, yet more immediate, parts of my calling.

Those done, I put on the kettle, and when the water was good and hot – but not yet boiling – I used it to fill an overworked hot water bottle which Father Jonas made more frequent use of every day. This time, however, spurred by a hunch Mesen's ancient notes had given me, I dropped my clear stone into the water and stopped the bottle's mouth.

Father Jonas took it from me weakly and hugged it to his chest, eyes closed, the first thing he always did; and I, not wanting to betray what I knew were far-flung hopes, sat stiffly down beside him in my own chair. Minutes passed wherein nothing happened. I cast surreptitious glances at him every few seconds, each one showing me a statue less lifelike than ever; until suddenly, with a little stirring, his eyes shot open.

"You went to Mornsong today, didn't you Mullein?" was the first thing he said, with clear difficulty and yet with a little lilt which told me that he would be smiling if he could.

"Aye, Father, I did," I nodded, "just like you told me to. How did you know?"

"You don't look like a wet rag for a change," he chuckled, then stopped abruptly and began to look around the room. If the world seemed refreshed to me that morning, worthy Elder, to Father Jonas it must have seemed a new world altogether. The transformation that came over his face I can only liken to ice melting into pristine water, though nothing about its appearance changed. The hardness of his flesh remained, but beneath it welled up a liquid clarity I had so far seen only once in all the many hours I had spent with him.

"How...how do you know that's what did it?" I asked, almost breathless.

"Because you spend all your time with me, and I'm no ray of sunshine," he said, taking in the deepest breath I had ever seen him take. It was half a breath to anyone else, followed by several more to make up for what was lacking in the first, but equally nourishing to me as to him.

“How are you feeling today?” I asked.

“I feel...” he began, still so fascinated by his surroundings that his eyes never rested anywhere. “I feel like I’ve just woken up from a nap, actually. You haven’t given me anything yet, have you Mullein?”

“You mean wort?” I asked, qualifying my own answer. “No, Father, not yet.”

“I didn’t think so,” he said, moving the hot water bottle from his breast to the top of his head, only to stop halfway. “What’s this now?”

“Pardon?” I asked.

“There’s something in here,” he said, kneading the bottle with swollen fingers, “something hard. Did you put something in this bottle, Mullein, or have I passed my curse onto it by mistake?”

The way he asked the question betrayed it as a joke, but I did not laugh; I could only stare at the floor as my ears burned. “O-oh, that. It’s nothing really, Father, I only put a small stone in the water.”

“A stone?” he asked, staring hard at me. “What sort of stone?”

“I...I believe it’s called sunstone,” I said, “or at least someone else called it that. Or...or I think they might have.”

“Which sunstone?” he pressed. “The red kind, or the kind that sailors use?”

I looked up from the floor into his eyes. “Sailors?” I asked. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t you know anything about sailing, Mullein?” he replied. “Ah, but why should you? You haven’t even been out on your mendicancy yet. There’s a stone that sailors call sunstone – entirely different from the red gem that the rabbitfolk call carnelian – used out on the open sea to find the sun when the clouds are too thick.”

“Is it clear?” I asked. “As clear as glass?”

Father Jonas grinned at me then, or as close to a grin as his rusted jaw would allow, and I squirmed beneath his gaze. “Is this your last stab at me, Mullein?” He teased. “A rock? Wouldn’t the mast stepping have been more useful? Then at least I could have used it to bribe the Shepherd Star.”

“No!” I said. “Not at all! Or, well, I suppose that was part of it, but I didn’t want to say anything until I could see if it had any effect. Then I would have offered you some *real* wort, I swear.”

“Child, child,” he said softly, as the kettle began to scream, “take a breath. I’m not going to scold you over a rock.”

“You aren’t?” I said.

“I’m not,” he insisted. “In fact, I think that you should go pull the kettle. I’d like my willow bark, and then I would like to see what else you’ve come up with so fast.”

“You would?” I beamed, springing up from my seat to hoist the kettle onto the stone skirt.

“If it’s half as interesting as hiding a sailor’s glass in my hot water, we may finally have something to talk about again,” he chuckled, laying the bottle atop his head and leaning back in his chair.

Not even under Master Culpeper have I ever been so afraid of giving wort to a patient. All of my hopes, it seemed, hung on these queer new brews having *some* effect on Father Jonas, and so as I administered them I found myself begging heavenly aid against the unbearable fear that they would be as useless as everything else. Within went the strong, bitter, blood-red decoction of mullein, marigold, and yellow goatweed, diluted in his willow bark tea. Without I slathered a paste of the mullein roots and seeds with turnsole and salt, all boiled down in wine until a paste formed. This covered all his tumors and every bony scar, staining his gray hair black. While I waited, then, for the willow bark at least to work, I set about distracting myself with whatever donkey work needed doing, stepping out at the very end to fetch breakfast for us both. Returning a nervous wreck, I opened the door to find Father Jonas preparing the table, standing – if feebly – on his own two hooves for the first time in weeks.

"Mullein, I don't know what you did," he said over our meal, "but I didn't think it was possible to wake up feeling so wretched, only to feel two hours later as I haven't felt in ages."

"You think the wort has begun to work already, then?" I asked, eating even more slowly than he in my excitement.

"The pain is no better," he clarified, "or at least no better than the willow bark can make it on its own. But Mullein, I feel...I feel as if a frigid cloud has been hanging over my mind for years, and it's just now passed by to reveal the sun."

"The bones are spurring your flesh," I sighed, only able to see what my wort lacked as I looked at his swollen fingers. "I don't know what to do about that, frankly, but I'm going to do all I can – if you'll let me, that is."

"I used to write poetry, have I told you that?"

"You haven't," I said. "I would love to hear it sometime."

"When I finished a poem to my liking," he continued, speaking as if he hadn't heard me, though I knew he had, "I would read it aloud once, and then never forget a word of it again. Not a marvelous feat considering I'd written it myself, but for years now this wretched, stale pain has kept me from remembering much of anything. Yet today...today the pain remains, but from the moment I brought that stone to my breast, my thoughts have been as clear as glass."

"That's wonderful, Father," I said, once again close to weeping. "Perhaps I can do you some good after all?"

"Mullein, you're the very last in a long, sad train of healers who all thought wrongly that they could do me any good," he smiled. "But it seems that you're the first one to show any sense. What changed between last night and this morning?"

"I...I...I..." I stammered, realizing only then that I could not bring myself to tell anyone – even him – about the Star who had visited me. "I found an old healer's notes in the library, and they spoke of a case very much like yours. The treatment she described was altogether different, though, so I thought it couldn't hurt to try. Heaven knows I was out of ideas."

A familiar incredulity came into his eyes then, a probing look which seemed to indicate, not so much that he did not believe my words, but that he feared I myself might be illusory. I have seen the same look more than once on the faces of the feverish, and I am sure I looked just so to the Star as it stood in Holy Hillary's. "Old wisdom is too often lost and found again," he tutted at length. "Sometimes I think we folk are put on earth to remember what our fathers forgot, eh?"

"It seems very likely," I nodded.

"In that case, heaven forbid I become a stumbling block to memory," he sighed. "If you think there's something to be gained from treating a statue, Mullein, I won't stand in your way."

"Oh, thank you!" I cried, leaping from my seat to embrace him as gingerly as I could. "Thank you, Father Jonas! I won't let you down!"

"I won't make the same promise," he said, giving me his blessing.

And so I launched my last offensive against that relentless winter. Enlivened by an early success, I threw all I had at Father Jonas' illness, every remedy listed in Mesen's notes which had showed the slightest promise. I took painstaking notes on them all in Father Jonas' notebook, interpreting and cross-referencing, spending every waking moment in the library when I was neither studying with Father Diggory nor praying in Holy Hillary's.

Three things became clear to me very quickly. The first was that, of the many worts listed in Mesen's fourth journal, nearly all of them availed against melancholy. Common gloom! Marigold, vervain, goatweed, turnsole, rue, rosemary, and dozens of others – worthouses hoarded them all against

the sunless depths of winter, for they were of the Sun themselves, and therefore brought heat to Father Jonas' cold affliction.

The second, as you might expect, was that these worts worked first and foremost upon Father Jonas' own peculiar melancholy – that 'dullness' as I have been calling it. It all but cured the slowness of thought and thickness of tongue which had until then kept him from speaking entirely more often than not. We spoke at length now about all of the things he craved to discuss, he with his inborn excitement and I with excitement contracted from his, and I felt for a few precious days that I had won for myself a true friend. His mendicancy, I learned, had brought Father Jonas into friendship with all sorts of queer folk: wizards and alchemists and circus clowns. The things he had seen, if I were to name but a few, would convince you both of his madness for recounting them and mine for believing him. It explained, at least, his fascination with haunts, and several other things I later learned about him.

The third, however, and alas the most terrible to me, was that in spite of this newfound lightness of ghost, Father Jonas' flesh only continued to harden. He moved with more difficulty every time I saw him, though he assured me that his pain was more bearable than ever. New tumors appeared overnight. His breath came shorter and more labored. Already thin, he lost perilous amounts of weight. By the sixteenth day of the Twelfth Month he was bedridden; and though everything in me wanted to deny it, my love for Father Jonas demanded that I heed his thin, slurred warning: that he believed he would not rise from his bed again.

All I thought I had gained was lost with that utterance. I received his blessing that night – dear God, how thin that arm was! – and left his room numbly, standing as still as a statue myself through Latesong, then waited until even the Shepherd had left to throw myself down before the bones of Holy Evensong. I railed against heaven for stringing me along, believing that the Almighty Lord and all his powers were conspiring to trick me, and alternately begged and demanded that I be turned to stone then and there rather than be made to watch another friend and confidant die in agony. But Father Jonas still lay wasting away in his bed, and I received no further answer.

My disappointment, as morose as it was, proved unique to me. For Father Jonas, far from being disappointed himself, could not have been more pleased with the results of my labor. His incessant cheer, in spite of all the failures I perceived, vexed me, until that Moonday evening, the seventeenth day of the twelfth month, I asked him how it was possible that he was not as disheartened as I.

"But why on earth should I be disheartened, Mullein?" he asked from his bed. "You've given me exactly what I wanted, what no one else has been able to give."

"And what's that, Father?"

"The strength to prepare myself," he patiently answered. "Thanks to you, my ghost has vigor I forgot I ever possessed. I've been shriven, and unless my heart keels over unexpectedly soon I will be again. I've spent whole nights in battle against despair, and at the risk of being proud I'll say that I've whipped him handily. I've made the best use of this time that I could, child, and you gave it to me."

"I've hardly given you anything," I frowned. "Nowhere near enough."

"Ah, but is it ever enough?" he chuckled, a brittle rattle terrifyingly like a final breath. "I confess that I would have liked another Yule. There's little I enjoy more than wassail, getting drunk enough on mulled mead to tumble down the hill in the snow and not feel a thing."

"I'll bring you some, Father," I assured him.

"If I'm still here, I may take you up on that," he said, "so long as you'll get drunk and tumble down the hill for me. Ah, and put lamps on the great ash tree. I won't have you downcast for Yule, Mullein."

"The great ash tree?" I asked him. "Which one?"

"Why, the one atop the hill in the garden, child," he said, giving me a queer look.

I gave him a queer look of my own in return, struggling to understand what he meant. Was there another garden in Redlamp? Did he mean the Tree atop the dome of Holy Hillary's? "I don't understand what you mean," I told him. "There is no ash tree on the hill."

I don't think I ever saw him so confused. He could not speak for over a minute, but only stared at me, probing me with frantic intensity. "Perhaps...perhaps my brains really are turning to stone after all," he muttered at last.

While I had worked on Father Jonas with the hope of his recovery, it had been all too easy to ignore the many queer things about him, and the many queer things about my life where it overlapped with his. I chalked them up to his bad memory, full of holes because of his pain, an excuse conveniently supplied by Lamb's Ear; and where I could not do that, I shrugged it off as the inscrutable intervention of heaven. Now, however, with no shield to protect me, the deluge of high strangeness battered my mind. My life since I had come to Redlamp resembled, in truth, one of Father Jonas' ghost stories, a maze more confounding than the halls of House Redlamp. Vainly I searched it; then reeling, remembered that I could simply open an outer door and cut across the garden.

"No, no no," I said, shaking my head as my heart began to pound. "If anyone is the bone-head here, it's me. I've been an utter fool, Father Jonas. A good-for-nothing fool."

"Nonsense, child, why do you say that?" he asked, furrowing his tight-knit brow.

"It doesn't matter," I said. "May I ask you something, Father? Something I should have asked well before now?"

"I hope you will," he said.

"Who is the head archivist in Redlamp now?" I asked. "I've been looking for some books, and I'm afraid I've had ill luck tracking them down."

"The archivist? That would be old Columbine," he said, gesturing with his eyes toward the ceiling. "He lives in the room just over mine. If your books are in the library, he'll know exactly where they are. The old kook loves books almost as much as he loves she-folk."

I smiled then, happy for the first time to receive such a baffling answer from Father Jonas. For the head archivist at that time was not named Columbine, but Arthnow, and I knew better now than to think that this old halser, whose thoughts were as clear as glass, had made a mistake.

"Columbine," I said. "Thank you, Father, I'll look him up right away."

With that I covered him in quilts and stoked the fire for the night; and receiving his blessing, ran out into the library and up the stairs.

Why I had not thought of this as I was scouring the shelves for Mese's journals, I will never understand. Perhaps it was merely that I was daunted by the vast ages through which I would have to search, whole Days of the world represented in Redlamp's annals. Regardless, I was less daunted now, for now I had two names under which to search, and in marrying them I might finally discover just where in the maze I wandered.

The library's hall of records occupied nearly a whole wing by itself, the rest being taken up with the head archivist's private study. I carried a candle in, hurrying so much that I blew it out twice before forcing myself to slow down, and lit the lamps on the walls. Then I searched madly, so madly that anyone who saw me would be excused for thinking me a thief, until I found what I sought: the annals of Redlamp's librarians, compiled into many thick volumes stretching back to the days before the king had returned to Mount Arzkoroll.

There was no time, of course, to search every one for an archivist named Columbine and a lazaret healer named Mese. Father Jonas would die of simple old age before I finished, even if he

were not sick. Instead I paced there before the shelves, wracking my brain for every odd thing I had heard the old halser say that might narrow my search. He remembered an ash tree atop the hill in the garden, at least, and I knew from my lessons as a child that there had been no ash tree on that hill since it was cut down before the Chiasm. He seemed also to think that the Low Tongue was casually spoken in Redlamp, something which would only have been true before the king returned to the mountain. That removed many of the volumes straightaway, but left an intolerable stretch of bygone ages before me until, like a flash of lightning, I remembered perhaps the most puzzling thing he had ever said to me: “I am the Elder of Redlamp.”

Opposite the annals of the librarians were the annals of the halsers, an even more intimidating collection; but it, at least, was organized by the succession of its Elders, and so I had only to run my scarred claw over the red spines until I found a volume just before the Chiasm stamped in gold with the name ‘Jonas.’ It gave me a span of twenty years, and with that I was able to find Columbine in the librarians’ annals in a scant five minutes. There was Mesen under him, head of the lazaret through the Fortieth Year of the Badger; and then, confirming my ludicrous suspicions, another lazaret healer directly below. Derwen, Mesen’s successor, had begun his work in the Fortieth Year of the Wolf, a single year after Mesen had ended hers.

I shouted for joy then, loud enough to wake the whole library if its innumerable books had not eaten my voice, and ran back to the healer’s wing as fast as I could. There I consulted its catalog, pitifully easy now that I knew what I was looking for, and learned that Derwen’s journals – for reasons I could not fathom – were shelved exactly opposite Mesen’s, on the far side of the wing. Mounting the stairs again, I ran to where the catalog directed me, and immediately cursed myself for my boundless idiocy. Derwen’s journals were on the very bottom shelf, in a long, neat line, impossible to miss for anyone with sense. I knew even as I picked it up that his first volume, bound in thick red paper identical to Mesen’s, would surely have glittered through the piece of sunstone that the Star had given me; but I had left the stone with Father Jonas, who wore it in a pouch against his breast, and so I could only have faith as I opened to its first entry and read:

“The first day of the Fortieth Year of the Wolf:

It falls to me, then, to compile Mesen’s final notes, which I must be sure to set aside to be bound and shelved with hers. Retirement, she said, could not have come at a better time, as the year turned over and her last patient began his pilgrimage. It is this patient, affectionately called the Statue, whose record I must here conclude.”

I sat on the floor before the shelf, too dizzy to stand, and took a deep breath before I read on:

“The final breakthrough came, alas, too late, when it was clear to the master from Margh Men that his remedies were insufficient. Seeing that he would soon no longer be able to chew his food, The Statue requested his favorite meal: lamb’s liver with onions. Of this he ate much; and satisfied, fell asleep. He awoke, against all expectations, more mobile and in less pain than before, his swelling less and his remaining flesh more supple. Even his tumors, for some days after, failed when removed to grow back as quickly as they had. The visiting master took note of this with some excitement, knowing the peculiar virtues of lamb’s liver, and thought to brew some new wort with the purpose of halting the growth of bone. But The Statue fell into a precipitous decline before he could, the flesh of his heart beginning to harden, and perished just after Yule Evensong.”

I fell back on the floor, utterly spent. That was the end of the entry. They had failed, as had I. Why, I wondered, had heaven sent me on this miserable chase? Why had it taunted me with hope, only

to snatch it away? Was friendship all I was to offer Father Jonas? Was that truly the help the Star had told me I would give? Why send me after ancient journals, in that case? Why not simply give me the stone? Why not tell me “Give him mullein and marigolds to cheer him up” and leave it at that?

I puzzled over this for an hour at least, turning around and around in my thoughts to no avail, until the room ceased to spin and I thought at last that I must give up as Father Jonas had instructed me. Another memory came to me then, however, one I would have surely abandoned forever if not for one short line in that short entry. I sat up too fast, almost falling back down for how my head swam, and scanned the words on the page again: “*The Statue requested his favorite meal: lamb’s liver with onions.*”

On my second visit to Father Jonas I had brought him that very same meal, and the very next day – aye, and it was the next day, as I reassured myself over and over again – he had been the healthiest I had ever seen him. Knowing so little about his illness then, I had not thought to draw a connection between them; but now, like the visiting master from Margh Men, my own mind raced with possibilities. I knew well the virtues of lamb’s liver. I had learned them from Master Culpeper, who gave it sometimes to poor folk who went blind and bald for how little meat they ate. He gave them other foods too with the same virtues: fish livers, eggs, sweet potatoes, and – most notably to me – a kind of mushroom called bearded hedgehog which I had since childhood refused to eat. I remembered how silken and soft of coat that diet had made Master Culpeper’s patients, whose fur had formerly been as brittle as eggshells; and while it was not precisely the same thing, I could not deny the resonance they shared.

I felt then as one possessed, no more able to stop myself than I was to stop the turning of the seasons. Leaving Derwen’s journal on the floor, I flew down the stairs to the table before the woodstove and scratched out near the end of Father Jonas’ notebook a table of every wort I knew which acted in accordance with lamb’s liver. Then satisfied with my work, I flew out of the library as fast as my legs would carry me.

Being the middle of the night, the worthwhile was naturally locked, and by this point I knew better than to wake someone to open it for me, thereby inviting questions I could not answer. I crawled in through a window, left unlatched for the burglars Redlamp did not have, and pilfered as much as I thought I might need of the wort it contained. Most of my list was represented in its cells, the most extensive on Mount Arzkoroll, including an ample supply of pressed fish livers. Two, however, I knew would not be there, the two I needed most: the lamb’s liver and the bearded hedgehog.

The middle of a winter night is perhaps the worst time to beg lamb’s liver of anyone; but being by that time emboldened by my successful burglary, and knowing that there was nowhere else to get it, I made my way to the mess hall kitchen. There I found, not a butcher, but only a few bakers starting bread for the Holy Supper, catfolk who like me found it easy to be up. I must have seemed a desperate character indeed, carrying a satchel stuffed with Stars-knew-what and in a frightful hurry to acquire fresh lamb’s livers; for they, who could have simply laughed me off, did not.

“Please,” I begged them, “he’s dying. Father Jonas is dying, and soon he won’t be able to open his mouth, and lamb’s liver is his favorite.”

“Stars, that’s awful news,” lamented one of the bakers. “I’m keen to do just about anythin’ for Father Jonas, but we were a-savin’ the lambs for Yule. Can he wait ‘til then?”

“He won’t be here then,” I said, half-choked. “Please. I’ll pay for it. I’ll work in the kitchen if you want. I’ll even butcher it myself. I’ll do anything.”

The bakers paused for a moment to look at each other, then without a word one of them nodded, seeming to understand what the others thought. “I’ll help you,” he said, fetching a long knife from a block. “Gonna be cold work though, bein’ the middle of the night and all.”

“I don’t care,” I said. “I’ll freeze if I have to.”

And so I added poaching to my list of crimes that night, helping the baker in secret to lead a lamb to the slaughterhouse, where by lamplight we proceeded to butcher, skin, and hang it. He offered me the rest of the organs when we were done cleaning up; but I through chattering teeth refused them, taking only the liver wrapped in paper, and after a dozen low bows ran out like the lunatic I was into the night. Much later I apologized to the baker for all the trouble my request had caused him. He, however, was dying to know only what I had done with a whole raw liver, for I never returned to the kitchen to cook it. For a time he half-supposed that I had eaten it myself.

With all but one of the worts in my possession, I went off in search of the bearded hedgehog. It was snowing out by that time, hard little flakes driven into my face by the wind, and dread swelled in my belly as I remembered what had happened last time I went out in search of mushrooms too late. This time, however, I had no need to scour the empty woods, for I had since learned in my studies that there are folk who traffic in mushrooms at all times of the year, being keenly interested in their more secret virtues. I despised them then because Master Culpeper did, whereas I love them now for what they did that night. They were my only chance, in any case, and so I left Redlamp with my mantle wrapped around my coat, following the tiny lights down into Genipweg to find the alchemists.

It was not hard. An alchemist's guildhouse is always smelled before it is seen, just like those who ply their craft therein, and my nose led me easily to its front door. I knocked very hard thrice, knowing that someone is always awake among the alchemists in order to do work that may only be done at certain hours. The face that greeted me was puzzled, but not unpleasant.

"B-b-b-bearded h-h-hedgehogs," I chattered, whiskers crusted with ice. "I n-n-need b-b-bearded h-hedgehogs."

"You need a hot bath," he grinned. "I think I have a beaker big enough."

He was serious about the bath, as it turned out, as well as the many other refreshments he and his fellows offered me. Except for some hot catmint tea, I refused them all as graciously as possible, asking only for the mushrooms. They would hear me only when they were satisfied that my scars were old and that I was not freezing to death.

"How much do you need?" asked the folk who had answered the door, a sly-looking dog fox swallowed up in the black cotton overalls and stiff white collar of his guild.

"All of it," I said. "As much as you have. I can't pay you for it now, but I'm willing to give you my coat in trust and do whatever you'd like after Yule."

"And leverage our merry generosity, eh?" the fox smirked. "Why do you need so many mushrooms, Gift?"

"My friend is sick," I said. "Dying, really."

"And you think a barrel of mushrooms is going to cure him?" asked another.

"Aye," I said, sounding more confident than I was.

"What's he dying of?" asked the fox.

"He's turning to stone," I said plainly.

They gasped then, all of them, and began to murmur among themselves. "Tell me truly, Gift, or you'll get nothing from us," warned the fox. "What's your friend's name?"

"Father Jonas," I said. "A halser from Redlamp."

I felt then that they were all puffed-up wineskins, and I had pricked them with a needle. "I feared that was the case," the fox sighed. "We knew Father Jonas was sick, but we didn't know he'd declined so fast. One of us was going to see him soon, since he hasn't come around, but we...well, we didn't want to embarrass him."

"You know him," I said, mouth agape though I was not in the least surprised. "I should have guessed it."

“Father Jonas is the only one who comes to visit us without being asked,” the fox grinned. “We’re good friends. Anything he needs, you just say the word and we’ll give it.”

I could have wept again, feeling for the first time in weeks that heaven had not abandoned me. I bowed instead, to folk who were expected to bow first to everyone they met. “Then I need your workshop,” I said, holding out my swaddled liver. “I need to brew all I have down to its purest virtues.”

“I reckon we can do that,” said the fox.

The work took hours, even with half a dozen of us laboring. I soon realized, however, that it would have taken much longer by myself; for while I knew better than they which virtues in the wort I wished to tease out, they knew better how to pull apart and sew together the ingredients themselves. We proceeded through the threefold path: the fetid, reeking Blackening to rid the wort of its unwholesomeness, the concentrating Whitening to pull its virtues out, and finally the perfecting Reddening to make the decoction complete. I had never seen a purer wort in my life, and I was humbled to know that I could not have made it better.

They would not take my coat as thanks, though I all but forced it upon them; rather I received a list of names for Father Jonas to pray for, and an invitation to return if I could bear to. I promised I would; then in the gray dawn before Mornsong, with the snow falling heavily in a light breeze, I climbed the hill back up to Redlamp.

12

Profoundly exhausted after the night’s work, I found in the wake of my frenzy that my fear of failure was stronger than ever, accompanied by a fear that Father Jonas would once again tell me to give up on him. Being now more sober than I was, I knew he would be right in doing so, but for his sake and the sake of my own conscience I wanted to see my labor through to the end.

I need not have worried, however. The malaise which had made him so weary of wort was no more to be found; even confined to his bed he was jocular, happy to oblige me, though my last effort necessitated the knife.

“I’m going to have to cut you in order to know if the wort is working,” I warned him. “I would do it beside one of your bony scars, so there wouldn’t be pain in a new place, but I understand if you would rather I didn’t.”

“Cut away, carver!” He slurred through a mouth almost frozen shut. “If I’m to leave a haunt, at least make it a handsome haunt.”

I gave him a dose of the wort that morning alongside a mug of beef tea (practically all he could get through his teeth now), and that evening I made the first tiny cut along a shaved patch on his side: deep enough to scar, but shallow enough that he did not notice the pain through that which he suffered already. Then whispering a prayer to the nameless Star to whom I owed whatever I might gain, I left him for the night.

Father Jonas was terribly thirsty the next morning, his skin dry and flaking: no doubt from the wort, an effect I had anticipated. He was weaker as well, shorter of breath and complaining of an ache in his chest. Removing the bandage on his side, I saw that bone had already begun to encroach on the cut. I sighed inwardly. Nevertheless I gave him another dose of the wort, this time with a great deal more water, and we passed our time that day talking as we always did. Then I made a second cut beside the first, and having forgotten in my exhaustion to do so yesterday gave him the list of names provided by the alchemists. With one of his queer looks he accepted it, promising to pray for them.

The third, fourth, and fifth days proceeded much the same: Father Jonas grew weaker and weaker, struggling against pain no wort could touch (he would not entertain the offer of poppies), and still dry and thirsty. This tormented me, for it flew in the face of all my hopes. I thought, however, that

each subsequent cut looked different than the last, the bone less and less eager; I said nothing, refusing even to acknowledge the difference for fear of wishful thinking. I chose only to pray, and to make myself as good a friend to Father Jonas as I could.

I was certain of the change on the sixth day. His most recent cut betrayed a thin, bony spur when prodded with a claw, but near the surface the old goat's dry skin was supple and – to my unspeakable thrill – new and white beneath the scab. I could hardly catch my breath for joy.

Alas, even our liveliest hopes must at times fall to the earth like corn and perish, and mine did so on the seventh day, the eve of Yule. An unmistakable change had come over Father Jonas in the night, a change I had seen many times and knew to fear. His weakness had grown deadly while I stood vigil in Holy Hillary's. He could hardly lift his head. Whether he found it hard to speak or simply chose to be silent, it was abundantly clear that all of his remaining strength was focused on the knot that joins flesh to ghost. I sat beside him, removed his bandage, and burst into tears: his last three cuts were as soft as velvet.

"I did it, Father," I sobbed. "I stopped the bone from growing. I cured you."

"I knew you would," he replied, indistinctly but, I thought, less stiffly than usual. "I had every faith in you, Mullein."

I laid my head on his breast and wept then, dissolving like a child when I heard the unnatural clattering of his heart. He comforted me as much as he could, expending strength I did not think he had, and all that day I stayed with him, as wretched as I had been beside my own sister's deathbed. The Yule bells rang Evensong from Holy Hillary's through the door at sunset; Father Jonas' eyes brightened until I thought they would rise to the firmament and become stars, and with breathless wonder I heard him say:

"There they are again! Always with you, Mullein. I knew, somehow, that it would be you. My Guiding Star."

"It's Yule, Father," I said, clasping his feeble hand.

"Then I release you from my care," he replied; and giving me his blessing, expired.

I washed his body, folding arms I found shockingly flexible over his breast, then scrubbed the room clean and stoked the fire with incense. After I finished weeping a second time I collected my things. Father Jonas' notebook, now half full of my own notes, I kept with me; but the sunstone the Star had gifted me I left around his neck, removing it from its pouch just long enough to assure myself that it was real. His limbs, by that time, should have begun to seize; but as I lifted his hands to open the pouch, I found that they moved more freely than they ever had in life.

13

Father Diggory and Lamb's Ear were having an argument when I finally dragged myself to Father Diggory's study. I knew it was an argument mostly because of Lamb's Ear's tone; so sharply vexed was she that my own crushing sorrow, after having not seen hide nor hair of her for so many days, turned to anger immediately. Father Diggory, of course, betrayed no such emotion, but I knew by how carefully he chose his words that he was as upset as she. I knocked, and after a pause I heard Father Diggory tell me to come in.

"Mullein!" they both shouted when I entered. Outside of a lecture, it was the first time I had ever seen open anger on Father Diggory's face.

"I'm glad you're here, son," he said, sounding exactly the opposite. "I was just about to go looking for you myself."

"You were?" I asked.

"I have been, ah, encouraging poor Lamb's Ear here to be patient with you all this time," he huffed, "on account of your, er, admirable performance in all of your other duties. I simply could not believe – not that I think Lamb's Ear in any way untruthful – that you would be so...so...irresponsible, so negligent toward such a needy patient. I begged her to be patient with you, well, I suppose even longer than I should have – for your sake, Mullein, I hope you appreciate. But even I strain now to uphold a misunderstanding."

"I...I beg your pardon?" I said, already feeling the blood rising in my face.

"Don't play dumb with us, Mullein!" Lamb's Ear snapped. "You haven't done a single thing we asked you to do for Father Jonas. Not a thing! He's exactly where I left him every time I go into his room, in the same clothes, unwashed, unfed, having taken no wort whatsoever. Have you even seen him since I met you in the hall?"

"Have you?" I screamed, quivering with rage as I thrust a claw at her. They both started at the outburst.

"Wh-what?" she whispered, I think almost speechless in her anger.

"How dare you?" I growled, opening my satchel and throwing Father Jonas' notebook at her feet. "How dare you come here and complain to Father Diggory that I'm not doing my duty when I'm doing *yours*, even after you've given up! Am I your scapegoat for when you can't be bothered to visit him at all?"

Numbly they stared at me then, as baffled as Father Jonas had ever been at anything I said. They looked at each other, then at me, before Lamb's Ear bent down to pick up the notebook. "What is this?" she asked coldly, thumbing through the pages.

"There are notes in there for every single day since Father Diggory sent me to Father Jonas," I answered venomously. "All of my attempts to do for him what you couldn't."

"You were *treating* him?" Father Diggory exclaimed, his little blind eyes bigger than I had ever seen.

"I didn't tell him to do that!" Lamb's Ear squeaked, now frantically scanning the latter part of the notebook. "I didn't tell him to do any of this!"

"That old halser deserved more than willow bark," I said, addressing Father Diggory now. "He deserved more than to be given up on."

"Mullein, we have not *given up* on him," Father Diggory replied. "We simply don't know how to treat him any more, but that doesn't give you the right to work behind our backs."

"Well Lamb's Ear wasn't doing it," I insisted, refusing to cede any more ground. "Father Jonas always told me that he was in too much pain to remember if she had visited him or not, but I realized pretty quickly that he was only trying to spare her reputation. I administered all of his wort, even the willow bark."

"That's a lie!" Lamb's Ear squealed, staring desperately at father Diggory.

"I suggest that you proceed very, very cautiously, Mullein," Father Diggory smoldered. "You're making serious – perilously serious – accusations toward Mother Lamb's Ear here."

"I'm not accusing her of anything," I shrugged. "I don't have to now. It doesn't matter. Look in the back of the notebook, Mother; you can see for yourself that I only cured him too late."

"You *cured* him?" Father Diggory gasped.

"Why do you say 'too late?'" asked Lamb's Ear, looking up from the notebook at me with eyes full of dread.

"Because he's dead," I said. "He died during Evensong, while I was sitting beside his bed. I came here straight after washing his body."

"Wh-what?" Father Diggory whimpered, beginning to tremble from head to toe. "But that...that can't be true."

"It isn't," said Lamb's Ear, reading my notes again. Her tone now, far from accusatory, was only quietly astonished. "I came here from Father Jonas' room myself right after Evensong to complain about you. He was alive, Mullein, and you weren't there."

Now it was my turn to be astonished. Derwen's notes returned to my mind, a riddle I was certain could not be solved, and my mouth grew so dry that I struggled to speak. "I...I...I don't understand," I whispered.

"Mullein, son," Father Diggory quavered, "which, ah...which, um, room does Father Jonas – *did* Father Jonas, rather – inhabit?"

"The one beside the hearth in the library," I answered, "just like you told me. Why do you ask?"

"Which..." Father Diggory paused to lick his lips. "Which, um, er, side of the hearth?"

I gasped then, feeling as if the room had suddenly turned upside-down. A memory of past confusion returned to me, of standing before the hearth in indecision, and I knew, if not the answer to the riddle, at least the whole of it. "The left side," I answered.

The healers were no longer baffled now, but afraid; I saw the blood leave their ears. They stared at each other for a long time, until Father Diggory cleared his throat and addressed me: "As far as I'm aware, Mullein – and I dare say that Mother Lamb's Ear here will back me up – no one lives in the room to the left of the hearth."

I knew as he said it that he was right – right in two discrete senses, in fact, ever since the tolling of the Yule bells. I knew also, somehow, what I would find when I led them through the library to Father Jonas' door. The red lamp, which had burned day and night for months, now burned on the opposite door. Nevertheless I knocked on the door to the left, once, twice, thrice. Nobody – excepting perhaps Father Jonas' dreaded haunt – would have answered that door in any case, and nobody answered it now. Glancing once at Father Diggory's and Lamb's Ear's sober faces, I opened the door wide and looked in. There on the opposite wall was the familiar window, there to the right was the stove, there to the left was the unused bedroom; but gone was the bed, gone the chairs, gone the antique desk, the table, the crockery cabinet, the bookshelf, and the grandmother clock, all of the pristinely old, beloved fixtures I now knew so well. In place of the Great Dragon hanging was a Tree over a bare lectern: apart from that, the room was empty.

"He lived here," I croaked. "I fed him here. I bathed him. He died there in front of the stove. I'm willing to swear it upon the godboard."

"There's no need for that, Mullein," said Father Diggory, laying a broad paw on my shoulder. "I believe you."

Seeing nothing left of Father Jonas that I could mourn over, cold clarity found me then. "Is there...is there someone living on the other side of the hearth?"

Without answering they led me past the fire – how unexpectedly its warmth melted my numbness into eagerness, how effortlessly its fresh Yule incense filled my bereaved ghost with new hope – and to the other door. Lamb's Ear knocked thrice on it, far more gently than I. A dull, slurred voice from the other side answered "Come in," and I was led in, heart rolling like a drum, beside another sickbed beside another stove, on which lay another statue with a familiar look of dull misery on his face. This statue, however, was not a goat, but a ram, his slaten horns crowded at the root with bony tumors. And unlike Father Jonas – my Father Jonas – he could not have been older than thirty.

"Ah, Father Diggory," he bleated as loudly as his feeble voice allowed, "it's good to see you. I'm sorry to hear about Angharad – may the Almighty Lord rest her."

"Thank you, Jonas," said Father Diggory with a dip of his head.

"And who's this?" he asked, turning to me.

"I'm only a healer's apprentice from Margh Men," I answered, bowing low to him. "My name is Mullein. It's very good to meet you, Father Jonas."

“Ah, Lamb’s Ear has mentioned you,” he muttered, giving me a queer look. “I was wondering when we would meet.”

“We should have met much sooner, Father,” I said, opening my bag to retrieve the half-empty bottle of pure red wort, “but I’m afraid there was some confusion. Nothing to worry about now, though; I’ve brought your wort. This should cure you, although I don’t know yet to what extent you’ll recover.”

“Cure me?” Father Jonas chuckled. “Is that all it took? To send for someone from Margh Men? Do they know how to cure the statues on those stone ramparts?”

“They do now, Father,” I smiled, “and I dare say Genipweg will soon. I had the alchemists down in the village brew the wort for me.”

“Ah, and I’ve been meaning to send for them!” he sighed. “They don’t think they deserve to enter Redlamp, no matter how many times I tell them otherwise. Are they well?”

“They’re very concerned about you, Father,” I said.

“Then by all means, give me your wort,” he said, raising his stiff right hand to bless me with the Chiasm. I almost neglected to kiss it, force of habit telling me only to dip my head. “May I ask, though, why you’re addressing me in the Low Tongue?”

14

I attended the Yule thanings throughout the following day, after sleeping peacefully for the first time in weeks. I do not think I could possibly explain, worthy Elder, just how I felt then, standing in the stall beside Father Diggory, the mixture of mourning and rejoicing in my breast as I remembered who lay buried in the croft beneath my paws. I thought of the Chiasm, of how it at times enables such meetings, and how it is there that both halves of the Wheel of Time meet, spreading outward like the limbs of the Tree. The words of a hymn echoed in the dome over my head, drawing me back to the prayer itself:

*“Of the Father’s love begotten,
Ere the world began to be,
He the End as the Beginning,
He the headspring and the sea,
Of the things that are, that have been,
And that after years shall see,
Evermore and evermore!”*

and I knew that heaven had not abandoned me. Aye, and it never had. I knew then who had found me in the hollow of that oak, who had carried me to my own doorstep, who had knocked so sharply on my door, only to disappear. I had promised Father Jonas – my Father Jonas – that I would wassail until I was drunk enough to tumble down the hill again. I found now that I looked forward to it.

It was Father Jonas – the younger Father Jonas, who took his name, as I now know, from an oft-overlooked Elder of Redlamp who lived before the Chiasm – who suggested that I write this testimony. Father Diggory had charged me and Mother Lamb’s Ear to speak of it to nobody; but as it involved the younger Father Jonas so intimately, I could not in good conscience refuse to answer him when he inevitably asked from whom I had learned the cure for his illness. It was then, in the middle of our mutual mendicancy in the Everwinter Wood, that I first told him my tale in full, and then that he proposed I write to you, worthy Elder, petitioning to have the body of Elder Jonas uncovered.

I fear that I have harmed my own case by writing so much; but as queer and convoluted as the events were, I feel I cannot leave anything out. You may find a strange skeleton in Father Jonas' tomb, Elder Colm, if you decide to open it, overgrown with excess bone. You may also – and this is my belief, if the younger Father Jonas' recovery tells me anything – find a body that looks as if it had just died ten minutes ago, as supple and flexible as your own. Either way, you will surely find a flawless lozenge of sunstone hanging from a pouch around his neck; and if his bones do not heal the sick who touch them, that stone may.

One last digression, only now thought of: I wrote earlier that the first entry in Derwen's journal ended with The Statue's death, but that is not exactly true. It was the end of the entry as it pertained to the Statue, but Derwen also appended a short note after what I assume he had copied from Mesen. I did not think it relevant to this testimony when I began to write it, but now I think that it may be as important as anything else. It reads:

“A short note: the master from Margh Men, so elusive during his stay in Redlamp, could not be found again after The Statue's passing. Mesen searched for him at length, and even recruited me for the task, but to no avail. None of the other healers had seen him. We could not determine so much as where he had stayed, in fact. All that remains of him now are the notes Mesen so diligently copied, his own originals gone with him, his patient no longer around to testify that he had ever come to Redlamp in the first place. I take it on faith that Mesen saw him at all. She must have, for she will not take credit for any of the work in those notes; but if I were asked to guess who this master truly was, I would say most confidently that he was the Statue's Guiding Star.”

I have not seen the Star who gave me that stone from his crown since I met him on that night before the bones of Holy Evensong, but I have felt his presence unmistakably several times, and I believe that he has saved both me and Father Jonas from danger more than once. I am tempted also to say that I have heard his voice; but in all of those cases there were doves singing nearby, and so I cannot say it with any confidence.