

# The Old Man's Request

Book One of the Utgarda Series

Joab Stieglitz





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## CHAPTER 9

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June 20, 1929

“You look awful,” Anna said with concern in her face. She had met O’Malley on College Street outside the library. Dark bags under his eyes gave testament to his intense study in the small, dark cell, which had consumed most of the day.

“Dr. Feldman is quite thorough in his exit interview,” the priest replied with evident fatigue.

When he had gleaned as much as he thought he would from *Inviolati Conditori Pueri* and *Travelers from Beyond*, O’Malley had pressed the button to summon Dr. Feldman. The antiquarian then detained him for another hour while he read over the priest’s notebooks, including the notes he had written in the past. Eventually, the antiquarian nodded and returned them to the priest and they exited the cell together.

“What do you say to a cup of coffee, and perhaps a slice of pie?” He gave her a weak smile.

“Of course,” the anthropologist replied. She glanced at her watch. It was almost 5:30. The Tihkoosue Club was a cafe on the water just south of the marina two blocks away. It was a sunny, pleasant afternoon. They could get a table overlooking the water and enjoy the warm breeze. “How about the Tihkoosue Club for an early dinner?”

“I am a bit peckish,” the priest said, acknowledging his rumbling stomach. “That sounds wonderful.”



“Hey there, doc,” Jack Barnes said with a sly smile and a wink to Anna as they approached the hostess’ podium. “I’ll take care of these two, Annette.” The pretty blond in the gold evening gown smiled, nodded, and held out two menus to the restaurateur. “Right this way,” he said, putting his arm around Anna’s waist. “Harry’s already here.”

The dark-haired man in the tuxedo led them through the dining room to the terrace. There sat Dr. Lamb at a shaded table looking out over the lake absently. On the table before him was a tall glass of brown liquid. Barnes showed them to the table and pulled out the chair for Anna. The sound of the chair on the floor returned the doctor from his thoughts.

“Another ‘Canadian Iced Tea,’ doc?” Lamb glanced at his empty glass and nodded. His face was drawn. Noticing the new arrivals for the first time, he gave them a distracted smile. Jack glanced from Lamb to Anna to O’Malley. “I’ll bring one for each of you,” he said and walked away.

“What’s happened?” O’Malley asked the doctor.

“Jason Longborough passed away this afternoon.” Lamb sighed. “We all knew it was coming, but you’re never prepared when it does.” Anna took his hand in hers. “He seemed to be doing better yesterday, and then he had the conversation with the three of us. After that, he started fading.” He shook his head. “I should have been there.”

“Was there nothing more you could have done?” Anna asked. She had intended to be supportive, but the doctor’s scowl told her otherwise.

“His heart was weak and his lungs and liver were damaged from all the smoking and drinking over the years,” Lamb said with an irritated tone. Then he sighed again, resigned. “It happens to us all eventually.”

“The best thing to do at these times,” the priest said with compassion, “is to remember the man and all his good works over the years.”

Barnes returned with a redhead in a short black skirt and white vest that highlighted her bosom. The waitress carried a small tray with three glasses, a basket of bread, and a plate of cheese and fruit.

“On the house,” he said as the glasses and plate were placed on the table, “in light of the circumstances.” The alcoholic bouquet from the glasses was barely concealed by sprigs of mint perched on their rims. “Lacey here will take care of you. Whatever you need.” He looked squarely at the doctor, “All you have to do is ask.” Anna raised a surprised eyebrow at the doctor. All he did was nod to their host and give a brief smile to Lacey, who sauntered over to him, leaned into him, slowly selected a strawberry from the plate, and put it his mouth with a big smile.

“Jason was responsible for so many improvements to the university,” O’Malley continued, hoping to get past the awkward silence. “In fact, I believe he was instrumental in all of us getting positions here.”

“That is correct,” Anna chimed in. “I could not find a post on account of my Russian ancestry and being a woman. Jason approached me specifically for my medieval Russian specialty.”

“And he personally requested a dispensation from the Vatican to allow me to teach ancient history,” the priest added. They looked to Lamb who was looking uncomfortably at Lacey. The waitress had pulled up a chair and now sat close to him with her arm over his shoulder.

“Um, oh,” Lamb stammered, when he finally noticed them looking at him, “I was just the resident on call when he came in with chest pains last year.” Lamb thought for a moment. “Though I did get an offer to teach first years at the medical school rather unexpectedly soon thereafter. I hadn’t even started thinking about post-graduation yet.” His eyes widened. “Come to think of it, Jason Longborough asked me about my future plans during his hospital stay.”

“He was an interesting fellow,” Anna added. “He was very knowledgeable of Eastern European cultures and histories, which is not a common hobby.”

“We talked many times over the years about medieval medicine,” Lamb said. “We conjectured about the scientific basis of ancient cures and remedies.”

“He was a swell guy,” Lacey interjected. “He used to bring me little gifts from time to time. All the girls, I think.” She smiled thoughtfully, enjoying a memory. “He was sweet like that.”

“His knowledge of pre-classical history was also quite impressive,” O’Malley said, refocusing the conversation. “Particularly in Asia Minor.” A strange expression crossed his face. “Dr. Feldman said that Jason had been personally interested in *Inviolati Conditori Pueri* and had championed maintaining the Rare Book Collection.” He glanced conspiratorially at his colleagues. “I wonder if he engineered it so that we three had the necessary resources to take care of the business at the farm for him.”

“If that is the case,” Anna said skeptically, “there are several very rare plants that we are unlikely to find in Wellersburg that we need to make the powder.”

“Let’s see what we can do?” Lamb said with renewed vitality. Sensing the doctor’s change in demeanor, Lacey stood and returned her chair to a neighboring table. No one noticed Arthur Cophen sitting at a nearby table with his back to them.

“After we eat,” O’Malley said, helping himself to a bunch of grapes.

A few minutes later, Lacey and Barnes returned. Their host leaned over to Anna, quickly glancing down her shirt as he did so.

“I understand that you may be looking for hard to find items,” the shady restaurateur said quietly. Anna glanced at Lacey, and then met his gaze with a neutral expression. “Perhaps I may be of some service to you.” He smiled knowingly and handed her a small piece of paper. Anna smiled back curtly.

Barnes rose and snapped his fingers. Three white-coated men brought covered platters to the table. After they revealed the feast, the restaurateur said, “Enjoy,” winked at Anna, and followed his staff back into the restaurant. Lacey hovered around the doctor as they ate.



At the back of the House of Delights, the new and exclusive Chinese restaurant in town, was the Exotic Herb and Spice Shop. The building was located at the mouth of the Woolley River at the southern end of the business district near the train station. The paper that Barnes had handed to Anna had the address and a note saying “Go around to the back.”

A chime tinkled as they opened the door to the small store. The three were immediately overwhelmed by the variety of unusual smells. It was crowded and dark in the shop. Behind the counter, tall shelves lined the walls with large tins labeled with Chinese characters. There was a door at the back of the shop. Sounds from the kitchen of the restaurant could be heard behind it. Sitting on a tall stool behind the counter was an older, dark-haired Asian woman with timeless beauty wearing a tight, sleeveless, red silk dress, smoking a cigarette in a long cigarette holder.

“May I help you?” she said in unaccented English. Anna approached the counter, followed by Lamb and O'Malley.

“Jack Barnes suggested that we visit you,” Anna said without emotion. The shopkeeper looked her up and down.

“I bet he did,” she replied with the same even tone. “And with your priest, no less.” She produced a small packet from beneath the counter.

"If this doesn't work, one of you is sterile." She slid the packet to Anna. "That will be five dollars."

"You misunderstand," the doctor chimed in. "Barnes said you could help us locate some exotic plants." The woman glanced at him with an amused expression.

"Did he? And what might you be looking for?"

"We are looking for Dragon's Blood, is that correct?" O'Malley looked to Anna for confirmation.

"Yes," Anna replied. "We are looking for Dragon's Blood."

"What do you want it for?"

"We are trying to banish a demon," Anna said pointedly, as if sarcastic. "Why do you need to know?" The composure of the woman behind the counter did not waver.

"Dragon's Blood is a pretty generic name. I have many things that might meet your needs. Can you give me any more details? What are you supposed to do with it?"

"It is supposed to be mixed with goat's rue and the Five-Leaved Flower of Light," O'Malley blurted out to the startled looks of his companions, "and then thrown on the demon when it appears."

The woman tapped her lips with her finger for a moment, produced a small ceramic bowl from beneath the counter, and then turned and walked into the shadows at the rear of the shop. When she returned a few minutes later, the bowl was filled with some yellow roots and reddish leaves.

"Dragon's Blood has been used for centuries for digestive problems. This was imported from Persia." She began to grind the contents of the bowl with a marble pestle. "The Five-Leaved Flower of Light is the name for several herbal remedies. Some believe that the wild strawberry is such an herb, but they are mistaken." She glanced toward the bowl. "These roots produce a hallucinogenic effect said to reveal the spirits. The usual method is to ingest or smoke the mixture."

“You do not seem surprised by our inquiry,” the doctor said.

“It is not uncommon for people to come here looking for access to the supernatural.” She examined the bowl and continued grinding. “But few have had such specific instructions,” she leaned closer, “and even fewer are sent to me by Jack.” O'Malley was about to speak, but the woman shook her head. “You do not need to know.”

“What of goat’s rue?” Anna asked. The Asian woman’s eyes flashed as she looked up.

“It was common in ancient times to include unnecessary ingredients in order to reveal the imposters from the real sorcerers. Goat’s rue is a common weed. It would add nothing to your compound. If anything, it would dilute it.”

“Or extend it,” Lamb interjected, “to increase the quantity of material in order to disperse it over a wider area.”

“Sorcery does not work that way, Dr. Lamb.” Lamb was startled. How did she know his name? “The ingredients are not the spell, they are the medium. The real magic comes from the caster.” Without warning, a needle appeared in her hand. “You must each provide a drop of blood.” Lamb, O'Malley, and Anna looked at each other and then back at the woman.

“You must each contribute a drop of blood to empower the mixture and assert your control over it. Without the blood, it will not work.” She noticed the doctor staring at the needle. She flicked the thumb of her other hand into the forefinger, and a small blue flame burst from the tip of the thumb. She held the point of the needle into the flame until it glowed, and then glanced back at the doctor. He held out his hand. She poked the needle into his fingertip and dragged his hand with it to over the bowl. Using the needle, she turned the hand sideways and quickly pulled the needle from his finger. A drop of blood fell into the bowl and sizzled briefly.

“Who is next?” She returned the needle to the flame. It took a greenish hue for a moment. When the blue returned and the needle tip glowed, she glanced at Anna. The anthropologist looked to the men on either side of her, and then held her finger over the bowl. The woman

smiled and poked the needle into Anna's finger and pulled it out. When the drop hit the contents of the bowl, it also sizzled.

"Now, Father," the woman said as she again cleaned the needle, "it is your turn." The apprentice exorcist was reluctant. Such rites were counter to the holy word, but he knew that these pagan rituals had value under certain circumstances. He mumbled a short prayer under his breath and held out his hand over the bowl. Again there was a brief sizzle when the blood joined the compound.

The woman extinguished her thumb with a gesture. There was no sign of any burning on the thumb or anything unusual on the long, slender fingers. She mumbled some unintelligible words as she poked the needle into the once-burning thumb and added a drop of her own blood to the mixture. This time, there was a bright flash and a cloud of gray smoke burst from the bowl. When it cleared, the brown and red contents of the bowl had been transformed into a white, crystalline powder.

"This will do what you seek," the woman said, pouring the contents of the bowl carefully into a paper packet. "As I said, the usual method is to incorporate the power into your bodies through food or smoke. But that would only reveal it to you. If you cast the substance upon the demon, all will be able to see it." She handed the packet to Anna and held out her hand. "That will be twenty dollars."

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Joab Stieglitz is an avid tabletop RPG player and game master of horror, espionage, fantasy, and science fiction genres, which he plays 3-4 times a week.

Joab is a Senior Business Analyst for a software company. He has also worked as a software trainer, a network engineer, a project manager, and a technical writer over his 30 year career. He lives in Alexandria, Virginia.

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