

1st Cycle

14th May 1348

It is as though I have waited a lifetime to begin writing, but at last, I feel that it is time to do so. Tomorrow, the hermitage of Our Lady of Absolution will be consecrated and my work can properly begin. Those who have gathered here sleep now, and I write by candlelight, as finally I dare to record some of my intentions. It has been so long since I have truly expressed myself sincerely and with no reserve, even when alone, and it is my hope that this diary will prove useful in planning over the years to come. The plans I have put in place are intricate, and require constant vigilance and maintenance. I dare not risk even the smallest matter going awry.

It has been a trying season for my brothers and sisters. They have worked long and hard to transform what was once a ruined, forgotten farmstead into a holy retreat. Each has poured love and weary tears into their art, and I have watched with pride at what they have accomplished. I doubt that any of them could have believed that they were capable of such before I picked them up from the gutters, from the dirt. I doubt further still that any of them could ever imagine the truth behind what is to come.

Brother Mark and Sister Kristiana have proven themselves to be masterful stone crafters and carpenters, as I suspected from their tales of life before they joined us. They have apprenticed young Brother Anthony for much of their work and he has revelled in the opportunity to learn. He is such an eager young man. Brother Ladislaus has lived by the light of his forge. Brother Thomas has tirelessly worked to bring them wood and stone from the valley with the assistance of Brothers Lachlann and Hob. They have worked hard under Brother Thomas's yoke, but they were only too eager to see to our provision of grown foodstuffs. From chaos, we are bringing order.

Sister Apollonia continues to prove herself an eminently capable huntress, although having travelled with her from the Holy Roman Empire, this has come as no surprise to me. She too has worked with young Brother Anthony, whose evidently boundless energy sees him spend as much time immersed in the untamed quarters of the valley as within the hermitage proper. The leadership qualities I note in her are only growing now that we are settled - perhaps too much, now that I muse on such. While those I have gathered here are generally too damaged to be much at risk of striving for independence, and certainly Sister Apollonia is among these damaged, it would not do for her to grow *too* strong, *too* secure. I may have to reconsider tomorrow's appointments.

Sister Agnes, ever the mother, has done a wonderful job of seeing our bodies nourished. She has worked well with Sister Grace whose skill as a brewer easily matches that of Sister Agnes as a cook. Brothers Fychan and Ralf have administered to wounds and sickness when they emerge. The plague has not followed us, as Our Lady promised. The others praise in the Church our good fortune and piety, and thank the Lord for his blessings.

Sister Idonea sees us kept warm and guarded against the more fearsome elements of the valley. Although her insular nature has been noted, she is nonetheless working hard when it comes to the cloth, and no one has begrudged her the space as yet.

Brother William has raised spirits with his angelic voice, an irony which deeply appeals to me. So often as I move among my brothers and sisters as they work, I hear them singing songs of praise. Brother Peter, a most studious young man, has been stalwart in helping me to teach; I could not have hoped for a more malleable understudy. He tends to our Brothers and Sisters as proficiently as he sees to the wellbeing of our sheep herd.

In fact, yes. Writing this down has straightened my thoughts, and convinced me. Tomorrow during our humble celebrations, I will announce that Sister Agnes is to become the head of the sisters, whilst Brother Peter will become the head of the brothers. No doubt this will serve to ease some of Sister Apollonia's ambition and gently nurture the insecurities for which I sought her. It will not be hard to give a convincing explanation to the rest of the flock - Brother Peter and Sister Agnes are both very different in how they lead spiritual lives, but they will complement one another because of this. Sister Agnes shall occupy a position of gentle love, while Brother Peter one of stern guidance. There is much to do, and many celebrations to be had tomorrow.

I shall be ill-placed to enjoy them if I do not sleep.

15th May 1348

Today has been a truly fascinating day, and I am grateful for Our Lady's blessing in making it so.

After a morning of preparation and worship, we took a gentle spaciement as a flock to beat the bounds. Of course, my own private communing with Our Lady was, as always, fruitful, and I left her presence feeling ever sharper of mind and purpose than I had when I woke to the crow's call. I led my brothers and sisters along the hermitage boundary so that all could be aware of the marking stones. We stopped and worshipped at each one, and they prayed for God's protection and for a blessing of the land. The extent of the blessing they felt at our journey was apparent, and tears were shed in gratitude for the divine hand that led us here. Oh, my Lady, how divine your guidance has been - how potent the fruits of your power, even to those who cannot ever truly understand them.

In the evening we shared a meal together before moving to the Chapel to give thanks. Brother William led us in song and our voices raised in great passion and devotion.

To my surprise and extensive entertainment, it seemed that some among the flock had chosen to prepare gifts for the community to enjoy.

The flock seemed pleased on the whole by my decision to appoint Sister Agnes and Brother Peter as heads of the nuns and monks respectively, although I do wonder at how many noticed Sister Apollonia's subtle shift of expression. It seems I was right to undermine her here, as she has been quiet all evening, and even her watching over Sister Idonea has lessened slightly. It is good that she remains pre-occupied, at least for now, and I will watch how this changes her friendship with Sister Agnes with great interest.

Of course, it would not do to have her fall apart - not while we still have so much work to do. I will try and speak with her in the coming weeks to monitor her thoughts, although I will be greatly curious to see if she approaches me first. The next few weeks could be very telling indeed.

7th June 1348

It has been longer than I intended since I last wrote here, but we have been exceedingly busy. These weeks have seen a true transformation in the dark valley of Duddon. Summer has begun to spread its mantle across the fell and has seen the grey landscape made green and lush. I am told that our crops are sprouting well, and there has been no dearth of fresh meat for the pot.

The flock I have gathered are a wise group, however, and will not indulge too heavily in the blessings of the moment. Work has already begun on shoring up the cupboards. Sister Agnes and Brother William have been working fastidiously to preserve whatever they can and they have decided between themselves how they might proceed over the coming seasons. Brother Hob has been particularly eager to see that the crops are tended in such a way that they will provide for us into early winter. We shall not be permitted to rest upon our laurels. As isolated as we are, we cannot take our good fortune to heart. I understand that Sister Grace has already started work on bottling for the colder months with warming draughts to keep our blood from freezing. I have no doubt that the winter will be cruel, but the land is providing generously, and Our Lady is ever-watching.

Brother Peter has taken his appointment seriously and has done a great deal already to oversee the teaching of our less educated fellows. Even those who had been unable to read before they came here now have a rudimentary understanding of their letters.

In truth, I had feared that Brothers Fychan and Ralf may have grown idle due to the lack of illness and harm to treat, but they seem content to occupy themselves with philosophy and establishing an infirmary. I am fascinated by their discussions and sometimes even entertain the thought of how they might respond to a meeting with Our Lady. Of course, such a thing would never do, but it has brought a smile to my face on more than one occasion.

Sister Kristiana and Brother Mark have proven themselves to be every bit as talented as I had suspected in the art of stone and wood. I understand this partnership of brother and sister much better, now; she is the architect, he is the ready hands. Despite her sex, I suspect that she is the key to their guidance and direction. Perhaps more significant, she is the calming hand on the reigns of his temper, something I have had cause to see only when his frustration overcomes his composure.

I had wondered if the others might balk at receiving instruction from a woman. Brother Anthony, of course, remains so eager to please that he does as he is bidden with nothing less than full-throated enthusiasm.

A traditional man such as Brother Thomas might have been expected to refuse to labour under a woman's guidance, but then I must remember our former reeve is a practical man, and once a married man. So long as he and those with which he works focus on the betterment of our community, he is content and hard-working. I had wondered if a man of his nature might show a stubborn pride at taking instruction from those younger and less experienced, but his habit seems to be to support, not undermine them. Useful for now, but worth bearing in mind later.

2nd July 1348

Another happy month has passed, with some matters starting to fall into place. Sister Apollonia has finally spoken to me about her envy towards Sister Agnes's appointment - a matter that I had left for perhaps longer than I ought. It was fascinating to hear the raw honesty in her voice alongside the shame, as she confessed her feelings and begged for mine and the Lord's forgiveness. Our Lady is less forgiving than the God she prays to, but that is something she never needs to know. I comforted her, though I let her see that I was not surprised by this revelation, and she is most contrite. I prayed with her for forgiveness and she seems to step a little more lightly. I am not certain that she feels entirely liberated from her burden, but that is as it should be. I shall continue to observe and see if the darkness in her grows over time once more, a vibrant green fire she can quieten but never quite extinguish.

Conversely, even poetically, poor Sister Agnes seems quite unsettled in her role. Her humility is clear, but I have advised her to remain strong and remain faithful, and told her I would not have placed her in such a position if I did not feel that she was able to perform it. They will need her guidance to be ushered down the road ahead. She is, at least, easily appeased by such platitudes.

10th July 1348

Brother Fychan approached me today with a noble goal, one which reassures me again that I have chosen the right people, those capable of true devotion, those who can serve their roles in Our Lady's plan.

He has great plans for a gift to the chapel and the community. It seems he has the knowledge, or at least the intelligence, necessary to design an organ. With Brother Ladislaus's aid we can construct one, provided only the metal.

I have asked him to prepare a design in advance and to determine through this what would need to be purchased, and how much, so that I can cross the bounds to secure it.

We will sing to Our Lady in time, and such a glorious song it shall be.

23rd August 1348

I have spent much time of late working on my personal studies and I have been able to add greatly to my notes. I have spent a significant amount of time in private meditation and enjoying the tranquillity of the valley. It is enjoyable to sit in my chambers and hear the sounds of honest work outside and within the hermitage, knowing what it all moves towards. It is so different to the enclosed chambers I grew used to in Avignon. Here I can see God's hand at work in the land itself, just as I hear the work being carried out by the faithful I have gathered. It has been inspirational.

Our seclusion enables us to thrive. Without the distractions of the sinful world beyond, we are accomplishing good things. I give my thanks to Our Lady for her guidance and for the gifts she has granted to make this vision real.

Watching the flock continues to be a fascinating endeavour, as they settle into their routines. Sister Grace is doing her best to compensate for her lack of physical health by bringing jugs of fresh watered wine to those working - in contrast Sister Idonea seems to be very busy with not much output in the shade and cool of the hermitage. There has not been any quarrel over this yet, but it is worth noting nonetheless.

There has been some tension between Brother Ralf and Sister Kristiana, also. Sister Kristiana and Brother Mark have been intensely pre-occupied with plans for the chapel, and it seems that Brother Ralf has some interest in making his opinion about such plans known. I think tomorrow I will take him aside and suggest he draws up some of his own designs to add to the concepts - after all, the more minds working on such an endeavour, the further it will move from mortal influence and closer to Godly, surely?

Sister Apollonia has been a little unwell lately. I suspected she has overdone her self-flagellation and a quick clap on the shoulder after dinner confirmed such, as well as she hid the flinch.

I must speak with Our Lady directly again soon. I find myself craving her presence.

6th September 1348

I have come from Her Chamber. I am enlightened, as bright as the sun. Afterwards I called once more upon our Lord - tell me, God, tell me if what I do is sin, tell me if I am going against your words. I knelt, I prayed, and I felt only peace and comfort! I am God's man, and I am Our Lady's man! I work their will, and I will see eternal paradise on Earth. Our plan unfolds, as inevitable as the trickle of time.

Our Lady's plan needs prayer, needs each of my flock to see themselves as righteous and pious when the time comes, and Brother Mark and Sister Kristiana's zeal to see the chapel made sturdy and enduring is gratifying to see. It offers them a sacred place, in which we can prepare ourselves, in which we can strive toward that state of grace in which the work of salvation is best approached. I have come so far since my first readings in Avignon, have learned so much, and yet I still am sure to pray. I am God's man yet! Blessed is Our Lady, virtuous and Holy.

In this fire shall we be tempered, and then in time, we shall be made pure in the crucible of our deeds.

And yet this is not the only triumph of the week, as Sister Grace has been able at last to show us the fruits of her labours. Last night she tapped the first barrel of her ale, and each of us took a cup in celebration, and another in delight at the flavour. I am less familiar with these English techniques than many at the hermitage, but the skill she shows is still clear, and I am sure I shall develop a taste for her work. I noted that young Brother Anthony seemed to enjoy it particularly, and his cheeks were pink by the end of his second cup. This youthful ease of merriment could possibly be useful in times to come.

Through the hard work, there is a sense of wellbeing and contentment in our cause. I shall not allow us to become complacent, but it is good that there is a level of commitment. The fruits of our efforts are already ripening, only hardening the resolve of all to make the community work. And what glorious fruit it shall be.

I confess, I had my concerns in the early days as we came upon this ruined, wind-lashed vale. I fear that some among the flock expected to stumble onto Eden rather than create it. Their disappointment and arrogance was palpable. I grimly suspected that some may abandon our pursuit. But, all must learn that rewards are not given for expectation and assumption alone. If we seek absolution, we must first construct an altar on which to offer our sins.

We prepare for the harvest, and Our Lady waits.

17th September 1348

The inspiration of Our Lady still strong in my mind, I have made what I hold to be great advances in the rite to create a space that works as a tomb. Many peoples have come close to perfecting their own burial rituals, and I currently have the vision to draw lines between these practices.

1st October 1348

Somewhat inevitably, given the brilliance of some of the minds within the hermitage's walls, it has become common for the study period following the evening meal to come alive with discussion and philosophy. Given what I know of their backgrounds, it is fascinating to listen to these conversations. Brothers Hob, Ralf, and Fychan in particular enjoying verbally sparring over the nature of God's creation and the creation of His nature. It is truly fascinating. Many of my peers in Avignon would balk.

I am made of stronger faith, of greater understanding than to hesitate at the words they share. I learn so much of their thoughts and fears, and their consideration of His nature are like ants contemplating the temperament of the sky. The Lord is unknowable and they can do Him no insult.

In particular, I do find myself observing Brother Ladislaus. I am only too aware of his disposition and former life. Brother Ralf's ideas can border somewhat on the dangerous at times. Together they are a combination that I will watch very closely. It would not do for things to come to a head too soon.

12th October 1348

I had not expected to write again so soon, but some interesting events have unfolded over the past week. It is most heartening to see how they work towards the future here, though they know not the full glory of what is to come. Our purpose is not merely survival, the sullen drudgery of the masses. We build towards greater purpose.

Sheep-breeding has begun, under the keen guidance of Brother Peter and the assistance of Brother Fychan. This is a humble labour of which I am not acquainted, but Peter handles the beasts with competence and directs his brothers in their work with that same confidence. Though it should come as no surprise that such a time is troubling for him. The greater responsibilities, the reminders of his humble past; these are fertile soil in which sin may plant its seed.

He came to confess, shaken as he was when I first guided his path. By day he may guide his brothers, but at night he remains plagued by the dreams and torments of temptation. It is a weakness within him, a susceptibility he knows will drive him from the path of God if not overcome. I have offered him what guidance I can. He must be watched most attentively, for now is not the time to stumble. I see the manner in which he observes and speaks with our sisters.

4th November 1348

Sister Agnes has been greatly disturbed of late. In confession, she has been speaking of dreams of her life before. She told me her tale as we travelled together, and it was this that made me realise our meeting was not by accident. It is a complicated matter and one which clearly festers at the heart of her. She has asked for my help in overcoming it. Although it is clear to me that she enjoys her role as the Head of the Sisters when she is occupied by their needs, she finds herself adrift in quieter moments. It seems that, in these darker months, these moments have become more pressing. She has requested additional roles to perform, but I feel it is more important, and useful for our purpose, for her to confront these thoughts.

I have been giving much thought as to how I can begin to further my hopes for the hermitage and I feel a hand guiding me towards Sister Agnes. Perhaps soon it will be time for another conversation with Our Lady. I both dread and long for such.

As winter drives in, the Brothers Fychan, Hob and Ralf share their views of God and his works. It keeps the longer nights full and thoughtful, but for my part I am simply content to observe and listen. These are all intelligent men, and I must understand their course if I am to guide them truly.

10th December 1348

Perhaps the first disturbance from within has reached our haven. Sister Grace, ever protective of her work, ever protective of her place, has been so proud of her labours and the ales she produced. But Brother Lachlann, whom I know the least well of all in the hermitage, thought to offer his advice. It proved ill-received. Sister Grace has taken it as criticism from the uninformed, most defensive of her role. While Brother Lachlann seems taken aback by the response, he seems poorly equipped to placate such anger.

I will not intercede. I must see how Sister Agnes responds and manages such conflict; she must rise to her role and it will be most telling to see how it develops. A minor altercation such as this will not be the undoing of anyone, but I must understand the more withdrawn, such as Sister Grace, and the newer of our flock such as Brother Lachlann. Mayhap they shall resolve this themselves, but whatever the outcome I shall be further illuminated as to their weaknesses. If we are to forge ahead with our path, it shall be essential.

26th December 1348

Praise be to Our Lady for her guidance! For as I visited her again, as I made the necessary preparations and said the righteous words, I have been granted clarity of vision for my dedication. I am ready, now, and no man nor woman nor child will stand in my path. They pave my path! Their very

ways, their weaknesses, their sin, it takes me to something brighter, more brilliant! I will recreate the glory of Eden here and know no death nor fear!

I must look to preparing for the time to come. I have much to do and much to consider. Truly I have been blessed to have been presented with so many possibilities to further Our Lady's wishes, and truly I am blessed to have been guided towards this!

Still, nothing is certain save in the eyes of God and I must plan. The task ahead is difficult and will require care. More than ever I am grateful for my diligence in keeping notes on the flock and their interactions. So much hinges on this.

28th December 1348

I must spend what time I can contemplating how I should approach the matter. It will not do to rush into things like a giddy fool, although I am so sorely tempted. My heart pounds at the thought of it all. I would risk too much in a lapse of patience. I have not travelled and worked these years to lose my head to such childish flights. I must exercise my discipline for a higher purpose.

The nights remain long and dark and the paths outside are treacherous. I choose to believe that this is not coincidence. Forgive me for my immaturity.

I must consider how I shall approach and execute these thoughts. I have research to perform and letters to write.

20th January 1349

Today, for the first time since the consecration of the hermitage, I have travelled into the world beyond the bounds. I have told the flock that I am looking to source the materials for Brother Fychan's proposed organ and I have left Brother Peter and Sister Agnes to oversee in my absence.

As distasteful as it has been to leave the hermitage, it has been wholly necessary. I find myself staying in the village of Ulpha, a difficult day's walk from the hermitage. As soon as I crossed the bounds, I found myself instantly assailed by the sickness of the world beyond. My skin felt loose and irritated at the exit, and as I lost sight of Our Lady of Absolution in the twisting gorge I was filled with a profound sense of dread at the thought of leaving. The boundary is potent, no doubt there. I have made provision to stay here in the Newfield Inn overnight.

As regrettable as the journey has been, it has been necessary in order to do what I must do. Locating materials required for the organ's creation has not been difficult. There is no shortage of raw metal from the local smithy that Brother Ladislaus can mould into necessary components. I have acquired a rather tired looking old nag to carry the items for me.

No, my more difficult task is one I must do alone. I have written three letters to be delivered to Abbeys in the vicinity of Sister Agnes's childhood home. It is my sincere hope that one of these letters will find its way into the hands of its rightful owner. I pray that the child has not succumbed to sickness or has

moved beyond my reach, as it will be a difficult task indeed to find another one quite so suitable. The letters have requested that any Abbess who opens them, should endeavour to find the girl. Although there is some risk that my reputation may act as twice-sharpened sword, I have called upon my former title in Avignon to ensure that the letters are treated with respect and the importance they deserve.

I will be sure to pray for forgiveness on my return to the hermitage, much as I will seek to cleanse myself of this world's rot.

I have instructed that any letters that I might receive should be kept for me at the Newfield Inn. I will return here in two months' time to see if my efforts have returned dividends.

27th January 1349

I returned to the hermitage of Our Lady of Absolution a little under one week ago, and I have only just begun to feel clean. Everything about the world beyond is like poison to me now. The stench of sickly food harvested from polluted ground by filthy hands did not rest easily on my stomach. The bed I was put upon to sleep stank of the sweat of meaningless copulation, a desperate attempt to feel alive before death's jaws would clasp firmly around their throats. I feel disgusted at the very thought.

For all my difficulties, it was heartening to see the relief and gratitude among the flock when I returned. They had worried for me, and it seems I have been quite successful at ensuring their dependence. I prefer not to leave for too long, lest events move in unexpected ways without my hand to guide them, but this journey has at least reassured me somewhat on that matter.

I am eager to see if I receive any replies for my efforts.

Brother Fychan and Brother Ladislaus have set upon plans for the organ most eagerly. I am pleased that Brother William has shown an interest in their work. He has made comment about the potential of starting a core choir to make full use of the instrument.

10th February 1349

I had known that Sister Idonea was by inclination an artist, but her post as our laundrywoman has kept her busy enough that little has yet been seen. Today she revealed to our little hermitage the first larger work we have seen from her.

I admit that I was surprised to see how deep her talent goes. Her work forms an interesting contrast to Sister Apollonia's art, which is a foremost part of her character: it is something she talks about on a regular basis, even as part of her theological insight. What she knows of God she has seen, in part, in her art which He inspires and drives. Sister Idonea, by contrast, speaks little of her creation, and spends so long in the laundry doing what Sister Agnes assures me should take not much more than half the time that the time for conversation is often short.

Still, a trinket or two has surfaced, nothing unremarkable, but today came her first painting in the hermitage. A flower, carefully depicted with all the sense of colour that it is, in hindsight, obvious a skilled dyer would possess, and with a shade of God-given talent to shape it. It is a deep contrast to the work

Sister Apollonia has shown us - passionless, but exact, and a vibrant recreation of what *is* as opposed to the thoughts and forms and expression.

I thought immediately of the altarpiece, and am still thinking of it. We have yet to determine who will do what, and now I am presented with a choice instead of a single simple answer. I must not push Sister Apollonia too far too soon - it is of vital importance that she remains a strong opposing presence to Sister Agnes. Yet, I find myself thinking on how this will alter the bonds between her and Sister Idonea, should I put the task on her instead. She will undoubtedly not realise the depths of what she may do.

I will think on this at length tonight.

13th February 1349

Sister Apollonia visited me today under the seal of confessional. Her last few nights have been a trial, it seems, one she fears she may fail, and it is the result of Sister Idonea's painting - though not in the manner of jealousy which I considered might appear. No, Sister Apollonia's struggle lies deeper than I had even imagined: Where the rest of the congregation saw a flower, she tells me she beheld instead the seat of lust, a driving inspiration - though she has fought it - to sin.

I counselled her in resisting this drive, speaking at length on how a woman's lust is not only the path to her downfall, but can topple others from our pursuit of purity in addition. She has promised to fight the urge, and I have promised to aid her with all that I can. I could see in her a tension as we sat together, and I rested my hand over hers. This could be very useful indeed.

After she had left I spent some time in contemplation. I had noticed a change in her disposition these past few days, and had not accounted for it well; it reminded me of a similar change some few months ago, when we worked as a hermitage to help Brother Peter in the fields.

It may be that Sister Apollonia has fought this battle more often than I have known. I will think further on the matter.

21st March 1349

Next month I shall return to Ulpha to see if I have received any responses to my letters. I shall do so under the guise of obtaining dyes to last for many years for Sister Idonea's work - although I am very aware that I cannot use such excuses forever. I will work on further ways to uphold this deceit, at least until I can risk honesty without compromising our work. If I am to succeed at all, they must trust me implicitly.

I find the ease with which they swallow such lies almost poetic. And it is all for Our Lady. Ours is the Greater Good.

My convenient excuse for a voyage beyond the bounds comes as a result of Sister Idonea being offered the opportunity to paint our new altarpiece. I note that Brother Mark and Sister Kristiana are not in favour of this decision, another angle I had not yet considered - but working to my advantage

nonetheless. I tell them it is so that we all can contribute to the sacred space within which we dwell, and Sister Apollonia has taken this gracefully. Even Brother Hob and Brother Lachlann have found joy in discussing grown tribute for the interior.

This recent conflict has caused no small amount of ire between the blood siblings and other members of the hermitage. Having made my decision, I am intrigued to see how the matter is reconciled. And it must be reconciled. For now.

9th April 1349

O Glorious Day! O Fortuitous Day! At last I have been blessed with the fruit of my endeavours! At last I have received a letter with the whereabouts and wellbeing of Sister Agnes's daughter. She is, as I suspected she would be, a nun, and has taken her vows in an Abbey to the north of York. She has been named Constance and is considered to be a most pious Sister.

My task has been slow and humble, but I give my thanks to Our Lady, and to God also. Never have I been more certain that my work here is within His will. If He did not wish for me to proceed, then - as is within His Power - he would waylay me. Our Lady will be pleased.

Whilst I am here in Ulpha, I shall write to the Abbey and introduce myself to Sister Constance. If I can be certain that she is who I seek, then I shall extend her an invitation to join the hermitage. If she is as blessed as her Abbess believes, than I have no doubt that she will perceive goodness in my request and will make haste to be reunited with her mother.

I shall keep this information from Sister Agnes at present. Until I can be certain that the child Constance is hers and that she is willing to join us, there is little sense in risking the understandable conflict in Sister Agnes's already disquieted heart. Not yet, at least.

In more grim tidings, the terrible plague which was close to my heels as I, Brother Ladislaus and Sister Apollonia left the mainland seems to have swept across England. After bleeding up from the south, it has finally encroached in Cumberland with ghastly results.

I must retain my distance. What a terrible fate it would be if I were to take this vile sickness back to the hermitage. How very cruel it would be, to have worked so hard and so long and be thwarted of what is rightfully mine by sickness.

The deaths are not many in a greater scheme but against the size of Ulpha itself they have taken a deep toll. I have seen bodies that died two or three days earlier whose houses are not yet shut up for nobody dares venture near. Instead, in offering of defence, the women of the village have knitted small mannikins they called poppets, green bloated things that they seem to think a protection.

When I next go forth for word of Sister Constance, I shall discover whether this remedy works. My own, I fear, is not for them, though it be safer.

Tonight I shall pray to Our Lady.

17th April 1349

Safely returned from the little that is Ulpha. I felt my soul relieved from the pressure and filth of the world outside the moment I stepped within the bounds of the hermitage. That is true each time, of course, but this time more so than ever before.

Had I realised the plague had come so close to us, I may have been so cowardly as to have waited further months, or even years, before I ventured out. We could survive here for seasons to come without perishing, and perhaps my work could wait - but I fear Our Lady would not.

I have sworn that I will not succumb to cowardice in the light of Our Lady's Will. Our Lady has seen me well protected and although Her power does not extend beyond the bounds, I am confident that she will not allow me to fail now.

Sister Agnes and Brother Peter have cared for the flock in my absence, and I will be sure to praise their efforts. I shall be setting aside some time to pray and speak with them over the coming days to find how they are progressing in advance of the first celebration of Our Lady of Absolution's founding. I am curious to know how they feel the flock is coming together.

Their perceptions are invaluable to me; I do not doubt that behaviours are adjusted in my presence. It is essential that I understand my Brothers and Sisters on all possible levels so that I may better love them.

17th April 1349, the second

I have just returned from communing with Our Lady and my heart is thundering, my blood coming to life in my very veins as I contemplate in religious ecstasy the matters that we have discussed. She is so powerful, so great - and her need, her hunger even greater still. Constance will be suitable, I am sure of it. I dare not speak with the others when I am in such a state, so potent is the force of her presence, but mercy, I feel so filled with life and purpose. I have so many ideas and thoughts as to how to progress from here, and it is only the strictest of my learnings that keeps me from rousing the Brothers and Sisters and setting out to weave the webs around them in this very moment.

Please, let Constance reply swiftly and be who I believe her to be.

They know not, they know not what grand matters await them! They will see!

20th April 1349

I have endeavoured to learn what I could of the happenings in my absence. Of course, much is overshadowed by the grim news of the fate of Ulpha.

I have been troubled by the well being of Sister Grace and Brother Thomas as both have taken news of the plague's presence so near to our threshold poorly. This dismay reaches beyond the more understandable concern of a healthy body wishing distance from that which may harm it.

This is quite understandable given the hardship of their lives before. They have both come to me and spoken of their grief. I am grateful to see that Sister Agnes has taken Sister Grace beneath her wing

and the two of them are bonding well over the sorrow. Brother Thomas's dismay is better concealed. He has been channeling himself into his work, finding even greater cause now to keep watch on our bounds as he hunts. He is a good man, but his quiet pride does place him in a position of isolation on matters he may consider as indicative of weakness. We are fortunate to have such a watchdog. I find myself wondering where his limits lie in protecting the sheep from the wolves. Sometimes a wolf may be needed to catch a wolf. Sometimes the faithful hound is just that.

I believe my absence has strengthened the hermitage as a whole. The discontent surrounding the crafting of the altarpiece has not escalated without my guidance. I am sure Sister Kristiana remains unsettled by the task going to Sister Idonea, who has proven as indifferent to the conflict as I anticipated. It is proof they are settling into their roles and their place and guarding them vigilantly. It is a petty jealousy, a petty pride, but wholly necessary and appropriate.

They all begin to understand that Our Lady of Absolution is the one place in the world where we may be safe, where we may forge our purpose. It is a sorrowful truth, but we are bound all the closer for it, and I find myself grateful for this light shining in dark times. The more they understand that there is nowhere else they may be understood, nowhere else they may be safe, nowhere else they may be cleansed, the more they shall be vigilant against any threat to the hermitage and its stability, and the more they will listen to my counsel. They must watch one another and accept that they all have a place here.

15th May 1349

The sound of the organ rang through our peaceful valley as the celebration of one year since our hermitage's Founding were seen to - what I deeply hope will be the first of many. I remain constantly surprised by the Brothers and Sisters who work so tirelessly within, constantly learning new details and insights into their worlds. My confidence and hopes for the future grows stronger by the day. After all, I learn as much from the times when they work in harmony as I do from when they bicker and struggle.

Sister Agnes and Brother William put on a wonderful feast, although I noted that it seemed to vanish rather faster than I had expected - I have my suspicions, although I will remain more vigilant for now. Sister Idonea's efforts in painting the altarpiece have surpassed all my expectations - it seems she has quite the eye for colour, as well as practical matters of laundry. The core-choir that Brother William has organised will doubtless provide much warmth and comfort on the long, dark nights next winter.

I am somewhat troubled by Sister Apollonia's ongoing illness, but one can always trust Sister Idonea to keep her in good health and spirits. I imagine that the light fever she has struggled with is down to an infection, although I have been careful to make no direct inquiries into her flagellation. Instead it is enough to assure her that such matters are not her fault, and simply advise her to pray. The guilt works so wonderfully in such a cycle. Additionally, I note that the news of the plague has caused her much grief - such is the empathy and compassion of her soul.

11th June 1349

Work on the Chapel has been completed, with the utmost credit due to Brother Mark and Sister Kristiana. Sister Kristiana in particular has proved most assertive in her role, unabashed at giving instruction and demonstrating the keen understanding she holds of her work. There is a liberation provided to her by the hermitage, and I do not imagine her surrendering such so easily.

Now that the chapel is complete, allowing Brother Mark and Sister Kristiana to turn their efforts towards maintenance and weatherproofing, Brother Anthony has been liberated from his duties as a faithful labourer. His enthusiasm has not lessened for the hard work he has done. So long as no shadow falls upon his mind from his troubled start in life, I would expect nothing less. Perhaps he will stubbornly hold his ground against anything that might drive him from this new light? Or maybe there is a strength to that old shadow which will prove purposeful.

17th August 1349

The harvest season is upon us, and I am heartened to see the dedication with which all of our hermitage approach this hard and necessary work. Truly they understand that they are single pieces of a greater whole, and they cleave to the same purpose of its betterment.

Or such were my thoughts until I noticed the absence of Sister Idonea from the weeks' labours. Greater attention proved her nowhere to be seen. While I do not believe this has caused any immediate rifts, and it is not outside my expectations given what I knew of Sister Idonea, I am somewhat concerned that, should it be examined more closely by the others, it might provoke a confrontation sooner than I had intended.

Certainly, I must contemplate this detachment from her brothers and sisters, and observe further. Am I merely witnessing another demonstration of the coldness I have always spied within her? Or have I made some misstep; is she shrinking from the fold? It will not do for her to question if the hermitage is truly her place. I still believe that she sees this as the best escape from the life she was trapped by before, but it is of the utmost importance that none of them try and leave.

For the moment I shall take no action. If her absence is noted or remarked upon, I must ensure she receives support and not reproach. I fear a harsh word may drive a wedge between her and the community, when they must value her and she must most adamantly value them. If this is simply her way, then her way must be indulged, for surely elsewhere it would be regarded less warmly. Certainly it is good that Sister Apollonia sees in her a figure who requires shelter and guidance, so Sister Idonea may continue in her odd manner.

28th September 1349

I have come to appreciate this time of year. As the nights become longer and the late summer gives way to autumn colours, the hermitage takes a turn from the practical to the more philosophical. So it is that the period assigned for study of an evening comes alive with the sound of discussion and debate. I do enjoy overhearing their thoughts. Such discussions provide such profound insights into their thoughts.

Their discussions inspire me to pursue my own research.

30th September 1349

Alas, my fond thoughts on the matter of debate seem to have provoked cruel irony! Only a handful of days after I last wrote, a somewhat less measured argument occurred between our resident philosophers. The exact details escape me. I shall wait until I am approached by any of those involved, but the result was heated indeed. I have not seen such overt conflict since before the hermitage's founding! The heart of the matter lay somewhere between Brother Hob and Brother Ralf, and a fundamental disagreement concerning the participation of the Holy Spirit within the living world. In truth, I am surprised that such an argument has not occurred before now.

Such high emotions are risky, so soon. I will work with Brother Peter to see the matter resolved as expediently as possible. As we approach winter and the colder climes compel us into proximity, it would be dangerous indeed to have such high tensions present. No, I am confident I can ease their disagreements - at least until such time as it will prove useful.

8th November 1349

Much to my relief, the argument of September passed into quietude. Although I am sure the core of their conflict has not been resolved, both Brothers Hob and Ralf seem aware that they have a greater reason to work together than they do in opposition. They are essentially sensible and will doubtless acknowledge how inconvenient a roiling feud would be in the confines of the hermitage. What happy chance to have such a tension ready to reignite, though!

As peace has settled over us and as snow begins to dust the valley sides, I have been able to turn my attention to my studies once again. This is a good time - an inspiring time. I have been most thoughtful.

It has been some time since I last spoke with Our Lady and I feel it is almost time for me to do so. I feel that as the time towards my introduction to Sister Constance looms, I must seek assurance that I am doing all I that I can. My faith is strong, but approval will strengthen it further.

I must pick my moment carefully. I cannot risk being seen or overheard.

11th November 1349

Such sweet melody is Her voice, so small and tiny am I in her presence. I will do Her work! Heavens, Hells, nothing will stop me!

29th December 1349

The celebration of the birth of Our Lord is always a joyous occasion, and this second Christmas proves no different. Sister Agnes and Brother William have truly outdone themselves in the kitchen, though some credit is surely due to our foragers, who were granted the most timely fortune of catching some woodcocks for our feast. I have found myself most partial to the mince pie Sister Agnes has baked and thoroughly occupied watching the group interact.

It is a time for spirits to be raised, and it seems they most truly need it. Something has agitated Sister Apollonia, for while I think her intentions are honest, she seems set to run the hermitage ragged. She has been quick to lend what she may think is a helping hand in the kitchen, though I can see well Sister Agnes has not welcomed the interference. It seems that in times of pressure, Sister Apollonia will return to her old discontent at Sister Agnes's placement above her. For once it has gone further; it reached my ears that Sister Apollonia also proved quite forthright in the matters of the foragers, and Brother Thomas has for once had to be quite firm in rebuffing her efforts at control.

I would imagine this is a discontent that will melt with the snow, but it is useful knowledge regardless. Sister Apollonia in particular is proving herself quite predictable and easy to direct.

In less pleasant news, Brother Fychan has slipped on iced rocks and injured his leg. While he has been most ably seen to by Brother Ralf, his recovery may take some time. His is not the only ailment, for Sister Idonea has fallen quite ill, just as we all needed her to lend aid to the Christmas preparations! It took a measure of effort to not smile when I was given such news. What unfortunate timing is this!

13th January 1350

We have been struck by some ill-fortune, although I am confident the grace of Our Lady will continue to see us through. Heavy snowfall has caused one of the roofs to give way. Fortunately no one was hurt, and Sister Kristiana has been indispensable in her tireless work to restore the hermitage to its full glory.

I cannot help but feel that beneath these trials there is matter that will only strengthen my plans.

8th March 1350

Yet more trials beset us. Two ewes died while giving birth. Brother Fychan, unable to assist as he might, was compelled to watch as the tragedy occurred. Brother Anthony and Brother Lachlann attempted to aid Brother Peter, but they lack the skill and experience to ease a life from the womb. Only one lamb survived the death of its mother; Brother Peter is working tirelessly to see it accepted by a still-living ewe with a healthy lamb of her own. The task holds him firmly.

Brother Ladislaus was quickly put to work butchering the mutton. There was little sense in letting it go to waste, but the taste of its flesh on our tongues was too much for some of my Brothers and Sisters. Those of hardier constitutions welcomed the hearty meal while those who had borne witness to the sheep's passing or were otherwise more sensitive found their appetites spoiled. It was a curious thing to observe. An unexpected display of their character.

I have intervened to some extent by approaching some of my Brothers and Sisters and asking them to help raise the spirits of the hermitage. It has been a trying winter. I am concerned that this difficult period after two years of relative success will cast too great a shadow on our purpose.

Interestingly, I overheard Sister Idonea complaining to herself about the emissions on Brother Peter's sheets this time of year. She was a married woman before joining us, so I would be surprised if she was not aware what such stains signify. I had to suppress a chuckle at her mutterings.

13th May 1350

Once again, I am leaving the comfort of the hermitage to travel to Ulpha. I do so under the veil of acquiring more sheep for the hermitage's fields to replace those we recently lost.

I have in my possession a letter of introduction, addressed to Sister Constance, and once I arrive I will ensure it arrives at its destination. I must confess to a certain level of trepidation that I am unaccustomed to - I have such hopes for all that is to come, and yet at this small, early step, there is the risk that it all may fall apart. If the courier fails in his duties, or if Sister Constance has no interest in her parentage, there would be very little that I could do, and in likelihood I would never even know. My faith is pragmatic as always - I am confident that God's grace will enable me to see Our Lady of Absolution to greatness either way - but I still cannot shake the worries at this uncertain time in my journey.

There is, at least, some consolation in passing the Boundary Stones as always. To see them standing so strong, like a physical manifestation of our Will and Devotion, always moves me and reminds me of the course that led me to this place. Our Lady will prevail. I must be strong.

15th May 1350

Home! The letter is sent. I paid the courier well, and in return received great assurances that my letter would arrive at its destination uninterrupted. The rest is down to Faith.

I returned to the hermitage this afternoon to find the celebrations well underway. Sister Grace seemed somewhat anxious, however, and I only learned the reason for this earlier this evening. She took me aside to confess her guilt and part in a theft - a pin that Sister Idonea had made for Brother Anthony. While I expressed disappointment in her choices, particularly given Sister Idonea's deeply private, sensitive nature, and urged her to return it, I do not think she needs to risk further isolating herself by telling them whence it came, but rather to just let it be a kindness of God that brought it back to them. Whether they will suspect foul play, I cannot say - but it will be interesting to watch nonetheless.

Matters are otherwise progressing as expected.

3rd June 1350

The situation with the pin seems to be resolved, although Sister Idonea has since upset Brother Anthony by rejecting his offers of assistance in weaving. I must admit I am not surprised, given her nature - she rejects even the company of Sister Apollonia when weaving - but Brother Anthony is nonetheless distraught. Sister Agnes has done her best to comfort him, and I suspect she, too, doesn't approve of Sister Idonea's tendency to shut down on her emotions. Whether this is down to a personal inclination towards openness or as an extension of her disagreements with Sister Apollonia, I am not sure.

Perhaps I can encourage her to enlighten me in confession.

15th July 1350

Brother Fychan has come to speak with me on the matter of his leg again. He is having some difficulty with being less active in the hermitage, feeling that he is not contributing as much as the others. With no mundane or holy means seeming to offer relief for his pain, I can offer little comfort, other than to point out that the Lord sends us such challenges for good reason. I also drew his attention to Sister Idonea's tendency towards the lighter end of work, when she is a woman of healthy and able body, and this seemed to give him some matter to think on.

17th September 1350

Brother Fychan has hit on his own project with which to occupy himself. He has set out to equip one of our rooms properly as a scriptorium. I was naturally delighted, and have asked Mark and Ladislaus to render any assistance they can spare in making the items he will need.

2nd October 1350

The first of the sheep breeding has been noted in the fields, and the tensions among the devoted are high. As always, the Devil knows how best to tempt us, but it is the Lord's Will that we resist such temptations. I have noted that Brother Anthony in particular has avoided assisting with that side of work at all this year.

I still have received no word from Constance, although I traveled to Ulpha a few days ago to check once again. I fear I may need to come up with some other ideas to move my plans for the hermitage forward, but I will give it until our fourth anniversary at least before I make any decisions. Travel can be difficult over winter, and it may be that correspondence cannot be sent in turn until the spring. In secret, I fear that perhaps some other fate has overcome my stalwart courier. Although the plague's wave has reduced to a seething fester, it would be the Devil's hand to see my letter lost to sickness.

Brother Peter remains our most confident shepherd, handling the sheep with expertise and appropriate amounts of force.

17th November 1350

The nights draw ever longer. I find myself thankful that Brother Lachlann joined us, as it seems sometimes that with even one pair of hands fewer, we should have difficulty accomplishing the tasks needed that lie outside our strong stone walls.

Too, it seems sometimes that the discussions between Brother Ralf, Brother Hob, and a few others can be overwhelming. I am developing a plan to start secondary discussion, something which will help to elevate the others to the same level of understanding. That will take some encouragement, I think, but perhaps Sister Apollonia can be urged toward it?

I cannot entirely blame them for not wanting to engage with Brother Ralf and Brother Hob, as forceful as they are in their views.

26th December 1350

The celebrations of Christ's Birth were successful as always. Brother Anthony found the draw of the bottle a little more potent this year, and was red-cheeked and exuberant by the end of dinner. I later saw him in close conversation with Sister Agnes. I confess my curiosity is piqued, but I will be patient. If it is a matter that requires my intervention, undoubtedly they will come to me. Sister Apollonia seems similarly concerned, but has not said anything.

I overheard Brother Peter speaking with Brother Anthony about impropriety this morning, although I suspect the pain in his head was as much a lesson as good Peter's lectures.

29th December 1350

Brother Anthony finally came to me this evening, and confessed to several childhood experiences that made him greatly uncomfortable and answered some of the questions I had when I first took him in.

Although his child's eyes clearly did not fully understand the matters that occurred before him, I was able to glean a few pertinent details. On at least one occasion he came across his mother in a state of nudity that he described in such a way that made me suspect her intentions were not entirely motherly. Speaking of it left him shaken, especially in describing his father's anger after.

It was a fascinating exchange, and I had to keep reminding myself that to push him too hard for further details might cause more harm than such information is worth. I must be patient, and take heed, and when the time comes I know he will fall to pieces as first among them.

13th May 1351

Good news! Our Lady be praised, I feel relief unlike any other! I finally received a reply from Constance. She is travelling up this summer and we are to meet in the month of August at Upha. Her words are calm and measured but sincere. It has been all I can do to contain my glee.

It will be fascinating to finally see her, to hear more about the life she has led. I have high hopes that she will be suitable, but even in this state of joy and celebration, I must, must be careful. I must be certain before I introduce her to the rest of the hermitage.

I may speak with Our Lady again soon. The thought strengthens my will.

15th May 1351

The fourth anniversary of our Founding was today. The ceremony was as pleasant as always, and went relatively smoothly. There is a sense of tension in the air nonetheless, of potential. I feel as though the harmony we have obtained rests over a roiling mass of chaos, and we must be careful not to lean too far one way or another, lest we fall to it.

I spoke at length with Our Lady today. Her presence is intoxicating, so much so that I barely realised how many hours had passed until I finally left her presence. It is as if the breath in my chest is made of fine dust, as if I am dry and weary but endless and powerful. I will have my immortality. I will

create Eden and paradise on Earth as intended by God, I shall, nothing can stand in my way now. With Her guidance, the rite of Immurement has been finalised. It now merely awaits a subject.

23rd July 1351

It has been some time since I last wrote in here, but reading the previous thoughts I recorded under the force of her influence, I am reminded yet again to be careful, oh so careful, that no one find these works.

I have noticed that Brother Anthony is spending more time in the kitchen of late, much to the pleasure of Sister Agnes - she is certainly keeping him busy. I imagine that some of what he confided to me he has also spoken with her on, though I do not know how she is managing with the burden of his secrets. It will be interesting to watch their friendship develop.

I am finding it hard to focus, I am so intent on waiting for August.

14th August 1351

Finally, finally, I have met Sister Constance at Ulpha. We spoke at length about the life she has led and I have spoken extensively of the work we have performed at Our Lady of Absolution. I am pleased to find her as pious and as intelligent a young lady as she conveyed herself in her correspondence. She possesses skills in tailoring and weaving which will see her working most closely with Sister Idonea. We prayed together.

Tonight we remain at the Newfield Inn, and tomorrow we shall return to the hermitage. I give thanks unto Our Lady that She has seen fit to place us together. I am eager to begin our work.

15th August 1351

This week I have introduced Sister Constance to the Brothers and Sisters of our hermitage. She has been welcomed as warmly as I could have hoped. Brother Ladislaus, much unlike himself, has commented on how charming and graceful she is, and Brother Ralf has expressed much the same.

The first evening was full of excitement. Brother William quickly set to preparing a special meal with what we had left, and the Core Choir gave an impromptu performance. For just this once, some of the strictness of our routine has been relaxed to help Sister Constance settle. Brother Peter has expressed some doubts about the wisdom of this, but I am confident she will do better with a light touch at first.

Sister Agnes is, of course, greatly affected by the arrival. It is a difficult topic for her, bringing as many dark memories as positive, and I am pleased to say that she has managed to keep a strong outward face. She and her estranged daughter have spent much time together discussing their lives, although I do not believe Sister Agnes has gone into great detail about the nature of her conception. It will be interesting to see how their relationship develops.

Brother Anthony has been exceptionally helpful in making her welcome, going out of his way to show her around and offer to help whenever she is uncertain. Constance and he look likely to become friends.

On the other hand, Sister Idonea has been her usual reserved self - although perfectly polite and civil. I think she has found the suggestion that the two will be working together rather difficult to swallow. She is, after all, an intensely private young lady.

It is strange to see the mix of happiness and uncertainty among them, strange to note who is quick to trust and who still views her as the outsider. I spoke with Our Lady at length last night, and inspired by her presence I have been coming up with plans and ideas to gently sway interactions in order to obtain the desired effect. I am both apprehensive, and oddly excited to be embarking on this stage of the journey. So much is reliant on Constance causing appropriate responses, and I am confident that she will.

21st August 1351

I have noted a tension since last writing here that has piqued my interest. It seems that Sister Apollonia made an overture towards Sister Constance, inviting her confidence on some of the matters that are clearly troubling her, and yet Sister Constance - rightly so, I believe - politely declined to discuss the details of her relationship with her mother. While I believe that Sister Apollonia's intentions were entirely pure, and that she simply wanted to offer the young girl some comfort, she has nonetheless taken this rejection to heart.

I shall be certain to carefully observe how this affects the relations between Sister Constance and Sister Idonea, in turn.

25th August 1351

Sister Idonea has made some complaint to me that Brother Peter's laundry is being presented to her in an usually viscous state. I must have a word with him about these lapses. The aim is not to cause these emissions to stop, after all, but to make sure he is aware they have been noticed and increase his shame at his reactions to dear Sister Constance. I am making a note to comment on her shapely limbs and ask whether he may have seen her bathing - the sight of smooth skin under water may perhaps have incited his difficulties? No? Well, my Brother Peter, you will certainly be thinking on it now.

11th September 1351

How bright and busy the hermitage feels! Sister Agnes has been hard at work in the kitchens all day today, pickling and preserving various food for the winter months. She has involved Sister Constance in nearly every step, and it is warming to see the two of them working so closely together. Neither seem inclined towards physical or verbal displays of affection, and as such there is a delightful awkwardness to the whole affair. Sister Agnes definitely seems to be overcompensating.

If it were not for Sister Agnes's clear discomfort I would consider talking to her about the matter further, but for now, I am keeping my distance and watching events unfold.

15th September 1351

Today I received a confession from Sister Grace that she is finding Constance's increasing interest in her brewery difficult to manage, and is feeling both possessive and jealous. Although I admit I am unsurprised by this, I am intrigued that it has come up so soon. From what I learned of Sister Constance during our correspondence, I assumed most of her work would be in the area of weaving and laundry. Still, it is good a good step in the direction of conflict, and Constance forcing others to have to confront their own weaknesses fits very nicely with my goals.

Brother Peter also seems to be struggling with some of the disruption to his routine. When I spoke with him about the matter of laundry, he confessed to suffering from more nightly emissions, so I have recommended an extra hour of prayer in the evenings to help cleanse himself of such things. Sister Idonea has not commented to me since, so I suspect it is working. Certainly he seems tired.

21st September 1351

Some of our routines are starting to settle again now, although Constance has made some improvements to the standards set around the house and the food. It has clearly not been a conscious decision, but she is of a naturally organised mind and has simply began to alter some of the ways that Sister Apollonia and Sister Agnes have grown accustomed to and continue to use simply out of habit. Sister Agnes is taking this with rather more grace, as Sister Apollonia has argued against most of the changes - until, of course, I have voiced agreement with young Constance. It is always delightful to see how things progress.

Earlier today I noticed Sister Idonea in conversation with Constance about some of Sister Idonea's paintings - Sister Constance asked some greatly insightful questions about the meanings and origins. Sister Idonea, of course, had little patience for such, and quickly grew irritated with the discussion. Constance quickly stopped when she realised she was causing offence, and has tried to give Sister Idonea space since, so this afternoon I put them to work on the laundry together.

These small interactions fascinate me. How clear it is that causing the rift between Sister Apollonia and Constance early was a wise path. If Constance had dared say such things about *her* writing, it might have resulted in forging a genuine connection. So fascinating to see how the same actions between different people produce such vastly differing results.

25th September 1351

I was helping take stock of our food supplies today and have found that we have a far higher than usual amount of berries. Brother Thomas mentioned that he has been helping Sister Constance learn the lay of the land and it is the addition of her helping hands when he has been foraging that has blessed us with such bounty. Evidently he is trying to overcome his difficulties. I must consider ways to adjust this.

5th October 1351

The sheep breeding season is upon us again, and once more I am struck by Brother Peter's masterful way of handling the beasts.

Yesterday I suggested to Sister Constance that perhaps she could use some of the berries she acquired with Brother Thomas in the brewery, and learn how to make cider with Sister Grace. This seems to have been a very effective approach, as Sister Grace has been sulking notably since Constance told her. Both she and Sister Idonea are already heading strongly in the direction that I and Our Lady require of them.

Brother Anthony seems incredibly drawn towards the awkwardness between Sister Agnes and Sister Constance. He is spending more and more time in their presence.

Thinking on my plans for Constance, I have been working more and more on the specific embellishments of the Leviticus ritual that will be necessary. So much of what we are doing is unknown, and I confess to some mild trepidation, but Our Lady has assured me that this path will grant her what she needs, and from that, I can create our Eden.

Sometimes I worry that something will go wrong before then - that I will slip, or fall, or some disease will somehow break the barriers we so carefully erected and destroy us - but I know these fears are unfounded, and I must put them aside and focus on the work of shaping the interactions of my Brothers and Sisters. It is, at least, a fascinating and distracting work to undertake.

12th October 1351

Today there was a very heated argument between the Cripplegates and Constance. Sister Constance made a remark about the Chapel design, describing it as 'quaint' - likely intended as a compliment, but Sister Kristiana was terribly offended and began arguing architecture. I arrived just as Constance was doing her best to try and explain her meaning, and, seeing an opportunity, I quickly agreed that perhaps some of the design was a little old-fashioned, and was sure to note Constance's eye for such work. Brother Mark started angrily telling her why this was not the case. When pointing out that Constance was more traveled than either of them did not cause as much response as I had hoped, I instead switched to quizzing Constance on how she would design a Chapel - entirely hypothetically, of course, just to discuss her artistic vision. She was hesitant, but even so, every word only served to anger the Cripplegates more. Eventually she excused herself and fled, and I was sure to remark on how flighty and inconsistent she could be.

That was several hours ago, now, and neither Sister Kristiana nor Brother Mark have not said a word to her since. Sister Kristiana confessed to me that she finds the preoccupation with Constance's personal aesthetic value - the comments on her grace and manners, for instance - very irritating, and said she felt it should not be so highly prized. I agreed that it was a very shallow way to appreciate a person, and tonight at Mass I intend to speak on judgement.

Interestingly, Brother Ralf also approached me, having heard the argument, mentioning how he thoroughly approved of Constance's critique, finding her educated and insightful. I am unsure what to make of this, but I do not consider it a worrying development.

19th October 1351

Brother Peter came to me today with concerns about Constance and the Cripplegates. For now I have simply dismissed him, which seems to be having the desired effect.

21st October 1351

There has been an interesting development between Constance and Sister Idonea. As usual, Sister Idonea has been feeling the pressures of the weather and the hard, outdoor work, and spending an increasing amount of time inside and out of the way. Although the others have accepted this by now, Constance has been showing increasing levels of concern, frequently asking after her health and suggesting remedies or medicine to try. This has been met with increased levels of irritation and brushing off, and more and more I suspect Sister Idonea is resenting having to share laundry duties.

Sister Idonea is always an interesting one to watch and learn from, as even in confession she is less likely to be open and forthcoming than any of the others - the introverted, private nature to her soul extends even to my care. As such I have to be more careful and more subtle in learning from her.

As always, Sister Apollonia is a useful tool for such. She mentioned a concern to me that Constance is crowding Sister Idonea, and prying in a manner that Sister Idonea is not capable of dealing with. I have told her I will consider this, and think on a way to direct her energies elsewhere. Of course, I will do no such thing.

27th October 1351

Sister Apollonia confessed to me today that her mind had been plagued with terrible thoughts. The sight of the sheep had once again caused her weakness in her bathing routines, and the image of Constance had been seared on her mind, along with all sorts of intimate and forceful encounters. I had to work to keep from smiling to hear this - such a fascinating and genuinely unexpected turn of events. Sister Apollonia's previously unknown sapphic tendencies could be particularly useful - even if they only appear under strain.

10th November 1351

Sister Kristiana's difficulties with Sister Constance appear to have redoubled. Today Constance plucked up the courage to pour oil on troubled waters and placate her. She chose as her means to do so an offer to bring out greater beauty in the decoration of the chapel.

I could have told her, had she asked, how badly this offer would be received, but as it happens she neglected to ask me and has simply made matters worse. I shall be watching Brother Mark carefully over the next week, as his temper in such matters is to be respected. Sister Constance has been here but a few months, and I must now pray that no harm befalls her. There is still much to be done.

I believe I now have the specifics and details necessary for the ritual, although the timing will be crucial. These notes have helped me greatly in staying abreast of social changes within the group, but I must focus more than ever, and always remember the height of what I am striving for.

12th November 1351

There are things we have all overlooked, and the remedy for this is not greater diligence but simply fresh eyes.

Looking at that sentence again, I realise it is rather cryptic, as will always be the case when one sets down an insight. To refresh my memory in future, this was the day that Sister Constance created a disturbance grander than I should have hoped for. There was no way to have foreseen either the cause, her participation, and the reception by the flock to the revelation. Only one whose vision extends far beyond my own could have known what was to happen.

It transpires that Brother Lachlann has spent time amassing a private store of food all his own, stolen from the hermitage's stores, and that the reason this had gone undetected is that the habit began at the beginning of our time here. Our assumptions are based on the levels of stores after his work has been done, in short. In hindsight, the persistent theft seems so transparent as to be laughable.

It was Sister Constance who came upon his store and when she shared her discovery, there was great uproar. It is lucky for Brother Lachlann that I chanced to hear the disruption before it turned to physical aggression. The reception to this news has been one of great betrayal and disgust. Brother Thomas in particular displays anger not with Brother Lachlann but with himself for not having been more observant. Mercifully I was able to calm him, but doubt has taken hold of him - doubt in himself and doubt in the honesty of those around him. He feels that he has been made a fool of and his frustrations were to be channeled the only way he felt he could turn them: onto the brother that has slighted him so. We spent many hours in prayer and confession.

I must remember, indeed, that Brother Thomas might well be prompted to exercise himself on the question of why Constance was looking into hidden and private places. But that is for the future.

The arguments that arose have been smoothed over for now, while I consider what is to come.

15th November 1351

I was visited today by Brother Hob, whose last two nights have been disrupted by resentments and ill thoughts, all directed toward Brother Lachlann. Brother Hob blames himself for having failed to notice his actions, but rightly considers that Brother Lachlann bears the true guilt.

Brother Hob's life prior to the hermitage leads him to dwell on this matter with a unique intensity and, to my great interest, fear.

I shall have to weigh his motivations carefully so that they can best be redirected into Our Lady's purity. Above all the hermitage must have absolution.

18th November 1351

I have had something of a breakthrough with Sister Apollonia. This evening she finally collapsed into tears, and asked me why it was that I chose Sister Agnes for leadership rather than herself. I was

genuinely taken aback to have her question me so directly, and I am somewhat berating myself for not seeing the conversation coming beforehand.

It was easy enough to pacify her, as I do not wish matters to escalate too far too soon. I gave the reasons that she doubtless already knows: That Sister Agnes is a stronger contrast to Brother Peter, and that I believed it would stretch her abilities in a way that would be healthy for the spiritual growth of all. She was quick to shut down her questions, and begged my leave to go to bed and pray and sleep on what she had done. I granted it.

19th November 1351

This morning, Sister Apollonia apologised profusely for questioning my judgement. She said that in her prayer she had seen it was wrong to doubt me, and that she would never bring the matter up again. I solemnly accepted her apology.

This afternoon I was sure to have a conversation with Constance while Sister Apollonia was in the room, and to make references to Sister Apollonia's art and connection to the Divine. Constance looked over at her several times during the conversation, and I am certain that Sister Apollonia noticed this.

3rd December 1351

Sister Kristiana confronted Sister Constance once again today. I had noticed, in the past three weeks, that whenever I stepped into the chapel there seemed to be something new, something finer, something improved, and I had been wondering whether this argument would happen soon.

When I understood what was happening, I complimented Sister Kristiana on her hard work and praised Sister Constance for inspiring her to new heights. I feel sure that they will both take my words to heart.

Sister Apollonia is making every effort anew to befriend Sister Constance, although it does not seem to be working as well as she would like.

10th December 1351

I have had many conversations with Brother Anthony over the past few days. Sister Agnes and Sister Constance, together, give him the feeling of a family around him, I must assume. It is natural under the circumstances that his thoughts should turn to family, of which we have spoken before, but never so deeply, and I begin to perceive the full extent to which his upbringing differs from a Christian one.

His mother is as wanton as any I have heard of, his father suspicious and violent. When I look at the sheer joy on Brother Anthony's face at almost all times, it is difficult to imagine how the one leads to the other.

I shall have to think on this more deeply. It seems to me that unless his mixed reaction to family can be made to apply to Sister Constance, Brother Anthony will be difficult to lead to his role, yet I suspect when he breaks, he will break the hardest.

7th January 1352

I believe it is time for Sister Constance to be better known to some of the wider hermitage. They must be united in their view of her, however different their reasons may prove, not to mention that some time away from the Cripplegates may be for the best for all of us. I suggested that she spend some time assisting Brother Ralf in the Infirmary, and in our discourses prepared her with some reading and philosophical beliefs I thought he might respond well to.

It was as successful as I had hoped. Brother Ralf has become more entranced with someone who seems willing to learn from him; he has always shared his beliefs with Brothers Fychan and Hob, but they debate rather than agree. A man of his convictions will always seek vindication, and it seems he is seeing the chance for such in her. For now I shall let him fill her head with his ways, encourage her to be open-minded to ideas which will be so different to those with which she was raised, and allow him to instil in her a trust I wager he has not granted any of our hermitage.

Some caution will be necessary. Brother Thomas has spent little time with Constance since showing her the land, but he came to me yesterday with concerns regarding all the recent mishaps and disagreements. While he made no accusations, he has noticed that Constance stood at the middle of this discontent, and he is concerned that her presence is proving a disruption. I have issued him reassurance for now, but complimented him on his astute observations. He cannot become too suspicious, too soon.

His sense of betrayal seems to have shaken him deeply despite our conversations; it has only quietened and festered. I must tread a fine line between encouraging this and pacifying him. His pride in his position and his scrutiny of others will serve well in the time to come. The balance is that he must remain at one with the family, but he must also stand to tolerate that which he perceives as the cause of disharmony for just a little while longer. Nonetheless, when the time comes, the initiative to act, of both him and others like him, will be essential.

18th January 1352

The first brews of the year are ready, which includes the fruits of Sister Constance's efforts under Sister Grace's guidance. While Sister Grace's work is excellent as always, she is ever mindful of our supplies, ever mindful of her tried and tested techniques. Sister Constance lacks such inhibitions in her brewing, and many of the hermitage have been only happy to indulge her. The result has been a brew more flavoursome than Sister Grace's, and while I may identify it as perhaps a little brash, I believe the change has been found most refreshing by everyone.

They are all so quick to compliment Constance, so quick to compliment her work, and I need to do so little to keep them exuberant, so little to keep Constance humble. There is even less I must do to fan the flames of Sister Grace's jealousy, she who has worked so hard for us for so many years, now overlooked by the newcomer lacking in all finesse. I know that Brother William has tried to calm her frustration, but there is only so much he can do. For now, Sister Grace will no doubt remember how her years of hard labour went unappreciated next to Constance's frivolities.

Soon, I think.

21st January 1352

Brother Hob's concerns about our food supplies continue. He is running Sister Agnes quite ragged with his interference; today I heard him down in the kitchen, going so far as to suggest alterations to our diet and even to her recipes! This suggestion has gone entirely unappreciated, to the surprise of perhaps nobody but Brother Hob.

I may in time need to steer this tension towards Constance, so that Brother Hob may see her as a threat to the natural order of things, so that Sister Agnes sees her own daughter as the cause of these tribulations, but I shall watch for now.

28th January 1352

If I was surprised at seeing Brother Ladislaus, so taciturn, so withdrawn, find the time to speak with Constance, then now I find myself truly bewildered! Constance has spoken with me of the time they spend together, of how he has made the extra effort so she will feel welcome at the hermitage. With all of the recent mishaps, he had somewhat slipped my mind until I took care to observe their interactions. When they talk and even when they do not, if they are near each other at mealtimes or services, so often is his eye drawn to her. Sometimes in idle observation, on other occasions he will look to her when someone has said something worthy of reaction, as if gauging her response before that of any other.

I had anticipated one of the men amongst our number falling prey to Constance's beauty and grace, but would never have anticipated that it might be Brother Ladislaus. The unexpected nature of this affection may prove useful; I am sufficiently aware of his former life and what took him from it to know that he will be struggling with this turn of events. Affection will cloud a man's judgement and weaken him. These are not qualities I perceive him as embracing without a fight if they are brought to his attention. I am convinced that under his dour disposition he is a volatile man, and all that must be done is that he be directed.

8th February 1352

These months have been so busy, so fraught, I have barely had time to stop and think. At some point I must take the time to ruminate further on plans and insights, but for now I will continue to record, to better aid my intentions.

Sister Constance visited with me today. While Brother Ladislaus continues to take up part of her time, her drive to better understand the teachings of Our Lord has kept her close by Brother Ralf in the evenings. I have been waiting for indications that this would bear fruit.

Indeed, I confess that I had begun to despair of it. But, as Brother Ladislaus surprised me, Brother Ralf was entirely dependable. His ideas are always fascinating, but they can be relied upon eventually to seem out of bounds no matter who his listener may be, and Sister Constance's faith is particularly well bounded by thought.

I spoke with her about his ideas at length and took care not to be the first to speak the word 'heresy'.

I anticipate it will be some weeks before she brings herself to utter the word again, to his face.

14th February 1352

I have been trying of late to fully fathom Brother Anthony's history, in order to better direct him when the time comes. He responds less and less to my questions as we near the truth, however, and is starting to show resentment at my attempts. I haven't seen much fire from him before, but this may be a pivot for him, where I can brace a lever.

I shall have to consider our next conversation carefully, in order to get the most of it. It is possible that Brother Thomas may serve this purpose; I think the two have been speaking more of late.

23rd February 1352

Sister Constance's love of brewing seems proof again to me that our path is blessed and that Our Lady's plan will work. I have watched Sister Grace over the past week with growing interest, first noticing the nascent symptoms a few days ago, and have realised that for Sister Grace, privacy is not merely desired but essential.

I believe that it is her time alone and apart from others which allows her to maintain her remarkable equilibrium. And I believe this because I have seen her receive less and less as Sister Constance's passions place her in the brevery more and more. It seems to me that it will not take a great deal to have Sister Grace in readiness, but this must be balanced with other things. Perhaps other distractions can be introduced which will not seem as significant to Sister Grace?

This merits work.

27th February 1352

A breakthrough, one I had been somewhat concerned about - for the first time, Sister Agnes has confessed to me that her feelings about her daughter are beginning to become complicated.

Still frustrated by Brother Hob undermining her authority in the kitchen, Sister Agnes has been trying to lose herself by talking with Constance about her life before the hermitage. I suspect she was secretly hoping to form a bond of mutual understanding over hardship, but once again the forces of God and fate have shown me fortune, for before coming here, Constance's life was simple, if not idyllic. Certainly, she has not known the hardships that her mother has, having largely been sheltered in the Abbey.

What might have been a strengthening of their connection has turned to Sister Agnes's envy instead - a bitter resentment that she has tried to suppress and to hide, but had to release to me in confession as it grew too potent for her to manage alone. She spoke of her sister, of the fortunes they had, and of how she does not feel that Sister Constance is truly grateful enough for the sacrifices that were made for her.

Having thought at length how I might best exacerbate this, I have determined that on the morrow I will speak with Constance and warn her that her expressions of gratitude and warmth towards her mother are making Sister Agnes uncomfortable, and reminding her of the sacrifices she made brings her pain. Constance will undoubtedly stop all mention of such at once, and the rift may grow. Yes, I feel this is the best way to proceed.

4th March 1352

Already lambing season is upon us, and in a rare moment of quiet, I thought I would write further on my wider plans and ideas.

As I have written before, I believe that all parts of the necessary rituals are complete and ready, although I do not yet feel that their participants have reached the tipping point. Another month, perhaps as many as three, and I believe I will have been able to slide them all into place, as if part of some puzzle box, and Our Lady will feed.

Great is Her hunger, but great is their sin.

In between the work I am doing, when moments of exhaustion have not driven me to sleep, I find myself thinking about the path that has led me here. Those first moments of discovery, the first books that I opened and found such knowledge within. How I would kneel and pray and ask the Lord our God for a sign if I should stop, how I would hold a candle to the wind and ask Him to extinguish the flame if this was not a path He meant for me to take.

The flame held. I have had no signs, only the continued glory that is my quest for knowledge. I will make myself an Eden, will rise above the rest of humanity and seek this power anew. The first time I looked upon Our Lady, I knew that I had to complete this work. It is the most important task ever granted to man, and I will live forever in grace and paradise. The thrill of balancing the lives and ire of the hermitage in the meantime is a delightful addition, although it is not the extent of my goal.

How easy it is to puppet them, to pull on strings and whisper suggestions. How blind they are, how trusting.

My candle burns low, and I tire. I have much to do on the morrow, and no doubt the stresses of the lambing will present many opportunities. I endeavour not to miss a single one.

8th March 1352

The tensions that I observed continue to build, and how right I was that lambing would only exacerbate these matters.

Brother Peter has complained to me of dark visions, and I can see the exhaustion and strain in his eyes as he shakily confesses what sights the Devil has sent him. As the evening rolled in, in the red haze of the twilight sky he witnessed Constance stood among the flock of sheep, and he described an incident in a cattle shed that came back to him as if it were replaying before his very eyes - he saw blood on her white robes between her legs, the sin of womanhood flowing freely, and felt the heat of her wetness on

his fingers. He sobbed as he told me this, trembling with the force of the memory. He begged me to assure him that it was a test, that she is not the darkness at the heart of the flock as he had seen and feared.

I told him that we will pray.

Brother Anthony, I note, stares at the lambing as if he is blind.

17th March 1352

I have noticed that Sister Apollonia is seeming increasingly flushed and erratic when around Constance, and noted her increasing the amount of time she spends with me. The flagellation is not reaching a point where she is unable to do her work, but I suspect Sister Idonea is once again washing blood out of sheets. Although I am pleased to see how affected she is, her constant desire to be close to me does sometimes make it rather more difficult to manipulate the others as I require.

Matters between Brother Ralf and Constance are also reaching a new height of tension. Her discomfort with his more extreme ideals has seen her withdrawing, only last night after Mass he caught her for a conversation, and I heard her utter the word 'heresy' before she fled. It is less anger that I sense in him, and more a bitter, bitter disappointment.

Things are falling into place. The Cripplegates openly show resentment towards her, and Brother Peter continues to seem exhausted and lost. Brother Hob has not been the same since it was first revealed that Brother Lachlann was hiding food - although I am not yet sure what will be the final way in to provoke him. Brother Thomas I believe I have convinced that the source of the disquiet comes solely from Constance, and this is a thought I must continue to seed in his head. Similarly, Brother William's resentment at the fighting is clear, and though he tries to ease the tension, it is not hard to restoke those fires again.

Brothers Ladislaus and Fychan may prove my greatest challenges. While I feel I need some further matter to nudge Sister Agnes over the edge, Brother Ladislaus's unexpected affection towards Constance may blind him.

There is much more to be done, and yet we are reaching a crescendo.

24th March 1352

The issue of Brother Ladislaus may well have solved itself tonight.

He overheard Brother Ralf making a disparaging comment about Constance's dedication, and such rage rose within him that even I was taken aback. He struck Brother Ralf, knocking him to the ground, and if I had not been present I fear it might have gone further. As it was, he went for a walk for some hours, and then returned to discuss his concerns with me.

He has noted that his affection for Constance seems to be weighing on his temper. It took only a few suggestions from myself to lead him towards questioning her nature - so often she is at the heart of

conflict, conflict that has disrupted our Godly life here. How easily she has been able to disrupt paths and - in a nod to Brother Ladislaus's own tormented history - how she wears such a face of innocence while doing so. He wishes for cleansing, to purge himself of all matters that cloud his judgement so, and I promised to think hard on what step to take. I suspect he likens her to a distraction, another test of his unwavering faith and one that he seems to be failing.

Speaking with Brother Fychan, I am relieved of some of my concerns there, when he uttered the opinion that Constance makes the others in the hermitage foolish and blinds them to their better sides. It was said entirely without venom, and yet I could hear the frustration in his tones. With the others boiling over, I am certain I can lead him to participate as well.

It will not be long now, I am certain.

26th March 1352

After all the conflict, I have finally worked out the way to tip Sister Agnes from resentment to destruction.

I intend to tell her that I will be replacing her as head of the Sisters. Constance will take her place come the next anniversary of our arrival. It will be easy to frame the matter as something she wanted - often she has felt the burden of her position, and expressed doubt at her appointment, and so this will 'relieve' her of this burden while passing it on to one who is more qualified. After all, Constance is not weighed down by the pains of the past as Sister Agnes is, is she not? Is she not so devout and graceful and right to take up the position?

Yes, I will talk with her first thing tomorrow.

27th March 1352

Sister Agnes has awkwardly agreed that perhaps Constance is more qualified. I could see the envy burning in her eyes. For now it is just a suggestion, just a possibility. I will not warn her before I make the announcement.

12th April 1352

Today I made the announcement. I was careful to time it, as it has been two weeks since I spoke with Sister Agnes on the matter and have not made a further sound as to my plans. Long enough for her to worry, but perhaps think that I have changed my mind. The announcement was met with surprise by some, including Brother Ladislaus.

Constance herself came to speak with me after, nearly in tears. I realise now how little I have written of my manipulations of her, how much I have focused on the work I do with the others. Perhaps it is because Constance is so easy to twist? She is so young, so uncertain in herself and so desperate in her want to do what is good and right. She told me that she does not feel ready for this, that she does not

want to take such a thing from her mother, and that she fears the Brothers and Sisters of the hermitage do not think her worthy.

For a moment I was caught unprepared, so used to her trusting in me so implicitly, so absolutely, but after a brief moment I was able to recover and convince her otherwise. I told her once more that the doubts and dislikes she sees from the others are all in her own mind, that I have heard nothing but good things from them. She confessed she fears that she may be addled in some way, so far from truth her perception strays, but I assured her it was nothing more than youthful uncertainty and was as normal.

The more she doubts herself, the more trust she places in me. I have no concern that I will not be able to control her until the end.

18th April 1352

Sister Grace came to me this morning in such a state that for a moment I worried matters had escalated without me, but it quickly became clear that the source of her distress was a dream - a dream of her mother, of the losses she has experienced, and the fury that it brought against Constance. She clearly was filled with shame and anger in equal measures, losing control for a moment and heatedly telling me how Constance is always underfoot in the brevery, always there to keep her from getting a moment's peace and quiet, and that she is tactless and inconsiderate. I assured her that I had spoken to Constance about giving her space before and would do so again.

This afternoon I told her instead that Sister Grace was having a difficult time and would appreciate a little more company.

Alas, I suspect the latter conversation may have been heard by Brother William, which could prove a problem. He is one of those more likely to understand my purposes, at least, so I do not worry too much.

In other matters, Brother Anthony has told me nothing further, but I have noted him staring listlessly at passages of the Old Testament when he is not occupied in work. I suspect that, while I may never know the full extent of his history, the work I needed to carry out has been accomplished, and only my innate thirst for knowledge remains unsated.

It has been too long since I last saw Our Lady, but I do not dare stop my guidance. This is the most critical of times.

25th April 1352

Sister Agnes came to me in triumph today, along with Sister Apollonia - a connection I had not foreseen, but it turns out to have worked to my advantage greatly. They both expressed concerns about Constance and myself, as Sister Apollonia believes that she has been trying to seduce me.

It was a task not to laugh aloud, but I listened in concern, and made certain to have some grave worries in turn - perhaps, I told them, some of the innocent touches that I thought merely part of her

nature were actually more concerning than I had thought? Sister Apollonia expressed that she thinks I am too pure to see to her wickedness, and they both were quick to assert that she does not make contact so with the other men of the hermitage.

I told them that I would speak with Brother Peter for his views and consider the matter carefully, and encouraged them to do the same. Oh, to hear that conversation! But I trust I have set enough in motion now. They are uniting together against her. Everything is going as planned.

1st May 1352

I have spent the last few days speaking regularly with Brother Thomas and Brother Ladislaus. The chaos and tensions among the group is making daily life difficult, but more and more I am convinced that waiting until our anniversary celebrations is the most prudent course of action. Brother Thomas is clearly worried, but holding back, and Brother Ladislaus's affection is starting to turn to concern. He fears his judgement is being clouded, and I have only need to stoke those fears.

Sister Kristiana stomps around the hermitage, sharp-tongued to anyone who interrupts her. Sister Apollonia seems desperate for my attention and affection, while Sister Agnes is a storm in the kitchen. Brother Ralf broods, glaring dourly at Constance. Brother Hob is more and more uncomfortable in her presence.

All is building. All is falling.

13th May 1352

Tomorrow night I embark upon my true voyage into the unknown. Immortality and paradise beckon on the other side.

The Brothers and Sisters of Our Lady of Absolution have told me they wish to speak with me as one tomorrow. I am ready. Let us hope they are.

14th May 1352

I am overwhelmed. I have crossed a barrier into a new land, and only the coming of the dawn will tell me exactly what this bloody violence, this holy work has wrought.

Tonight all was done as should be done. I followed the instructions of Holy Scripture and Our Lady precisely. I have done as requested. I have done as I was asked. As Abraham stood over Isaac and prepared to plunge in the blade, so have I stood wielding my own.

No voice commanded me to stop, however, and so I plunged. If I were not meant to have done as I have done, then He would have intervened. He would not have guided me to this.

My faith is strong, my will is pure. It is only base, mortal weakness that makes me less. This, I must overcome if I am to be worthy.

After these months of careful encouragement, the scapegoating ritual was accepted and performed most enthusiastically by my brothers and sisters. They indulged in their sinful desires and in doing so, liberated themselves and cast them onto the vessel. In accordance with the higher will, I had them take communion, drinking deep of the prepared draught. I bade them return to their chambers, where, as I hear them now, they sleep the pure sleep of the clean. They are closer to God now than before their very conception.

Tonight they will sleep soundly and awaken tomorrow, as innocent as babes. They will remember nothing of this. The vessel has been immured in her pitiful state where she will be taken by Our Lady and, with her, our sins. As the goat is cast into the wilderness and into God's embrace, so has her body and soul been offered unto eternity.

Never will I view them the same, having seen what they truly desire. Matters I long suspected, yes, and none of their choices surprised me, and yet to see it all enacted in the flesh - upon the flesh, upon her flesh - was a moment of both mortal dread and ecstatic joy. The Devil has moved within them. Never have I seen such malicious hunger through forced copulation, such eager delight in carving the flesh from another. For my records, I must detail their fascinating choices, although I cannot imagine what darkness might lessen this memory in my mind.

It was Sister Agnes who moved first, as I long suspected hers was the dam that would break, and in seeing violence from mother to child the others would find their actions easier. The knife she took from the kitchen was sharp, and Sister Agnes is accustomed to cutting flesh. Long scores were made in Constance's cheeks, across her nose and forehead - deep and disfiguring. I was careful to make sure that no single one of them caused her too much harm - it would not have done to have her die before the ritual was finished - and so I encouraged them to let the wounds they inflicted be symbolic.

With Sister Agnes done, shaking, Brother Mark came next, his anger hard to withhold. He clutched his sister close before he approached, wielding one of the great hammers with which he would usually strike stone. Down the instrument came unto the vessel's ankles, hobbling her. The scream she made at this I feared might appeal to their mercy, but no - their rage and righteousness held firm, and Sister Kristiana stepped forward. Her actions were far more controlled, and as Constance's hand was laid upon a slab, with expert precision Sister Kristiana broke each bone with a hammer and chisel.

Brother Hob stepped up next, his sense of righteous justification mingling with fear as he brought forth the shearing scissors and hacked off her long, dark hair - and what was not cut was torn. I had had my uncertainties about the man's will to carry out the task, but once the course of action had been settled upon, his was the voice raised to allay the consternation of others. He was the first of them to be vocal in the act also, pouring his scorn onto the vessel, that she was a festering sore on the hermitage, and that she must be cut out.

By this point, Brother Lachlann had drawn his own knives, and furtively he moved forward to slide those blades under her fingernails, prising them off. He too spoke to her, although his voice was too low to be heard. She pleaded with him, sobbing, but he did not relent.

Sister Grace took the knife from Sister Agnes, and the chisel from Sister Kristiana. When she forced Constance's mouth open, for a moment I thought the girl's jaw might break, but a tooth gave first instead, holding her gaping and helpless as Grace cut out her tongue. So much blood covered the white robes of both women that I worried she might die or drown, and I called Brother Ralf forward next, as I knew he would cause pain without as much damage.

I was correct, although I had underestimated just how vicious he was in his cruelty. Not once did he draw blood, twisting her limbs and using pressure points to draw out screams that echoed across the valley. The whole time, he spoke of how disappointed he was, how much more she could have been - how she had betrayed him.

It was Brother Peter who came next, barely able to hold himself back. He did not say a word, but tore off what remained of her robe and raped her. The contortions of his face made him look as if a demon, the grunts past animalistic and into a raw and violent need.

Sister Apollonia followed, although she also took from Sister Agnes her knife, bending down to see the blood that was coming from Constance's ruined maidenhood. And to that remaining maidenhood she took the knife, cutting away pieces of flesh until the scapegoat let out screams that I had not heard any human make.

Sister Idonea stepped forward to follow this, looking more curious than angry or upset. As I watched her draw a knife down the scapegoat's arms and torso, I saw her looking at the wounds more than any other, examining them as if she were considering a mix of dyes. I felt proud, then, although not for the last time that night. Proud at how well I had selected my flock, and how well I had turned them to this great and terrible task.

With such wounds as she was already suffering, it was Brother Fychan who next came forth, and his choice gave me little surprise. Those wide orbs that stared at him in terror were put out, and the scapegoat faced the remaining few in darkness.

Brother Anthony came next, half sobbing, half staring through her. His eyes locked on her chest, and with a whimper he latched into her teat, suckling like a babe. Only as his mouth worked, so did his jaw, and in time those strangled screams moved through the valley again as he chewed and gnawed off that which once might have sustained him.

He stayed there for some minutes, rocking back and forward, clutching her desperately.

It was as he left her that I saw what was in Brother William's hands, and beckoned him forth. He carried a needle and thread, and I took a moment to briefly wonder which space or orifice he might choose to seal. Fascinatingly, he chose her mouth - though her tongue had been removed, still she was able to scream, and within ten minutes or so he quietened this noise.

With so much damage done, she lay there limply, silent and broken. Brother Ladislaus stepped forward then, lifting the scapegoat and placing her onto the pyre. He told her she was a witch, and that her actions in the community had condemned her and sealed her fate long ago. Through her, their sin would be purified - the scapegoat would elevate them all. And through fire, she too would be purified.

He lit the wood beneath her and the smell of burning flesh filled the air.

Finally, it was Brother Thomas who stepped forward - grim-faced as he had been throughout the night, sombre, but wearing that same expression of doing what must be done that I saw so long ago when I first met him. His was a hunting knife, and before the fire could rise too high for him to approach, he made two deep, long slashes, and disemboweled the scapegoat. Though he spoke, the words were too quiet over the crackle of burning, and I did not catch the final words to her.

They drank, then. The fire was not hot enough to kill her quickly, and as they left for their beds - walking sightlessly, thoughtlessly, held fast by the power of the ritual - I was able to cut her free, and carry her to my chamber.

In accordance with the rites made clear to me, I took the scapegoat's body and immured her beneath my chamber within the very foundation of the hermitage. In accordance with the understanding I possess, I did all that was necessary.

I am but a servant to an unknowable will. I will create Paradise.

2nd Cycle

15th May 1352

Today a new age begins in the hermitage of Our Lady of Absolution. I look forward to seeing my people again once I return. After they fell asleep last night, I stole away to the land outside the hermitage to see in the dawn. Resting at the point where the road to Ulpha reaches a peak, my role in yesterday's work done, I looked around myself, and it was impossible not to smile.

The plague came to that village not long ago, and those fields they no longer have the men to work begin their overgrown return to the pastoral wildness of Eden. Around our boundaries the world readies itself for the purge I have known would come since I saw in Avignon the wickedness of even the Most Holy.

Sister Constance's part is done, and while I admit an inclination to mourn her, I feel it would be counterproductive. By her sacrifice and gift she has earned Our Lady's favour, and by that act so have we. Aside from that, my understanding of the way our Lady's Power flows gives me cause to believe that our vessel, whilst not living, has not even yet died.

It has been my custom since first I had my letters to record my years in this way, but this is the beginning of a new era. My old record shall end, just as the record before we arrived in Duddon was ended. I shall bury the leaves that came before this when I return; they are a guide I no longer need.

In a new era, new rules apply. We do not now live under the covenants of the Gospels any more than under the Jews' Testament. It is our blessed state to create something new to guide us.

16th May 1352

Until now I never truly understood why one's study is known as a retreat.

The working of Our Lady, in concert with the draught, has stripped their memories from them. This is not only of the deed, but of everything since, so far as I can determine, the second anniversary of our founding, and it is that which they believe has happened. Not only this, but the land here seems to agree with them.

And yet beyond the boundary stones, the reclamation of the fields of Ulpha by neglect still seemed strong and well - or was Our Lady's gift only given completely once I returned to the hermitage? Sometime soon I must venture outside again for long enough to see.

I nearly slipped so many times before I was able to retreat inside here and marshal my thoughts. With that done, however, I believe I can prepare. And yet I find myself beset with doubt. My doubt is perhaps a sinful one, at heart, as I contemplate the path my researches revealed, the divinities with which I entreat, and the question of their will.

I had speculated that our promised future might indeed be, in its nature, cyclical. It fit the logic and the understanding which I had. Yet I could not reconcile myself to the idea; in my heart, as an article of

faith, it did not seem a feasible way for the pattern to go. By arrangement with Our Lady, I am apparently outside of the cycle, and yet, I suspect that I am not.

There is no mark on my body by the absence or presence of which I may be certain, and so I can only write at this time that I believe myself to have been restored like the others. It is, after all, manifestly the case that Brother Fychan's leg troubles him again, though he had grown sturdy once more under Brother Ralf's ministrations.

"But the goat on which the lot for Azazel fell shall be presented alive before the LORD, to make atonement upon it, to send it into the wilderness as the scapegoat."

There is no mention within the Holy Text that the participants who cast the goat into the wilderness should be cleansed of their memory as well as their sin. Unless, of course, sin resides within memory. There is, of course, a risk of satisfaction in the deeds which have been undertaken becoming pride, kindling thereby new sin to replace the old. It may simply be that we are granted a way to avoid this, so that the assembled company remains pure for a longer time.

I must meditate on this further.

26th May 1352

The more I return to my researches, the more I see that I do not yet have all the information that I need. Yet for much of the day, at present, I am lost in thought, and this in spite of the fact I cannot come to a certain conclusion. I am sure that my brothers and sisters have begun to note my disposition. Some among them are more perceptive than I had given them credit for. Only a month has passed since, by their perception, we have celebrated our second anniversary. I should be joyful!

I shall endeavour to keep the weight of my thoughts to the privacy of my cell. I cannot allow my confusion to influence them. I do not want to consider what any changes to events they do not know have happened may do to them.

In spite of this, however, I have a duty to their care that I must not overlook. We have traversed this cycle but once, and we have acted in only one fashion. Doing so restored us to what we had been. Is this the true intent of the rituals? Is this our immortality, our paradise? Or is this a divine hand offering us another chance to purify ourselves more perfectly, sensing that we are close enough to have almost succeeded?

After all, I should be surprised if I were ever to find an agent as likely to provoke fury from all gathered as our Constance was.

Brother Ralf shall make a fine scapegoat this cycle. But the next, who? It could be Brother Lachlann easily enough, or perhaps Sister Idonea if her bond with Sister Apollonia can be broken. I fear it is not - can not be - too soon to consider these things, to make arrangements. In time I shall need to consult others, or perhaps to descend into what remains of Ulpha and begin with the village, though such an undertaking will be much more difficult.

14th June 1352

The more time I spend with my brothers and sisters, the more I grow aware of their ignorance. They truly do not remember anything of the events that happened a month ago. I would have expected their souls and minds to have been lighter so that we could better work towards our closeness to God, but they seem beset by the same sins as they have always been. With their ignorance of what we have done together, so too have they revert to spiritual idiocy. Even the last two years of work has been forgotten and all evidence of it removed. What benefit has this Divine act brought to us? Has all my work been in vain? To what end would the Divine approach me, place me upon this path, and watch me fulfil its every desire only to have it removed?

Brother Ralf's arrogance continues to irk those with whom he speaks. Sister Grace remains as guarded yet as needful of validation as she ever has been. I took it upon myself to watch Brother Lachlann more closely, hiding myself with my greater knowledge, and I observed him removing food from the foragers' stashes and secreting it to the store whose presence was revealed to all of us barely half a year ago.

Rather than finding clarity with the passage of time, instead I find myself more confused.

13th July 1352

I have struggled too much with my questions. Around me, my flock repeat themselves - their behaviours and their conversations leave my mind reeling. Although it is not within my capacity to recall every word of every passing discussion, I feel that I listen again to a sermon written and repeated each third Sunday of Evensong, as the least faithful of Avignon's preachers tended to perform.

I have done my utmost to repeat my actions. As with last time, Sister Grace approached me to confess the theft of Brother Anthony's pin on the eve of our second celebrations. As before, I advised her to return the pin subtly and pray for forgiveness so as to not arouse unnecessary negative reactions.

As before, Brother Anthony was later hurt by rejection from Sister Idonea, to whom he had developed an innocent fondness after her gift. Her somewhat callous dismissal of him from her work left him confused.

As before, Brother Fychan confided in me of his fears that he cannot work as hard as he feels is necessary to contribute towards the hermitage's success. As before, I consoled him, and as before, I found myself drawing attention to Sister Idonea's lack of involvement. Following the conversation, when I was once again alone in my cell, I was compelled to lay on my cot and attempt to pick apart the threads in my mind.

Am I insane? Have I been gifted with foresight? Are these moments truly repeating, or have I been gifted with some cruel prescience?

I know of Sister Idonea's true nature. I have seen her indifference and secret delight in the emotionality of others. I witnessed its blatancy in the years that followed and seem to once again be repeated. Did I,

before, draw Brother Fychan's attention to it in such a way? Is this the first time I have written like this? Is this simply the first time I have knowingly experienced this repetition?

I must meditate further. If I should fail in finding my own resolution, it will be time again to speak to Our Lady.

1st August 1352

Although I do not wholly understand the mechanisms at work, I find that my mind is settling into an uneasy acceptance of them. In truth, it has transcended mere confusion and is now settling into fascination.

Far from a rude purging of minds and deeds, Our Lady favours us with her powers over eternity. When she was provided with the Heart of the vessel, she turned back the flow of Time itself, rendering Time Past into Time Still to Come for our land and all minds within it, sparing only my mind, which retains the ethereal strand of its own awareness. All is reset, and all may be rebuilt exactly as before, then wiped away, and rebuilt, and the rest for all time.

Thus far I have all I can to ensure that things continue as they have done before. I am playing the role of myself as only I can. I continue to guide and advise as the plan requires.

It is the case that I do not have all of the answers I need to build an answer to greater questions upon. Nonetheless, I must be sure that a slip will not jeopardise what we have earned before I can seek out these secrets. Though I crave the certainty that these facts would provide me, I must first ensure that a cyclic repeat is not an aberration, or my experiments could yet damn us all. It will be at least four years, then, this cycle and the next, before I can begin to frame the greater picture, and while I recoil from that length of uncertainty, it is nonetheless called for.

It is my weakness which sees me falter when I do. I must strive to overcome this and become more worthy. In the interim, Our Lady awaits, and communion with her may be the balm my frustrated soul presently demands.

10th August 1352

I have been refreshing my mind on matters relating to Our Lady, her nature, and by her power the nature she imposes on those within her influence, including the separation of the Heart, Spirit and Soul. It begs further questions. Even if Time itself were to be brought back upon itself, as further observations bear out, the Sinful hearts of all here would act as eternal keepers of the records of their lives and their sins. I suspect, therefore, that the inclusion of the draught was essential in ensuring that the troublesome Hearts are kept silent of the Sin they recently bore.

8th September 1352

With enough time free of distraction this evening, I was able to speak with Our Lady and seek what answers she would deign to give me. Ours is a relationship the likes of which she had never previously

engaged in, and so our answers are few, but I anticipate that coming cycles will give both of us greater understanding. I think also that our arrangement may be renegotiated in time to come?

In the meantime, other questions are assuaged. Sister Constance will be returned to me, healed of her wounds and as ignorant of what has transpired as the others, when it is time. It is not required of me to nominate scapegoat after scapegoat, nor to collect another group when this one has been exhausted.

It is possible, then, to continue this for as long as could be needed to attain perfection. The thought is the balm I was hoping for, though we purge ourselves by scapegoat fifty times or more.

I shall have to consider what else would be wise to ask for. The Hermitage's trust is in me.

2nd October 1352

The first of the sheep breeding has been noted in the fields, and the tensions among the devoted are high. As always, the Devil knows how best to tempt us, but it is the Lord's Will that we resist such temptations. Brother Anthony, as before, has avoided assisting with that side of work at all this year.

It was in my memory that I set out to Ulpha at around this time, and so I did again, telling Sister Grace I should fetch in such herbs as she required. This may have been my greatest slip to date, as she remarked that she had been intending to ask if I would do so in the near future, and expressed surprise that I had named the precise items she wished for this time, as she is experimenting with a new flavour. I made light of it with a joke, but I must be more careful. It would not do to provoke such questions too often.

What is shocking here to me is the state of Ulpha. Consulting my observations at the beginning of this cycle, I remind myself that I had some questions regarding the world outside the boundary stones, my theories at that time in turmoil from the new information, in danger of being swamped in confusion. With this trip I have secured myself another answer.

The world outwith our boundaries has moved on. Fields once left fallow have been ploughed under, seeded, and are being harvested now. More of the wild land has been reclaimed by the poor sinners of Ulpha, who struggle on through the Lord's tests, all unknowing that Our Lady has granted a better path to a group very near them.

I admit that I find myself admiring their struggle now as I never did before I knew there was a better way. But they are not my concern. Cannot be my concern. My work is with my flock, and not with the sheep outside our boundaries, wild and unkept by any worthy hand.

Brother Peter remains our most confident shepherd, handling the sheep with expertise and appropriate amounts of force.

26th December 1352

Brother Anthony kindled his friendship with Sister Agnes over several mugs of Sister Grace's good beer once again, to the suspicion of Sister Apollonia. Watching them, I remembered doing so the first time.

wondering if this might become a difficulty, or if it would develop into something useful to our project here.

This time, knowing as I do the path that young man's doubts will lead him on, I could simply enjoy the moment. Not everything of the project needs me to steer it, and that is a thought which I sorely needed to be reminded of.

I overheard Brother Peter speaking with Brother Anthony about impropriety this morning. Did that happen last time? Or did Brother Peter notice my own fascination with the scene, and feel himself urged into action, to demonstrate his fidelity to Our Father's laws?

2nd March 1353

It is uncanny. The further we progress in this second 1351, the stronger my sense is that all this has happened before. I want, so badly and so deeply, to break this repetition, to say something shocking and jolt the hermitage from its twice-trod path. And yet I cannot, for I do not know, yet, if to do so would be to break everything.

I am sure things will change once work begins again. Had Our Lady not preserved Constance, I should even now be at work, guiding Brother Ralf into those few areas of the hermitage in which he does not already appear to grant us the benefit of his opinions, ensuring that feeling against him begins to rise at the correct rate among all concerned. Yet Sister Constance shall accomplish this in much less time, and she is not arrived.

In the meantime my task is to undergo and survive the torture of Tantalus. I am so close, yet I can do nothing to bring things closer, and much to move further from success.

All shall change in August, at least. And in May, my trip to Ulpha shall give me a chance to let down my vigilance and enjoy a few days where a simple slip from what has gone before can cost me nothing.

6th April 1353

Once Brother Lachlann's hiding place is known, it is hard to believe we all overlooked it for such a long time. Brother Peter engaged me in conversation quite near it today, and I must admit that when Brother Thomas passed us by, my attention was drawn to his movements. It felt quite impossible that he should not stumble upon it.

And yet he did not - as, of course, he did not when this happened before. My responses are swiftly becoming more guarded than ever before, and I do find myself a little resentful of that. It is my burden to carry, however, and like the others it shall be lifted when the scapegoat draws more of the attention than I.

12th May 1353

Returning once again to Ulpha, I found myself struck by the difference just two years can make. Last October, concerned as I was chiefly with the mistake I had made in dealing with Sister Grace, I purchased the herbs required, stayed for a single night, much in thought on my slip, and returned, my attention inward throughout.

This time I sat happily, instead, in the common room of the Newfield Inn, not going up to my lodged room until the fire had dwindled nearly to nothing and the villagers were making their way home by starlight. There is chatter and enthusiasm in the village again such as was entirely gone during the first few years we were here, when the plague was at its height.

In the aftermath, I find myself glimpsing moments in the reconstruction of a community, not a village, such as I am undertaking in partnership with Our Lady elsewhere. Yet I cannot question whether our course is truly the right and righteous one, as we have already taken our first step beyond what Ulpha ever could. Our future, our purity, are assured, and Our Lady is the key.

13th August 1353

Sister Constance is ready. I made much ceremony yesterday of my departure for Ulpha to bring in a new Sister, setting the hermitage to talking as before. Having returned with all asleep to collect her, I rest now outside the boundaries, looking down at the peace within the valley, as she slumbers beside me, her wounds entirely gone. Our Lady has surely eased her mind, too, of the hard memories she will come to endure.

If, as I have speculated earlier, sin and memory are bound together, and the memories of the last two years have been taken from the Brothers and Sisters as a concentrated draft of sin, then the sins visited upon Sister Constance will likewise have been drawn out of her and disposed of in Our Lady's traditional fashion.

It has been over a year since I awoke one morning as the only person in the Duddon Valley to recall the two years' prior to that, and I have waited the intervening time to commence my great work anew with all vigour. Any steps leading up to this have been but minor preludes, and tomorrow, as I lead her back to her room, we begin our work with fresh energy and fresh devotion.

I thought, when I first met her at the Newfield Inn and found in conversation that she fit my purpose as truly as I dreamed, that I would never be so excited. Yet this time I know. I know that what we do works. I know we are blessed by divine providence.

I think back to Avignon, to the faithless in their positions of power, to the ill-educated among the faithful, to the rich who hoarded precious texts, precious because of the knowledge within them, who refused to drink of that knowledge, and I consider where I am now, the people I have with me, their weaknesses to sins being precisely the ones needed, and I cannot imagine I ever doubted that my path was guided by divinity.

Finding the texts I needed to reach enlightenment. Finding the Brothers and Sisters whose foibles suited my purpose. Finding even a better candidate in Sister Constance than Brother Ralf could have dreamed of being. I looked for a sign to tell me to turn away, but in hindsight my journey was on clear paths, the milestones perfect guides on my route.

8th September 1353

It is the strangest thing to watch Agnes and Constance discover one another, having already watched it once. That trepidation, coupled with unspoken, uncomfortable affection, is an astonishing thing.

Sister Idonea has made comments to me as she did before regarding Brother Peter's bedding. If I remember the sequence correctly, I shall soon take confession from him...

11th September 1353

Another forgotten event resurfaces; Brother Thomas' berry gathering improved by aid from Sister Constance. As he did before, he works to surpass his difficulties in coping with her, in how he should behave. It is troubling that he does, of course, but I know that these efforts can be overcome.

23rd October 1353

I have written little here of late. The mechanisms and machinations I require are falling steadily into place, and my memory, human and fallible though it is, is sufficient of a guide to keep me on even keel. It is certainly the case, however, that the Brothers and Sisters under my care repeat their patterns very well, perhaps immaculately.

My work is, accordingly, as complex as ever, as I must still offer the same guidance and words as ever, inspiring the same thoughts, drives, goals, and doubts; nonetheless, it is easier, as I know now that my judgement in these matters has been proved correct. I am a little worried tonight, however, as I know that it is not long from today that Sister Constance and Sister Kristiana are due to have their confrontation, and that argument, so far as I was ever able to understand, hinged on the single word 'quaint'.

It seems to me that while the people around me have moved predictably until now, a single word choice is a vulnerable point. I intend to use the word three or four times in conversation with Sister Constance tomorrow, to keep it uppermost in her mind.

11th November 1353

Tomorrow is the day. Tomorrow, Sister Constance discovers Lachlann's great sin and exposes him. Brother Thomas, Brother Ladislaus, and Brother Mark, in particular, will raise their hands against him, and the building fury may reach a peak too early, may be inflicted on one who is not prepared.

I must be ready, therefore. I must be on hand, yet not too close. Before acrimony spills over into violence, but after all the seeds of the future have been sown I must intervene.

I am the only one here who is not simply on the same path as before, for I remember the first time, and my knowledge will change my actions. From time to time already I have chanced upon a conversation I remembered observing before, but this time coming upon the conversationalists from another direction. At times I have heard things that I did not, before, and I have surely missed discussions which I eavesdropped on the first time.

I have realised, these past few months, that very few of those are significant. Much of my work has been done when a Sister or a Brother has come to me privately, allowing me all the information I need to guide them as I did before. Many of the other directives had begun smoothly and efficiently without my hand being needed at all, or perhaps with my hand needed at a time before we even arrived in Duddon Valley. I have, after all, been sculpting these men and women to Our Lady's needs for some time.

There are a very few occasions when I shall simply need to be there. This, it seems to me, must be one of them.

12th November 1353

As wonderfully as a dream. Better, I think, than the first time.

8th January 1354

The new year is begun. There are less than five months until a second culmination of our work here, less than five months until I have more of the answers I seek. With that additional knowledge I shall be in a fine position from which to conduct the experiments I need to conduct.

It is time, now, to set in motion the other plans; time to connect Sister Constance more deeply to those not already set on their steady course against her.

The nights are long and drear now, yet I do not mind; all is excitement, more even than Brother Anthony at Christmas.

3rd February 1354

I cannot help but compare the hermitage to some of the groups with whom I studied in Avignon. Brother Ralf, Brother Fychan, Brother Hob and Brother Peter in particular, in their theological debates, proffer many of the same arguments and questions which would be brought up whenever no bishop or higher was present, the questions which, though forbidden, are irresistible to inquire into.

In particular, Brother Fychan's thirst for knowledge, never more evident than at these conversations, recalls to me the path I took when I first began my own personal researches, and to me this seems no great surprise, as his troubles with illness must perforce set his mind tracing a similar arc to my own. But Brother Ralf is another matter.

Brother Ralf struck me, before Sister Constance came to us, as a perfect selection for her role. I see now, with the comparison there before me to make, that there was an element of wishful thinking in this. If Fychan demonstrates a version of me grasping for knowledge which can only be found in the libraries of the Papacy, then Ralf is a reflection of those whose ingenuity muffled their capacity to listen and absorb the input of others, and the frustration they caused me throughout my years there clearly led me in some way I do not understand to make of him a scapegoat for their errors.

This simply could not have been so effective with such mixed feelings in the performance. I must work to keep myself pure of such things, as Our Lady's blessings sink more deeply into the others of the hermitage.

12th March 1354

Riling Brother Fychan against Sister Constance remains difficult.

I wrote that sentence to set down the thought uppermost in my mind when I returned to my study, but it is untrue. The difficulty is not causing him to become frustrated with her. The difficulty is entirely in being confident that Brother Fychan is angered, for his expressions are purely internal until the day itself.

He is measured in so many ways that it becomes difficult to assess his internal state, and I believe he confesses to Brother Hob rather than to me much of the time, yet there is a limit to how much I can press Brother Hob for details, even as their Prior, without seeming suspicious.

I cannot be certain, then, but I believe that his frustrations are building as they should. In future cycles, if we receive such cycles, I shall have to think on this more deeply.

1st May 1354

Has it truly been so long since my last entry? It seems so, but it has passed so swiftly. I have stayed my hand all this while as I have had only delight in the smooth progression of our plans. The original packet is secured, should I need to refer back to it in a moment of crisis; this second time down the path has seen very little deviation, at least to my memory.

Yet today I must record my satisfaction. The hermitage has almost reached the point at which the cauldron overflows and steaming water scorches those closest. The slightest spark will now kindle the inferno we require, and Sister Constance stands, if perturbed by the temperaments she sees arrayed against her, at least confident that I shall be there to protect her from them and to help them understand her goodwill.

It is doubly blessed that she is so faithful and trusting, so loving, even now, of the hermitage as it turns fully against her. We need that openness so that she can truly accept their sins into her, so that we can be cleansed. I am, again, uncertain that Brother Ralf was ever a wise choice, but when I selected him I had no idea how perfect an opportunity Sister Agnes's confession would afford us all.

13th May 1354

Tomorrow is the day, and all is in readiness. I shall not sleep tonight, but instead I shall spend my time in prayer, steeling myself for the sights I will behold and supervise. After all, last time led to an unpleasant night, and not simply from the uncertainty of what we had done; if the appeasement had failed, we should surely all have been damned, and indeed, for cheating the Devil of his prize, I dare imagine that should we fail in offering to Our Lady once more that imps shall rise to claim us.

The images from that time remain seared into my mind. I had expected to be able to bear the burden without undue hardship, and I suspect I shall come to understand the beauty in their darkness just as I understand the beauty in Our Lady's visitations. Tonight, in my prayers, I shall consider Sister Constance's Sacred Wounds, dwelling on them, and steel my spirit for the reality as her Wounds are reborn.

Two years since we proved the truth of Our Lady's plan, and we are ready to recommence. It has passed so swiftly, yet not swiftly enough.

In two days I shall begin to have the understanding I need to devise experiments on the cycles, or I shall discover that the cycles are not susceptible to my theories. In either case, a new life truly begins then.

As the others prepare to purge their sins, I must take care not to become too eager or prideful in my anticipation of this.

15th May 1354

It is done.

3rd Cycle

15th May 1354

Once again, it seems that all has returned to how it was.

These past four years have been so very strange, and yet so very enlightening. I wonder now if there is some rhythm to the work that I must do, some way to perfect the events so that we might move into a truer Eden. Or perhaps this is truly it - the safest and simplest way of existence to cut off the world outside as it changes and grows more corrupt. This is an immortality I would never have thought to ask for, and yet it suits my purposes well.

How closely I will grow to know them all. How intricately I will be able to make my moves, each time improving.

I am ready for our meal, and to begin again.

3rd July 1354

Several times now of an evening I have sat before these papers with pen poised, only to realise that I have nothing new to record. Matters progress as they have now twice before. Sister Apollonia spoke with me yesterday, and I was able to advise and ease her in a way that was even more skilled than times before. I am growing used to splitting my knowledge, to carefully saving matters that have not yet been spoken of and yet using the insights I have to add a powerful undercurrent to my words.

Now that I have witnessed how easy it is to mimic to bare necessities, I can allow myself more freedoms in carefully constructing the matters more smoothly. Many of my fears from last time are comfortably set to rest.

20th July 1354

Brother Fychan's leg is causing him much pain again, and I cannot help but notice that the infection seems to have set in with more fervour than I recall before. I am uncertain how this has occurred, but I have strongly encouraged Brother Ralf to take more time to see to him.

8th October 1354

It has struck me recently that there is one factor that may always change, and I have seemingly no control over, and that is the weather.

This time last cycle I seem to recall a great storm shortly before sheep breeding season, and yet now sheep breeding is upon us and the weather remains sunny and gay.

It remains a somewhat petty amusement to see the tensions rise as Brother Peter manages their mounting.

17th October 1354

Brother Fychan passed away this morning.

Even as I write this, my hands are trembling. For all my planning, all my newly acquired foresight, I had never imagined that something as intractable as human frailty might put my work here at risk. The wound on his leg had become black and leaking pus in its severity, and his brow was burning, and no amount of work from Brother Ralf was able to soothe him.

For the first time in some months, I prayed to God, as well as to Our Lady, asking for guidance. I have no idea what pressures this might place upon my task, or how it might affect the rituals and plans to come. I am lost and adrift. The hermitage is united in mourning, but they do not know the true extent of the danger we approach.

20th October 1354

Some measure of normality is slowly beginning to return, although Brother Fychan's death has caused ripples that I still work to track, and prepare to have to counter. I find myself unusually grateful for the more predictable and less emotional members of the flock - Sister Idonea, for one, who has shown very little sign of change at the news. They will be my rocks in the months to come, as I consider how to progress.

10th November 1354

I have grown overconfident. So carefully was I interceding and manipulating matters with Brother Peter, that I have neglected some of the comfort towards Sister Agnes I usually offer. Irritatingly, this has meant the discussions between Brother Hob and Brother Ralf have caused some genuine rift to form among the group. Some of Brother Ralf's more extreme ideas are being spoken of as disrespectful to Fychan's memory. Sister Agnes herself has not been the guiding hand that I have grown to rely on, and as such it has taken much direct involvement and careful discussions with each of them to soothe the raised tempers.

I cannot have them fall apart too soon. Already I am praying that the ritual is still able to commence.

I must make time to speak with Sister Agnes over the coming weeks. I cannot allow my experiments to cloud my judgement or deviate too far from the path.

26th December 1354

Once more, Brother Anthony spent the celebration of Christ's birth red-cheeked and telling Agnes about his mother's strangeness. Brother Peter scolded him after - I think more harshly than before, although I could not tell for certain - and I am at least comforted that some things do not change.

29th December 1354

And, as usual, Brother Anthony confesses to me his incestuous mother's overtures towards him. I fear I may have been a little less intense on my focus on him, as he stopped short of some details that I am sure he normally let out at this moment, but I gleaned enough, and I am confident things in that department remain predictable.

Though again, I am struck with the memory of him suckling at Constance's teat, chewing and gnawing on her. It is odd, how of all the atrocities they commit against her flesh, this is the one that still offers me the most pause.

15th May 1355

The fourth celebration of our Founding (or, I suppose, the eighth?) came and went with little change to remark upon. I recall how the first time I was so eager, so thrilled to soon be meeting our scapegoat, anxious that she be suitable.

It is strange to think on my feelings towards her now. I do not feel sympathy, and I wonder at this. While I have no doubt that Our Lady guides me well, and not once has God given me indication otherwise, it is strange to think of introducing her for a third time, to see her in her innocence and naivete once again. The work that I put in to manipulate her each time, the words I whisper to others and the promises I make that their looks are all in her mind, they leave her such a broken creature by the end. It is as much my twistings, I fear, as their enacting of sins that break her.

Perhaps that is how I make a scapegoat of her? Are those my sins that she bears with her down to Our Lady?

Though she remembers nothing of what we do to her, how will this continued cycle affect her if it goes on for decades? Will the burden of bearing all our sins over and over change her, twist her or damage her in some way? How sustainable is this paradise that I create?

These are difficult questions. I will be sure to watch her carefully when I meet with her this summer, for any signs of early difficulties or change.

15th August 1355

Yesterday I removed the bricks from Constance's chamber and took her out to some far-off place in the hermitage to wake. She will remember our night in Ulpha, though I do not care to travel there again and see how it has changed. My fears about Fychan's death rose once again, and I barely slept the night.

Today her introduction went as smoothly as ever, the delight in Sister Agnes clear and potent, the intricacies of their sin just starting to needle in their thoughts. How graceful she is, how beautiful. No, Constance seems thus far unchanged by the tortures wrought upon her and the strain placed upon her soul. Whether that is Our Lady's power, or God's, or her own strength of will, I cannot know.

25th August 1355

Today I received Sister Idonea's complaint about Peter's masturbation, or nightly ejaculations - whichever of the two he is suffering from currently. I find myself oddly bored by the thought of the conversations ahead, so pre-occupied I am in studying Constance and in considering what Fychan's death may bring, but I will do my duty.

11th September 1355

Ought Sister Grace have come to me for confession yet? I am not sure. I suspect I have not been doing enough to get Constance involved in other areas of the hermitage, that she might develop relationships with all involved. I must rectify this.

19th September 1355

Thankfully, tonight the confession came. I think it may be later than usual, but it is hard to tell - this is a particularly cold autumn, and as such the year feels older than it is. There is rather more concern around the food for the winter, as our harvest have not been as bountiful as they have in times past.

8th October 1355

Another small difficulty to overcome - although Thomas has been taking Constance foraging as always, with the rather poorer harvest I cannot as quickly or easily call the berries an excess. We will likely need them for the months to come.

This has made my suggestion of her joining Grace rather more complex, although I have put it forward as a matter of her learning the different roles within the hermitage so that she might find where best she fits. If anything, Grace is more resentful of this, which works to my advantage - as long as she does not break too soon.

12th October 1355

Ah, the argument with the Cripplegates once more! Better still, Constance referred to an area that Fychan had been particularly fond of when she used the word 'quaint', and the conflict was more intense yet still. Strange how one event echoes onto another. So much of this web is so carefully woven, I am both fearful of and yet fascinated by the smallest of changes.

I have come to terms with the knowledge that this will not be the perfect cycle, if such a thing can be made, so I am striving instead to ensure that it passes as smoothly as these things can and that I learn as much as possible.

If nothing else, I will learn much from the Fychan problem. If his death is a disruptive factor to the ritual, I will have to adjust my plans.

4th November 1355

Careful spying has told me that Brother Lachlann's stolen stock is larger than usual, and is perhaps one of the reasons we are suffering quite so much this winter. Although Sister Agnes continues to make the

best of a small harvest, talented in ways that I had previously taken for granted, I cannot discount that there may be more anger than usual at his actions.

To think I began this cycle anticipating that I would be able to strike out and experiment with new approaches! Instead, I am being as cautious as I know how.

12th November 1355

It is done. The anger was greater, as I had suspected, but calmer heads still prevailed and calling on the memory of Fychan was enough to calm the worst of the tempers. Kristiana was able to pacify Mark, and while Hob was clearly quite beside himself with fury, he has never been a man for physical confrontation.

9th January 1356

Constance's placement in the infirmary is working even better than before. Ralf has clearly suffered from only having Hob to speak with, and not Fychan, and so having a new audience for his words has been a delight to him. Constance's patience in the matter and her careful and considered responses are only fuel to the fire of his interest.

21st January 1356

I came across a scene that quite worried me this morning, as I suspect Agnes came close to chasing Hob from the kitchen with a frying pan. His complaints to her and suggestions for improvements on the menu have been incessant these last few weeks. Despite my usual instinct to fuel such conflicts, I had to carefully de-escalate in this case, lest things boil over too soon.

Agnes's bitterness and resentment is starting to show through, and I must keep them all at a level before May.

17th February 1356

Constance's worry about heresy seems a little late this year, but it came eventually. I am starting to relax a little as we approach the final few months. There is nothing I can do about Fychan, after all, and everything else is falling neatly into place as usual.

8th March 1356

As comes the sheep breeding, so comes the chaos. Peter's vision was somewhat different, this time, and included Fychan's corpse spread about the field. The sheep were eating of his entrails as Constance stood among them, blood between her legs as always, one finger curling to beckon him.

Fascinating.

24th March 1356

Brother Ladislaus struck Ralf not once, but twice this time. It took more effort to restrain him from continuing to beat the man, and I saw Thomas looking on in worry and concern after.

13th April 1356

Constance herself may pose a problem. Perhaps I have not been as prudent in dispelling her fears as being of her sickened mind as I was before. She is much more adamant that she cannot take her mother's position and that, indeed, she will not.

I have argued her into settling for now, but I will need to work on her carefully over the next few days to keep her in line. Damn girl. Rarely have I found myself more irritated with her - she understands so little of the part that she must play.

14th May 1356

It is done.

Once more they struck out their sins upon her flesh, with as much violence and hatred as ever before. Their sins remain as great, and the ritual was completed. Our Lady took Constance in with the usual hunger, and our sins are excised.

Only the morning will tell what will come next. I must sleep.

4th Cycle

15th May 1356

Relief beyond measure, as well as wonder, strikes every word I write tonight.

Fychan lives once more.

As the Brothers and Sisters of the hermitage went to sleep after taking of the draft, and I myself fell into a similarly deep sleep, on awaking I found that time has been returned as normal - and Fychan is among us, waking from his slumber as if his death had never occurred. He seems to feel similar aftereffects to those who took the draught, only more potently than the others, and he confessed to a feeling of tingling in his limbs. Otherwise he is in perfect health.

Except, of course, the injury upon his leg remains. I feel oddly cold to think on it, to think that this wound he bears may yet see him dead.

More than that, I am struck, tormented even, by the implications of this discovery. His body is restored, yes, but what does this mean for his soul? Was it held waiting by Our Lady, as so much of these lands within the boundary stones are under her power? Has he moved onto the judgement of God, and if so what has this return done for him? I cannot see that he could possibly be without his soul now, as he speaks and acts as ever he did. He has no more memory of the times that have passed than any other under my care.

There is relief, yes, for I now know that we are truly immortal, but I also fear as well. What would fall upon us if the ritual were not completed of a cycle? Would we be ejected back into the real world, time enacted upon us all at once? Would we simply die? If the former, then shortly so the latter, as that much ageing upon a man's person would surely do him untold and fatal harm. Already there are six years that have passed without their knowledge. I myself am untouched by this passage of time as well.

In the first instance, I was able to leave for Ulpha with no ill effects. I am not bound in the same way as they are, though - to my knowledge, my sin does not empower Our Lady as directly as theirs does. Were one of them to stray outside, I fear that all might end, that the balance might be disrupted.

It cannot be risked. I will not allow it to happen.

In the meantime, I have had to work hard to keep my misgivings hidden from the flock. Though shaken, this has only served to reveal the true might that Our Lady is capable of displaying. Even death is no end to her. God has seen fit to preserve our immortal souls.

I must leave quickly and quietly, before they awaken, as they believe me to be in Ulpha.

1st June 1356

I continue to watch Fychan closely. Other than the first symptoms he expressed, he seems to be suffering no ill-effects, and I grow more certain that there is no long term cost to him whatsoever. I

have pushed Brother Ralf into being rather more careful with his treatment of his leg. I would rather he not die again - it complicates matters.

Still, I must be cautious not to overly fixate on this matter. There is still the usual work to be done, and I am filled with fire anew for my work and the opportunities it presents.

8th June 1356

I find myself becoming more and more fond of Idonea. There is something so beautifully simple to her, and she is so easy to set in a direction without my input or oversight. The coldness, even the selfishness, make her so predictable. She is a mark of order in chaos, and I note her actions as the least often changed by petty circumstances. She is like a deep ocean, untouched by winds across the surface.

Would that I could say the same for Anthony, whose emotions leave him prone to flitting like a sheet in the wind. In our conversation today, I said almost exactly the same words as I always have, and yet I sensed something in it was less effective, and the more I tried, the more he withdrew.

26th July 1356

I know that Fychan has always complained about his leg this time of year, but I cannot stop the anxiety it raises. Rather than draw his attention to Idonea, I confess I focused entirely on pressing Brother Ralf to do more for him.

This is folly, and I must adjust myself. His death is ultimately irrelevant, but his doubting of Idonea is much more important.

18th November 1356

More and more, I see such futility in recording the mundane events that I have witnessed before and will see again. I find I write here only when I need to clear my mind or meditate on a specific problem that has arisen. Fortunately, Fychan is on the mend and things are otherwise progressing smoothly.

The discussions tonight did give me pause, however. Fychan and Ralf got in such a heated debate over the nature of medicine and prayer that Ladislaus actually stepped in to quiet them. He has been complaining of a headache, and I think it is wearing his patience thin.

I am not yet sure how this will affect the growing dynamics, but I will watch carefully.

1st January 1357

We approach the quietest time of year yet again. I wonder why these few months are always so quiet, so unremarkable. After Anthony's revelations at the celebration of Christ's Birth, all falls into quiet and ease until May.

18th February 1357

I could curse myself for speaking too soon. Hob was tending to his herb garden when he slipped and nearly fell. Although he is not severely injured, there is a cut on his palm that is quite deep, and I have no interest in seeing him also fall and succumb to infection.

Otherwise, things go as before. I work on the skill of knowing what is when, and anticipating their moves.

20th April 1357

Today I came across a sight I have missed in all previous times. I am not sure what change I made in my routine, or why I happened across it now, but today I found Grace alone in her brevery, sobbing silently.

Though we did not have long before the risk of interruption caused her to quiet such upset, she confessed to me that it has recently been four years since the loss of her family, and the memories of it are weighing heavily on her.

I am interested to find it is still such a potent difficulty for her. So much of what I presented with Agnes and Constance in the past must have inadvertently rubbed salt into this wound. Perhaps this is yet another piece of the puzzle in achieving perfection - now that I am aware of the ravness, I will be better placed to tailor the matters I emphasise in order to cause the most resentment.

13th May 1357

I chose today to travel to Ulpha as if there were still letters to be picked up, if only to see some of how matters progress in the world around us, outside our sanctuary.

The town is much the same, although I am careful to avoid too much close contact with any who might recognise me - many of those I know have grown notably older, and yet I remain as I ever was. They have built several new houses to the north, and I cannot help but feel the work is clumsy and something of an eyesore compared to the work I am used to from the Cripplegates.

Though it is strange to see a land where things continue, I must admit I felt relief at the idea of returning to our Eden.

15th May 1357

It is not often that I choose to speak with Our Lady outside our rituals these days, but today I spent some time in her presence. Although I am still filled with overwhelming power at the sight of her, I felt more able to speak some of the questions I've had here than I have before.

She did not give answers that I can fully understand, but I will think on her words nonetheless.

15th August 1357

It is fascinating. Still there is no change. Still she is the same as ever.

Do I imagine the flicker of darkness behind her eyes, the flinch in her voice? Were they always there, or am I seeing what I fear I will? She has made all the same decisions, said all the same things, and they all react to her just as before.

I find myself almost contemptuous of her. What kind of creature could endure this over and over without changing? How weak and malleable her soul must be.

25th August 1357

Curse my complacency. This time was going so well.

I may have emphasised Constance's more attractive assets to Peter just a little bit too much. Now he seems concerned that I, and not he, am the one under her thrall. His worry for me is rather irritating, but I was wise enough to listen to his counsel at the time and intend to show myself breaking out from it over the next few weeks.

22nd September 1357

Every time I compliment Constance to manipulate one of the others - such as Kristiana, or Apollonia, I have Peter watching me with concern. Never have I more wanted to throw him out of a window. His worry is almost as irritating as Ralf's sanctimoniousness.

Still, matters are otherwise progressing as expected. Constance has begun reorganising matters again, and this is causing the expected tension with Agnes.

15th October 1357

The argument between Constance and the Cripplegates went as expected. Brother Ralf is focusing on her once more, and that seems to have distracted Peter at least.

29th October 1357

I caught Idonea glaring at Constance's back with such venom this afternoon that I thought she might actually strike her. For all that this cycle has been awkward at times, I am reminded that things continue to go well overall.

When I look back at previous iterations, I feel a pinch of self-recrimination at my lack of gratitude. For all that I have sacrificed and fought to get here, I am finally doing the work of my lifetime. Constance's role in that is unfortunate, but necessary.

Still I find it strange to look upon these people and remember the acts they participated in against her.

12th November 1357

Matters today have been trying.

I do not entirely know what was different. That I was delayed undoubtedly caused some problems, as the heavy rains this year slowed my passage across some of the grounds. I was not present when Constance first revealed Lachlann's folly, and the initial bursts of anger occurred without me there to calm them.

Fortunately, Kristiana and Thomas were present, for Mark struck Lachlann. He got in several vicious blows before he was pulled off, and Lachlann has yet to wake. Ralf has begrudgingly seen to the man's health, and I have done my best to ease the worries and anger. I do not think this will cause issues for most of our work here, but it would be unfortunate if Lachlann is unable to wake.

13th November 1357

My worries were unfounded - in the early hours of the morning Lachlann woke, and seems to be no worse for his injury. Indeed, it has added an extra element to the complexity of their feelings about his crime: On the one hand, I suspect Thomas feels he had been punished enough, but some of the others are clearly having difficulty repressing their frustration that he is now treated as the victim.

I will have to be careful over the next few weeks. The balance must be maintained.

26th December 1357

Hob has been complaining at how much Constance is being given for her brewings, and Apollonia continues to seek extra to give to her, clearly as an attempt to assuage her guilt. I feel almost as if I should tell Hob that he does not know how well he has it this year, but I have bitten back, and instead offered agreement and concern in turn.

The celebrations of Christ's birth were particularly exuberant this year, and Grace has truly outdone herself with her brewing - although I was careful to compliment Constance's skills more, of course.

9th January 1358

To my surprise, Ralf's education of Constance has started very much at the more drastic this year. I have had to speak with her about keeping an open mind on several occasions, as if she does not agree with what he has to say at first, he will not develop the trust that then must be so broken.

15th January 1358

I find myself watching for the earlier signs of Ladislaus's infatuation, watching it grow. In some ways, he is the one she trusts the most - aside from myself, of course. I must be certain to watch her expression as he sets fire to her. I almost wish I could rearrange it so that he could do that while she still was sighted, in order to see the full knowledge of betrayal there.

Alas, it will not work. The fire must come at the end, else the risk of death would be too great.

I ought to have taken advantage of last time, with Fychan dead. Maybe there will be opportunity yet.

17th February 1358

Agnes's conversation with me about Constance is slightly early this year. I wonder what specifics have driven her to this fitful jealousy sooner.

I told her the usual, and that she must understand that Constance has faced hardships too, just of a different kind, as well as matters about how Constance can be the legacy and lead the life she was never allowed to - matters that might comfort some mothers, but not Agnes.

How well I chose our flock.

14th May 1358

It is done.

5th Cycle

17th May 1358

It seems to me time now to begin my examination of the degree to which a cycle can be manipulated without causing problems. I know already that minor variations on my actions will take care of themselves.

I know further that the weather is still gifted to us by the wider world, outside the boundary stones, and I know that the overall health of Fychan and others is not guaranteed to remain the same. I know even that if one of my flock dies, this is no great cause for concern. I do not care at this time to experiment with a greater number of deaths.

I also do not care to experiment with certain other deaths. Sister Agnes, in particular, is so deeply tied to the motivations against the scapegoat of others; Brother Anthony, Sister Apollonia, through Apollonia Sister Idonea; even Brother Ladislaus, I suspect, is partly drawn to Constance by her representation of the family that all have left behind, and that representation stems from Constance's bond to Sister Agnes.

I have already begun my steps by urging Brother Ralf to tend to Brother Fychan, far earlier than I considered it necessary to do in 1354. This time he shall not die, however inclement the weather, whatever other circumstances are in play. And this allows for other steps to be taken.

However, as my tutor used to stress, it is important to think through the consequences of your actions before taking them, in case other protective measures are needed. If I cannot have Fychan die when I am taking risks, I must also establish what protections I can muster against other risks.

I have decided, therefore, that in this cycle I shall engage Brother Peter in much more personal dispute and instruction, and I shall see what aspects of my task he can be guided to perform. With that safety in place, I can progress other issues much more swiftly.

16th June 1358

One of the best words for Brother Peter is diligent. I am more than satisfied with his drive and determination to work, to produce, and I am somewhat pleased with his capacity to take instruction.

I have told him that the spring and summer should be considered a time for each of the hermitage to work exclusively or almost exclusively on their own personal duties, and that it is the seasons when we must attend to the breeding, gather in our harvest, and then work together in the hermitage, hemmed in by the blankets of snow outside, that we must come together, in order that when Constance arrives, this notion will be accepted practice among the Brothers and Sisters.

Under those circumstances, her final months with us will seem a deep transgression of what is right, giving all the more reason for them to become inflamed against her. I can rely on him to carry this out, though I doubt that he is the right person for certain other things. It is possible that I should have begun with Brother Hob, or even with Sister Agnes.

And perhaps I could, this cycle, but even as I write that I realise the problems with attempting them all at once. I come back to Sister Kristiana and the word 'quaint'. There will be certain words, certain phrases, which will act as swifter versions of these conversations.

It is conceivable that, if I can have Brother Peter correctly aligned to do half of my work with Constance by the time she arrives on this cycle, it might be possible to do so with a month or less of consultation once I have learned the right phrases to bring him along more quickly.

17th September 1358

Fychan's work on the scriptorium begins today, as before. It is always refreshing to see him return to his work.

20th September 1358

Long discussions with Brother Peter are proving somewhat fruitful. He moves slowly toward the mindset that I need, but only slowly. I have in mind the man I need him to be, and he develops toward him slowly, yet Brother Thomas has noted a difference, and it seems to concern him. I'll have to consider this more carefully.

Perhaps what I truly need here are different tools to those I spent the first eight years of this work developing.

I have come to understand how to render these people truly angry with someone. In so doing, with the presence of Hob and Thomas, I have developed tricks which hide my hand in their fury. And this is all well and good, but these are not tools suited to refining someone's beliefs. I have not needed them to be.

It is not necessary that these people understand; indeed, by and large I do not have time for them to reach that understanding. Fortunately, only their righteous anger and their deeds are needed.

Working with Peter in this way has made me realise that I have shamefully neglected other tools. At least there is time to undo that mistake. We have our eternity in paradise to earn a true paradise through perfection.

26th December 1358

As before, Brother Peter confronted Brother Anthony today about his behaviour on the fruits of Sister Grace's labour. This time, however, differences began to emerge, and strongly at that. Peter has taken on my recommendation that discipline be emphasised more strongly.

It was clear that Brother Anthony took the stronger recriminations badly. I have the same fears now that I have had before, in the first repetition, and when Fychan died; the possibility that this has gone too far.

I should not fear this. I know that I can control Brother Anthony's fears, at least well enough to guide him to the correct decisions. Yet I do.

27th December 1358

It is not fear. It is excitement, anticipation, but the excitement that comes when there is the risk of failure. It's been long enough that I mistook the one for the other. This coming year I have created an imbalance for myself, perhaps not a powerful one, but an imbalance nonetheless.

And that is a better test of my work than this conversion attempt could be. I shall learn Peter's mannerisms in time, no doubt, if I need to. In the meantime, I have given myself a chance to learn adaptability.

And that is an advantage I need greatly. The weather took Fychan from me once. A simple slip might take anyone else, someone I rely on not merely for themselves but to direct others.

I thank the Lord for this enlightenment, and I thank Our Lady for the opportunity to act on it.

31st January 1359

Over the course of this month past, I believe that Brother Anthony has returned to the path I need him to be on. Brother Peter is a more difficult matter, as to simply reverse the instruction I had given him hitherto would prompt obvious suspicions.

Instead I am attempting to guide him through discussions with Brother Hob, whose knack for rhetoric, internal and external, should allow him to impart the understanding I need Peter to have, all the while testing another theory. I anticipate that this will take some time yet.

28th February 1359

Brother Peter respects Brother Hob's intelligence and debating acumen, but does not consider him to be as holy as himself, nor as close to my understandings. Watching Hob approach him with certain ideas this month has been entertaining, if not as productive as I should wish it to be.

Still, we have until August, and we have a test betweentimes in May, when I shall be away for some time, in Ulpha, and Peter and Sister Agnes will hold sway.

These will be instructive.

31st March 1359

At this time it seems as if Brother Hob is making progress with Peter, but the path is not yet fully corrected.

I find myself wondering if lambing season has distracted Peter from concerns of rank, making him more amenable to Hob's assertions, or whether some opposite effect has hindered developments. Perhaps the time spent concerned with his literal flock has made Peter less willing to consider suggestions related to our shared one.

I can guess, but I do not know him well enough to be sure of myself. April should confirm things, I hope.

30th April 1359

My trip to Ulpha looms large on the horizon, but I am confident that nothing troublesome will arise while I make it. Brother Hob has made substantial inroads into Peter's theories and attitudes, given only the passage of three months with which to do so.

I find myself mulling over confessions I have taken from members of the hermitage, their sins before and after they came here, their willingness to unbend to others. I have learned something, now, of what Hob could be set to if need be.

Yet I fear that while Peter would be one of the least tractable of my flock, there are others more difficult still. It is certainly difficult to imagine that Ralf would be turned around swiftly, when over all the years they have debated, disputed, and argued, the two still hold beliefs which, while all Christian, are sufficiently far apart that it takes all my skill to give them the illusion of kinship.

I must not assume the tools I am honing are perfected.

31st May 1359

I was uncertain for a few days after my return from the outside world. Now, that is thankfully settled. I did note some trivial differences; Idonea seemed discomfited in some small way, Grace more combative than usual, and it seems to me as if Sister Kristiana is testier than I am used to seeing her before Constance arrives.

However, it occurred to me that all those who were acting unusually were female, and so I decided to observe a little while longer in case it was simply that I have become more alert than usual to differences, owing to my confusion, and it certainly seems the case that Peter's typical difficulties are enough to have caused the dismay.

I have attended to it, as I must assume I have done before without realising, and am confident that we proceed according to Our Lady's plan, as ever.

I opted this year not to return to Ulpha, but simply to leave the boundaries and travel the roads. It is as well that their memory of me blurs sufficiently between visits that questions are not asked.

17th June 1359

Consulted this day with Our Lady. As ever, the power of her presence is both intimidating and reassuring. I have spoken with her of my experiments, but she provides no answers save that I think I detect a smile on her lips.

Clearly all is proceeding as it should, and my researches are the correct path to take. Enlightenment will not be given, and must be earned, just as it should be.

31st August 1359

So far as I can tell, Sister Constance's arrival has proceeded as in the years before. Brother Peter's eagerness to enforce discipline has mostly returned to normal, but he still follows the first instruction I gave him, that there are times for people to work where they are expected to, and times for people to gather in a group.

This is well, as I still believe this will cause Constance's behaviour to be more deeply and extensively frustrating to the flock, and they will respond accordingly. I look forward to finding out more.

It seems likely, though this diary does not reflect such, that this will be a very productive cycle, with new understandings aplenty and a certain number of additional or better-honed tools with which to steer the flock.

12th November 1359

Brother Lachlann discovered today, as before, and as before, a fury had to be quelled. Peter has always been one of the more difficult members of the group to deal with at this time, yet this time Brother Hob spoke up against him, perhaps in a newly developed habit from his debates over the first part of the year.

I was gladdened initially by the support, but as I have thought about it more deeply, I am a little concerned. I shall need them to act in concert as the cycle draws to a close, after all, and I do not wish that to be too difficult for them.

20th December 1359

The correction to the split between Peter and Hob turns out not to be one I needed a hand in at all. Rather, it is Fychan who corrects it, Fychan and Ralf, as their disputes reach the peak they always did, and as all four find themselves roaring their points rather than speaking them.

I am not certain, of course, but I believe this to have been the most raucous December of them all. With the semantics of Fychan and the wild theories of Ralf arrayed against them, Hob and Peter have found a remarkable common ground.

All appears to be well.

24th January 1360

Sister Kristiana's determination to disprove Constance is as strong as ever. 'Quaint' is the word on which she turns, and she is the pivot on which Brother Mark turns.

I am glad of such an easy angle on someone who naturally leads some of the others. It is as well to have as many factors guiding as possible, especially as we continue to pursue perfection.

17th February 1360

Brother Anthony is as withdrawn as ever, yet it is more frustrating than usual. Perhaps that is simply the repetition, but perhaps it is that I feel I have learned so much this time.

This is a reminder that my progress here has not been complete, that I must not overstep myself or allow myself to become arrogant. It is a timely suggestion, as we have less than three months remaining.

I shall have to content myself simply with ushering matters to their conclusion. Frustration is rising, and perhaps the few adjustments I have accomplished will produce perfection, but I doubt it. This is merely a prelude.

14th Day 1360

It is done.

6th Cycle

15th May 1360

From chaos, order is restored. Once again all is as it was. I grow more confident in my thoughts, bolder in the experiments that I may undertake. What a blessing this is, to be offered an eternity to grow and know and understand the multitude of ways that I can tweak at strings and retune the symphony of their sin.

This time, I wonder if I can redirect Apollonia's affection for me onto Brother Peter.

It will take some care, of course. I continue to direct Ralf towards Fychan early on, as I still am not yet confident enough to experiment with one dead, in case the balance shifts too far.

I returned rather later than usual this evening, so deep in thought that I wanted more time to myself. Perhaps next time I will truly visit Upha.

16th May 1360

A minor change owing to my late arrival that I did not consider - Grace had not the time to speak with me about the pin she stole from Idonea. Such petty matters, I was almost tempted to tell her to keep it, but I advised as ever.

The only true way to carry out these experiments is to change as little as possible each time around.

3rd June 1360

Once again, Idonea has upset Brother Anthony, and through this I have hopes to begin the redirection. I am going to encourage Brother Peter to be the one to step in and resolve the dispute, and suggest he try and encourage Apollonia to open up to him about Idonea's reticence.

5th June 1360

That did not go as well as I had hoped. Peter remains too anxious around the Sisters, and although I believe Apollonia did tell him some of Idonea's struggles, he was unable to take the lead or offer much comfort. Perhaps I pushed too hard too soon. I will settle back for a time and let them return to usual.

15th July 1360

I am quite worried. Despite my instructions to Ralf to attend to Fychan's leg with more intensity, still he came to me today to speak of the pain. Upon looking at the wound, the matter was looking quite worrisome. It is hard to recall if it was worse than this when he died, or if this is as I would usually expect, but I will put pressure on Ralf to work harder nonetheless.

22nd August 1360

It would seem that my worries were not unfounded. Fychan is desperately ill, barely able to sit up in his bed, and speaking desperate nonsense. Worse still, Brother Ralf is taking his decline with more weight than he did before, and I can only imagine that is from the pressures that I bestowed upon him to take more care.

My plans for matters with Apollonia and Peter are being put entirely aside for now. Perhaps in future I ought to wait until he is stronger before I begin any new undertakings, in order to avoid disappointment.

30th August 1360

Fychan still lingers, though his visage is that of a dead man. There is a tension through the hermitage that I know not how to dispel.

3rd September 1360

Finally, Fychan has passed.

I have learned one important thing in this cycle, at least - it does not matter what I do to encourage Brother Ralf's attentions on the man. His fate is in the hands of chance. I would say he was in the hands of God, but I suspect God's inclination to directly intervene is limited when his soul is merely waiting to return.

2nd October 1360

The weather is terrible, and not even the madness that accompanies sheep breeding season can lighten my mood. I am impatient, and that will not do. As much as I wish to start over sooner, I must focus on keeping this cycle on track before I plan anything further.

26th December 1360

Brother Anthony ended up sobbing at dinner this year. The slow death of someone he knew evidently has affected him strongly.

15th August 1361

Nothing of note has happened in the past few months. Matters develop as expected. Today I introduced Constance. Removing her from the immurement chamber is always a strange moment. I wonder if I will ever grow accustomed to seeing her whole again, after the brutalities that they inflict.

12th October 1361

The word 'quaint' occurred as it ought, as it always does. I barely even seeded it this year.

12th November 1361

The stash was found, and matters progressed with minimal violence this time. The only difference I noted was in Brother Hob, whose demeanour was quieter than usual.

I went to speak with him after, and found that he has turned much of his rage inwards - the loss of Fychan from their discussions has weighed on him heavily. With only Ralf to speak with, he has lost some of his confidence and is feeling the strain far more greatly.

I will be sure to redirect this over the coming days. Perhaps I can trick Constance into saying something disparaging about some of Fychan's work?

17th January 1362

Another change - this time Grace accidentally dropped one of the brevs that Constance had made. I suspect it was not entirely an accident, but Constance has taken it with the usual acceptance and understanding. If anything, I think that has made Grace angrier.

21st February 1362

As always, I have been attempting to gather more information from Brother Anthony regarding his history. Although he remains reticent, he made an odd passing comment about siblings the other day that I feel bears more unpicking.

14th May 1362

Once more, it is done.

As I noted to myself once before, I was careful to watch Constance's eyes as Ladislaus carried her to the flame. There is almost a gentleness to the way he scoops her in his arms, although his voice is hard and set. He did not look down at her as he carried her, though she looked at him with terror and pleading.

When he placed her upon the pyre, there was a moment when their eyes met, and I heard just a moment's hesitation in his voice. But Brother Ladislaus has always been one of the strongest among our flock, and he carried forth the flame and lit the scapegoat to burn. Behind me, I could hear the keening of Anthony as he rocked back and forth, jaw still working though he had no matter to bite.

Next time I shall wait, and see if Fychan lives, and then continue my experiments.

7th Cycle

15th May 1362

All has progressed as normal and expected. I pretended to make my return from Ulpha late in the day to find them in celebration as always.

I will make notes on Fychan's health, and little else, until I am certain one way or another.

23rd July 1362

Ralf has been treating him carefully, but there are no signs of improvement as yet. The trouble with burying my previous notes is that I cannot always be sure of how things are comparing. I feel that his discussion a few days ago was as usual, but I cannot be certain.

The more prominent events and dates stay in my memory (12th November 1351 is when Constance finds Lachlann's hidden goods, for instance), but these smaller moments are harder to capture.

29th August 1362

Fychan is feverish again. I am finding it hard not to be irritable.

18th September 1362

After a brief period where he seemed to recover, Fychan has dashed my hopes for this cycle once more. His death is mightily inconvenient.

14th August 1363

I have chosen not to go to Ulpha this time as well. Instead I take some time outside the hermitage in contemplation of matters to come.

It has been some time since I spoke with Our Lady when not simply as completion of the ritual. Perhaps I ought to be paying more attention and worship towards Her, although I doubt she has much time for my musings and considerations. Still, it would be good to learn if she feels this is building towards a greater matter.

15th August 1363

Constance's arrival went as usual.

Lady Ammit continues to be difficult to understand. She does not speak in terms that a mortal man as I can easily decipher.

For the first time in a while, I have felt the urge to pray.

12th November 1363

On time, as always, Lachlann is discovered. There was no violence this time, and Hob seemed to be back to his usual vocal self. Fychan's swifter, less prolonged and painful death is apparently good for him.

14th May 1364

How dull these two years have been.

The matter is completed, at least. I know I need to continue my interest and think on how to perfect these God-given works, but there is something oddly soothing in the steady routine of doing things as they have been done before. Each time I learn a little, even if I do not consider it worth putting to paper.

I must learn patience. I have eternity.

8th Cycle

15th May 1364

On times before, this day has felt surreal or strange. Although the memories of the tortures inflicted remain potent, I am less taken aback by their monstrosity this time. No, today the reset of their small lives feels clean and comforting. They are, for a very short period of time, free from their sins, and we are made young and whole again.

We shall see what strange matters this time brings to light. I am of a mind to reduce my input and see how that affects things such as Fychan's death and Agnes and Apollonia's conflict.

It is late. Having returned only at tenth bell, I have stayed up long past they have gone to rest to record these notes. I must sleep, too, for there is much to be done still.

15th July 1364

Today Fychan visited me as usual about his leg. I have decided that if he dies this time as well I may have to consider waiting for him to survive as an impractical consideration in the face of reality. There must be more I can do to extract the most value from each cycle.

15th October 1364

Fychan is dead. I am resolved.

13th May 1365

This year I decided to travel to Ulpha once more, although I have been careful to keep to myself and wear my hood low. It would not do for one of the village to recognise me and call attention to my lack of ageing.

It has been a strange experience. I sit in the same places and recall my delight at receiving Constance's letter. The sincerity within, the naivete, her genuine hope for what might come all told me that I had chosen wisely. Or was it more than that? I recall at the time I thanked God for his hand in guiding to me one quite so suitable. Although there can be no doubt that what we do is Biblical as much as it is Our Lady's guidance, do I still feel the hand of God in my works?

It is difficult, when I know the depravity that the human soul is capable of. When I have seen the pieces they would carve from one who is, at heart, one of their own.

How much of these matters come from myself, and how much is in the sin of their own natures?

It is a question I hope to one day answer.

15th August 1365

She is unchanged. Among them once again, I cannot but see her as the mouse toyed with by the cats. They pull their smiling faces for the time being, but in nine months they will show their teeth.

I must not let these thoughts distract me from my purpose.

25th August 1365

For all that I am practising these matters for little gain, I do believe that was the most successful manipulation of Peter's feelings that I have managed yet. I could almost see the frustrated lust in his eyes as we spoke on her temptations.

The key, I think, is allowing him to fill the silences.

21st October 1365

As always, Idonea has been feeling the pressure of Constance's prying gaze. The tension between marks most of my work as currently.

I do sometimes worry what would happen were it not Fychan who died, but one of the others more central to the web. Apollonia or Peter, say, or the unthinkable: if I were to die. Would the sanctuary simply end? Would the truth of what unfolded be revealed to them? Would they just die?

These are not questions I care to contemplate in any great detail.

8th March 1366

From time to time, I am struck by just how long I have been doing this. 1366, is the year - a matter I continue recording if only to preserve my own sanity. It was 1350 when I first received Constance's letter, and the true work of Our Lady began. Sixteen years. Nearly sixteen years. If she had survived, she might have carried forth babe from Peter's raping and had such child be nearly adult by now.

It is so very easy to fall back into habit and safety, or to think of matters so wildly complicated that they are almost impossible to accomplish - such as my early thoughts on guiding Apollonia's affections to Peter. How naive that seems now, having watched them rise and fall so often.

No, I have a greater thought for our next cycle, and for the ones following that. If I am to truly understand the great works that I undertake here, I must better understand my Brothers and Sisters. They are the key - their sins, their weaknesses and strengths, and those are the things that I weave and work to our purpose.

It will be easiest, I suspect, to take one at a time. I will keep the work I usually do, of course, with a light touch to make sure things go as planned, but I will pick one of the flock to focus my attentions on. From this, I will aim to learn their secrets - learn the darker sides to them, learn their reasonings.

I intend to start with Sister Idonea.

14th Day 1366

It is done.

9th Cycle

15th May 1366

Once again, it is late, and the Brothers and Sisters of the hermitage finally sleep. They have been as unknowing and predictable today as they ever are - with so little variance in what can come, they are easy enough to herd. I have dealt with stolen pins and confessions, and as they slumber, I can now think.

The question is, how to approach Sister Idonea? She is one of the more reserved and private among the group. I know that she lost a son when he was only a few years old and that she could not stand to remain with her husband after. I know that when she speaks of this she speaks in quiet, reserved tones. I know that she does what she feels is right and appropriate.

I know that there is a hollowness in her. I suspect there is no force on this world that can fill it. She is as reliant on Apollonia for protection in that matter as Apollonia is on her - each leans on the other for protection. It will be impossible to separate them entirely, but that should not affect my work.

The trick will be finding a way to make sure that she feels safe to speak of her experiences without crowding her. I have witnessed Constance making such mistakes (and, indeed, guided her straight into them). I must be accepting, but hint that my acceptance does not hang solely on her being as pure and devout as she would have us believe.

It will take time, and I must be cautious.

Fortunately, time is one thing I have in abundance.

18th May 1366

I have been careful to pay closer attention to the matter of the pin this time.

It is an unusual thing for Idonea to do, to make another in the group of gift just for the sake of it. It is, in fact, the only time she does so in the time of the hermitage that I have witnessed. Perhaps this will be a clue? What inspires her to make something for Anthony, and what then causes their friendship to break down?

To that order, I have told Grace this time that she absolutely must confess not only finding the pin, but how it came into her possession. It will be interesting to see how the revelation of her theft may cause either of them to open up.

She is due to have the conversation tonight. I will be there, to offer guidance, and to witness.

19th May 1366

The conversation was oddly enlightening.

Anthony was greatly upset to hear what Grace had done, although relieved to get the pin back. Most of the discussions happened between the two of them. Idonea was quiet, and her usual reserved self. In fact, I would even hesitate to say that she was bored.

What, then, does such tell me? Although she created the item, she has little attachment to it remaining in his possession. The gift no longer matters to her, nor the feelings of Anthony at having it taken. Is it possible she did this entirely on a whim?

I will have to be careful as this change might have impact later across the group. Anthony has been very forgiving and Grace is duly chastised.

25th May 1366

I have been spending more time watching Brother Anthony and Sister Idonea, and he has began making his offers of helping her with weaving. She has given him a few menial tasks, mostly fetching and carrying, but I can sense her coldness. Anthony seems to be interpreting this that he is not doing enough - fascinating.

I must try to observe her in the laundry without her knowing I am there. It will not be easy, but I am certain I will be able to manage.

26th May 1366

Today I was able to watch Idonea on her own for a good half an hour.

It seems that, in the same way Grace retreats to her brewing as a safe place, Idonea takes solace in the simple work of fabric and repairing garments. I saw her spend some time just looking at the colours of the dyes, seemingly doing nothing at all. Her expression is odd to see in these moments, and I am reminded of her cuts against the scapegoat. There is that same detached curiosity in so much of what she does.

Towards the end of the minutes I spent in hiding, Brother Anthony arrived to offer yet more help. I could see the mask of quiet, demureness return as he approached, but not before I heard the sharp exhalation of annoyance. Yes, I see it clearly now - in his mind, he is helping all he can, and it is not yet enough. In hers, he is repeatedly invading her sanctuary, and taking away the tasks that she finds soothing. Interesting that she takes such solace in this specific area of work in the hermitage, but will do so little in others if she has the chance.

2nd June 1366

The argument happened today. Usually I would not witness the aftermath until tomorrow, but it was good to witness the actual exchange.

Idonea was unusually blunt, even for her. Anthony had taken it upon himself to help start on one of the repair jobs, clearly hoping to impress her, and she lost her temper, telling him outright that he should leave her alone and get back to his own work and leave her to hers.

Anthony left in tears, although he did not go straight to Agnes as I first thought. I imagine that will come tomorrow.

For a while I will give her more space, as well. I have been fortunate not to be seen thus far, and I do not wish to risk upsetting the balance too far.

12th September 1366

Other matters are progressing as usual, although I note that Fychan is nearly entirely back to health. It is somewhat typical that the first time I stop focusing on it, he survives.

29th September 1366

I approached Sister Idonea tonight. She was sat reading the Bible, as is her wont. It fascinates me that she is one of the more devout in this sense: I see her reading God's word more often than almost any of the group. Clearly, whatever her emotional difficulties, she takes comfort in the Holiness of His work.

It is never easy to encourage a confession from one who has not volunteered for such, but after months of waiting I am certain that she will not reveal more details of her difficulties without some pressure. Still, I know that asking her about herself will only drive her away, and so I have done something somewhat against my nature, and went to speak with her about myself.

It was a gamble, asking to sit with her a while and admitting to her that I often feel as if I have to wear a mask in front of the others. I told her that the expectations of my position weigh on me sometimes, and it is a relief to be able to be true to oneself. She paused in her sewing, but otherwise just nodded. I could not tell if I was boring her or reaching her. It is very difficult when she is so careful at hiding her emotions.

I resolved to sit in silence for a while, and this seemed to be to her preference.

18th November 1366

I have some more observations from the last few days spent closer to Idonea.

Firstly, she seems to have a genuine need for Apollonia. I believe at least part of that is the shield that Apollonia provides from the others - she is very much a protective figure in Idonea's life. It also seems that Apollonia annoys her less than some of the others in the hermitage. Apollonia will express her feelings without needing as much feedback as some of the others do, and that puts Idonea in a safer place to witness - and, possibly, imitate? - such emotional outbursts without having to endure the expectation of reciprocation or understanding.

I am not sure I would truly call it a friendship, but certainly it is a dependence.

26th December 1366

Jdonea definitely found Brother Anthony's red-cheeked exuberance irritating. I am starting to really learn to note the turn of her mouth, the flicker of an eyebrow that indicates her displeasure.

I eagerly await the scapegoat's reappearance this year. I am convinced I will learn much.

15th May 1367

Today was the celebration of the so-attributed fourth anniversary. Matters progressed as they always do, but I noted that Jdonea seems to have little change in demeanour at such a celebration.

Of course, I also note she generally does less work than the others regardless, so perhaps the alleviation of duties affects her less profoundly.

14th August 1367

I have left the sanctuary of the hermitage behind, taking with me the scapegoat's reformed body, though she slumbers still. Soon she will waken and I will gently feed in the information as to where we are again. The brief period of confusion may be useful. It is a shame that I cannot take her beyond the boundary, as a fresh start from Ulpha would in many ways make my story easier to impress upon her.

Although it would be fascinating to push her closer towards Jdonea (and witness Apollonia's jealousy among other things), I do not think such would be conducive to learning more of Jdonea's mind and motivation. As such, I will save it for now, and focus on learning the lay of the lake before I skim stones on its surface.

21st August 1367

I witnessed the discussion between Constance and Apollonia today, with Constance as usual declining in her awkward, uncertain fashion. Unlike previous times, however, I have been focusing on Jdonea's reaction almost exclusively.

She is among the most indifferent to Constance on first arrival, possibly only Kristiana rivaling her in such a way. She also does not seem to react protectively towards Apollonia's upset, although she did spend more time with her than usual today. Perhaps that is the closest she comes to showing affection outwardly? Certainly Apollonia seems to lean on her for it, and I am left with the impression that the partnership serves them both in this way.

Constance does note Jdonea's tendency towards avoiding work, too. She is very careful not to offend but I think she fails to understand that it is a deliberate avoidance on Jdonea's part. Many of their early interactions are around this topic, and already I can see some of the resentment forming.

25th August 1367

I listened to the usual complaints about the state of Peter's bedsheets, only this time I used the conversation to try and get her to open up further. Certainly, she seems well aware of the nature of

such viscous emissions, which ought not surprise me, given she was married and had a child. I think her complaint is as much about the irritation of having to deal with it as it is the concerns of purity or the inappropriateness of her handling Peter's seed, however indirectly.

21st September 1367

Jdonea's frustrations grow more apparent the more I observe her. Constance has been, as usual, asking Jdonea about her art. On Constance's part this is clearly an attempt to forge a connection or find a way to relate to Jdonea, but Jdonea does not view art in the same way that the others do. For her, it seems to be entirely about the colours and the aesthetic for aesthetic's sake.

What seem such innocent enquiries about meaning and depth have caused a great deal of displeasure from Jdonea. She certainly seems to resent having to explain herself, even when the paintings are simply scenes from the Bible.

19th October 1367

With Fychan well again this year, Constance's enquiries into Jdonea's health seem to be meeting nothing but dour glares and misdirections.

When I first met her, I did wonder how much of her apparent weakness is from an honestly weak constitution, and how much is her dislike of physical labour. For all her moments needing to lie down, I have never seen her truly ill - not even so much as a fever. Perhaps on another time I will see what happens if I push her forward, and remove the safety and comfort of her time spent resting. For now, however, I intend to use Constance's pressure as a way to get her to open up.

21st October 1367

It went rather well, all told.

Publicly scolding Constance for prying too far into Jdonea's health may cause some ripples that I will need to keep track of, but it seemed to placate Jdonea and has eased some of her wariness around me. After I berated Constance for her lack of empathy, I was sure to spend time alone with Jdonea and express my sympathy about the fronts we have to put on for others, once more.

I do not think I will ever truly convince her that she can tell me the truths she hides completely; at least, not without revealing my own secrets and that would be far too dangerous. None may ever know what work we truly do here. Still, she spoke a little on the death of her son.

It would seem that her negligence was part of the circumstances surrounding his death, her lack of care and focus. Perhaps that is why she is so averse to taking on more responsibility? Or perhaps it is simply that she does not care?

12th November 1367

The matter with Lachlann progressed as expected.

Sister Idonea, on closer inspection, seems more irritated than righteously angry. Perhaps she, too, has something to hide?

13th November 1367

Further examination of Idonea's quarters have me convinced she does not have anything directly to hide. If she has been taking food as well, she is doing so with much more skill than Lachlann did.

Honestly, I doubt it is the case. Idonea would never risk drawing attention to herself in such a fashion.

7th January 1368

As always, I am directing Constance to areas anew within the group, but that has not stopped me from continuing to observe Idonea.

More and more I am convinced that she simply does not feel emotional connections in the same way that most of God's children do. I do not know if she is touched by the Devil, or if she was the subject of some unknown hurt in her past that damaged her thusly, or if it is some other possibility that has not yet occurred to me.

14th May 1368

I have had little to add to my notes until tonight. It is done, as ever.

My conclusions on Idonea are almost as simple as they are terrifying. I believe her motivations in what she does are as much following the path of least resistance as they are personal: Certainly, she sees Constance as a threat, for Constance asks too many questions and seems to see through some of the carefully erected walls that Idonea has spent so long constructing. The distress that Constance causes Apollonia also seems to be a concern, as Apollonia is her closest friend and staunchest ally.

I am at once proud to have chosen so well, and yet also terrified at what I might find behind the carefully constructed facades of each of the others. What darkness do they hide? What more can I learn of them?

10th Cycle

15th May 1368

It is time I turned my eye to those of our number who need less of my direct manipulations in order to turn against Constance. It is perhaps ironic that one of those is one of our more just and even-handed brothers. As a man who was once a reeve, I had wondered if Thomas Graham's mind would prove less malleable than the others. He is more accustomed to thinking for himself, more accustomed to controlling himself for the good of others and out of a sense of firm justice.

But he came to me a broken man, a man who abandoned his dying village, a man whose wife and children had succumbed already to the plague that blighted the land. I had hoped perhaps to find something in his grief and loss that could be warped and twisted.

I was most delighted to learn that there was already something warped and twisted inside of him. Before there was the reeve, there was the soldier. And the soldier followed orders, and the soldier did what was necessary for his men and his home. No tolerance can be shown for the outsider, for the ones who threaten the community.

21st June 1368

It is time to repair the buildings and make them ready for eventual winter, before the harvest and before the colder times. Thomas proves himself a most helpful worker, attending upon Mark and Sister Kristiana as a willing menial labourer. There is a humility in him from which others could perhaps learn; so long as it is for the betterment of all, he sees very little work beneath him.

I have made myself available on several afternoons to help with the works. They try to usher me away, but I have two willing hands and, on occasion, the time. It provides me with an opportunity to watch them at labour. Truthfully, I learn little that I did not already know. My sole curiosity is that he struggles not at all to take directions from Kristiana. His late wife must have been rather formidable.

3rd October 1368

Thomas is far less amusing to watch during sheep breeding season. I do not believe the base lusts of man are the most efficient way to steer him.

15th August 1367

Constance is arrived, and now my work begins. Observing Thomas more intently grants more insight to the nuances of his reaction. For the moment surprise reigns supreme, with him as with everyone, though he has withdrawn to his usual, comfortable reactions. When in doubt, the man goes quiet and observes.

I must be discreet in watching him. I cannot exactly follow him as he forages, study every frown of the brow and wonder which intricate thought assails him.

17th August 1367

I realise this time something I had not noticed before: he is suspicious of Constance. At first he doubted her identity, for he sought me out to ask how I had found her. He expressed it in terms of curiosity at such a miraculous development, but I saw he was searching for some error in my judgement, some flaw in my investigation. He takes me at my word, however.

Then he is suspicious of Constance's intentions. Perhaps this stems from some protectiveness towards Agnes, perhaps a fear towards all outsiders and how they might disrupt his happy home. While I do not wish to set him against her too early, I have tried to reassure him without snuffing out that spark.

25th August 1367

Even after all these cycles, I find myself unsure which feeling strikes Thomas first. Is it satisfaction on behalf of his friend Agnes at her reunion, or jealousy that such a reunion for himself is impossible? I believe the latter, more base instinct is one which he masters relatively swiftly, but there is no doubt that it festers in his heart, however much he may deny it.

If it did not fester, he would not stay away. But he has been busy in the hills this past week, most determined to be far from the kitchen and the laughter of this joyful reunion. Nobody objects, because nobody notices and nobody will complain at a forager keeping busy. Agnes might have noticed that food was more plentiful, but Agnes notices little beyond her haze of joy.

5th September 1367

I have encouraged Constance to learn more of the local area a little sooner than usual this time. And, for once, I have directed her explicitly to Thomas, speaking of him in terms where I hope she will expect him to be kind, paternal. Often, this has been an interaction I have allowed to play out as it will, but I shall monitor the developments more closely.

8th September 1367

Thomas shoulders his new burdens, as expected. He has seemed brisk when he stops by the kitchen to prompt Constance to accompany him, but this is a brusqueness I see only because I know to look for it. Constance does not know him well enough to take this as a personal detachment, and even Agnes is proving oblivious.

11th September 1367

The foragers were out later than usual tonight, but I smiled most sincerely at the sight of their return. Thomas and Constance, baskets laden with blackberries, fingers and mouths smudged, laughing as they walked the path back to the Hermitage. I do believe her charms are working their magic upon him. I shall let this happy state of affairs continue for a while longer.

25 September 1367

I made sure to speak with Thomas on Constance, and how she is settling within the Hermitage. He has been warm, enthusiastic, praising her work greatly. It seemed an appropriate moment to comment on his improved demeanour, and make some mention of his family, how they must have brought such joy to his heart as well.

27th September 1367

My words have found their mark. Thomas withdraws day by day, his heart burning with jealousy for what has been denied him but granted to Agnes. Guilt haunts his steps at the merest notion that he is moving on from his grief for his family, and I believe he shall henceforth guard himself against the charms and warmth of Constance. He smiles, he is polite, but that open pleasure at her company is being smothered.

5th October 1367

As the chill creeps into the wind, as winter looms on the horizon, Thomas has stopped his excursions with Constance. Of course, he provides the most sensible reasons - foraging is more sparse, conditions are worsening, and there is better work she can do elsewhere.

While I do believe she is disappointed at losing a thread to this new companion, she will forget quickly, overwhelmed with other interests and other individuals. I will judge how to handle this matter in the spring.

20th November 1367

Lachlann has been revealed, and I do believe Thomas is proud that Constance has been the one to discover the truth. That is some lingering warmth, appreciation that I must make sure is snuffed out in the months to come. He must see her as a threat, not approve that she has acted as watchdog to the community.

In confession, he admitted to some guilt that he had not noticed the thefts himself. He had long suspected Lachlann of ill-doings, he told me, and believes he should have acted upon them sooner. I assured him that he was not wrong to believe the best in his brothers and sisters, and reminded him

that Constance was granted the perspective of an outsider. In the past, this has proven sufficient to plant the seed in his mind that he, and even Lachlann, are of the community, while Constance is not.

8th January 1368

If all is proceeding as it ever has, within a matter of days I expect Thomas to come to me, seeking my guidance. There have been bickers and tensions, and he will notice that Constance is the subject of many.

13th January 1368

As anticipated, he sought my guidance. This always requires a delicate hand. I do not want to blame Constance, for he never acts out of malice towards her, merely a sense of necessity and duty. I have agreed with his concerns, validating his suspicions rather than dismissing them. It is always difficult for a community, I have told him, when someone new enters the fold. They will bring with them disruptions, for they upset the established order with their mere presence, however innocent their intentions. We are so accustomed to one another that it should be of little surprise that Constance's arrival has prompted discontent. That which had been laid to rest rises once again. Habits we have learnt to take in stride chafe once more, for there is something new to chafe against. Long-established tolerances turn intolerant.

I have encouraged him to spend time with his fellows, to help them guard against arguments and division, and assured him that I shall watch Constance. Best that he does not deal with her directly, for then he may see the young woman, instead of the interloper. Best that his attention is upon all his fellows, so he feels the bond that will drive him to act.

25th February 1368

He has kept his distance, as I advised. I see him offering guidance to Anthony, attempting to comfort the disturbed young man. Sending him on the occasional errand to the Infirmary makes him a witness to the arguments between Constance and Ralf, so that he might see a new fissure bursting within the Hermitage. We spoke again, two nights ago, and I made sure my reassurances held the faintest hint of doubt. I cannot push him too far, too soon.

29th March 1368

The fight between Ralf and Ladislaus went splendidly. I made sure to manipulate Thomas to witness it on this occasion, and while he has never held Ralf in the highest esteem, never before has our Infirmary driven anyone to violence.

We spoke extensively several nights after. I made sure to give the impression that I had to deal with the affected parties, that there was much work I had to do to heal our community before I could make time for his observations, important as they are. Finally I may begin to voice some concern that Constance is

too great a disruption for our community to endure, though I quickly brushed over these worries as if I had said too much in error.

He thinks he sees through me, this reeve. He thinks he can see the sin in the hearts of all men, and he thinks me too soft, too forgiving. It is perfection.

20th April 1368

Thomas came to me directly, no doubt spurred on by Agnes's upset at my suggestions Constance eventually take on her role as the leader of our sisters. I expressed that it was my hope that granting Constance such a position would help integrate her better, make her one of us rather than an outsider. Thomas all but directly accused me of undermining those of us who have served the Hermitage longer, though I know he thinks me to have done such in naive ignorance.

I acted as if the notion that integrating Constance into our community might not be possible had not occurred to me before. Let him think he is enlightening me, let him think himself the watchdog.

1st May 1368

I went to Thomas for the first time in some time, acting as though I sought his guidance. I had done my utmost, I told him, to bring Constance into the fold, and yet her presence has been causing more distress than joy. We have built so much, I told him, that I am fearful of what might happen if the tensions continue.

He agreed that it was not fully Constance's fault, that she is a kind young woman who has done no harm by intention. He even ventured that her virtues have clashed with the sins of the Hermitage, that so many of our number are scarred from their lives before my guidance that they cannot overcome their own darkness in her presence.

I had to lead him to the word sin, I had to lead him to the idea that we must purge ourselves of our inherent wickedness. By the end of the conversation, however, I knew the idea had been planted in his mind that Constance has become the centrepiece of all this strife, and that her fault is irrelevant. It is a simple truth, and simple truths must be resolved in simple ways.

13th May 1368

As I have spoken with them all, I spoke with Thomas, ensured everything was in place before the final action tomorrow. He has been worrying most deeply, for he fears the loss of this community, this place that has been his only home since the loss of his family. He does not blame Constance when he thinks rationally; he blames the Hermitage, but he accepts their sins and their faults, instead of condemning them. She merely brings every sin to the forefront, by presence if not by action.

I have assured him that action will be taken, and when he looked apprehensive I clasped his shoulder and allowed a quaver to enter my voice. We need him, was my assurance. Many of them are weak and ignorant of their own sin, but something must be done, and it must be done with a firm hand to ensure the safety of all of us. I can offer what guidance I can, but there must be the firm bedrock of the unwavering heart, and there are few other than him who can act without succumbing to their weakness.

He has done what his home needed before, he has dealt that final blow to the innocent for the good of the community. And he shall do so again to save his home.

11th Cycle

16th May 1370

Jdonea, Thomas - these were two people about whom I understood rough outlines without ever having the clarity that comes from determined, focused study. Sister Kristiana is more open, but is nonetheless difficult to judge except when it comes to her brother.

For that reason, I have determined that this period of study will focus upon her attitudes and understanding. This will take some easing into, as historically I have left her and her brother to guide themselves except over certain decisions regarding the chapel. Their skills are as obscure and confusing to me as my studies would be to them.

And their history, I eventually learned, is surprising. It is hard for me to argue that they did not bring the plague upon their home when I recall what the fat men of Avignon have done to bring disaster and destruction upon the world, when I consider the sacrilege that unfolded from their intent into action.

And yet that is not even the worst of it, as their path also encompasses a murder. True, that was Mark, not Kristiana, and Mark is

I was going to write that Mark is simpler to understand than his sister. It occurred to me as I was writing that this isn't guaranteed to be the case, that he is simpler to work with merely because he has learned to defer to his sister's talent.

There is no great jealousy in the man, but there is in Kristiana, a jealousy born of pride and her unusual upbringing. And it is that interplay of pride and jealousy that makes her complex. I shall have to study her as best I can.

For this coming year, by the usual pattern, she and her brother focus on maintenance and refinement, and for nearly twenty years now I have simply left them to it, trading at first on their barely-veiled contempt for Ralf's architectural conceits and, later, the simple fact of Constance's delivering them to me.

It is clearly time to change that, in order to have reason to learn from them.

14th June 1370

As our days stretch to their longest, repairs begin in earnest. There is little left to chance, and little doubt who oversees it all; it's not uncommon for Brother Mark to spend his time simply cutting lengths of wood to size for the underlying repair, while Sister Kristiana moves around the area in question, often clambering for a better perspective, and directs operations.

It's impossible to doubt her confidence in her work, though I cannot fault her for certainty. I have on occasion, these past twenty years, counselled her against pride but, I think, never successfully, and I am not sure I will ever enjoy success with this. She does not see her pleasure in her work as the sin it is, and it seems to me that she will always fall to sin again if allowed to practice her craft.

At the same time, I find it difficult to imagine a life in which Kristiana Cripplegate does not ply her trade for any length of time. It is possible that finding some better way to harness her desires is the way to resolve this.

20th August 1370

Fychan is dead once more. I suspect this will matter little; it has been surmountable four times, after all. It is no reason to shrink from the purpose to which I dedicate this cycle.

7th October 1370

It becomes easier to engage Kristiana in discussion, as her craft is comparatively limited in scope and she must practice most of it within the confines of her workshop, which allows me the opportunity to sit and speak at length.

Too, her responses in this space are distracted, and seem more revealing as such. I think this must be embraced; I can learn more in this way than I expected would be possible.

8th October 1370

And a day later, Mark returns also to the workshop, having finished those tasks that kept him outside. My questioning, perforce roundabout, garnered me little in the way of insight, save to say that I understand now why the word 'quaint' enrages her so.

She is aware, as who from her occupation could not be, that those of the social class above her are educated to a judgement she does not possess, and to hear their usual terms of dismissal applied to her work frustrates her to an astonishing degree.

If I were working otherwise, I would speak to her from my days in Avignon at length. Around me clergy, I remember strongly the rich who we sought patronship from, in particular those whose libraries held the key to communion with Our Lady.

And with that exposure, seeking their money but holding knowledge they did not to make us feel their equal, I saw many times that their opinions, their tastes, were almost invariably inferior to those of the artisan.

If I were working otherwise, I should tell her so, and seek to impress the truth of it upon her. But as it stands, that word remains the strongest foothold into her that I have.

15th August 1371

And now Constance is here, and the tone of the hermitage changes. It is not simply my anticipation, although doubtless that helps to drive this, but the fact is that with that sudden addition, things shift as they haven't since the surprise that was Lachlann, and when Lachlann arrived we were new to this place, not comfortably embarked on a way of life.

Kristiana is a little tense already, but not defensive, not aggressive; she sees a newcomer who may not understand who she is and what she has earned. Anger will come from her pride, in the end; the handle through which I can guide her to dispatch her sin into the scapegoat is the very sin she needs to purge.

20th October 1371

Quaint'. It's so quick to say, so abrupt, and so easy. And between Kristiana and Constance it is everything.

Above all else, I must never let them become friends before the argument begins, or I shall never have as strong a lever again, and little time with which to use it.

I had, this time, a view of the entire uproar, and it is perhaps worth my remembering that even seeing me there did not prevent Kristiana from actively taking offence, though it did keep her from becoming violent as effectively as her brother's presence usually does.

I will guide Constance as I always do in the right means by which to apologise.

6th November 1371

Constance has offered, as she always does, to help renovate the chapel. And, as I have suggested since I first thought of it, she has made a start before making the offer. Such presumption mirrors Kristiana's own instincts, and I believe that to be why it angers her to the degree that it does.

17th November 1371

The links that will always stand out as the hermitage bond together against Constance are the ones which you cannot imagine forming under any other circumstances.

Industrious Sister Kristiana and lackadaisical Sister Idonea may be the closest, splintered as they are not only by their attitudes to work and community but also by my interest in an altarpiece both carved and painted.

That choice is early enough that I could not undo it even if I wished, and at the time I wondered if I would need to keep them apart in order to ensure Brother Ralf would infuriate them both, when I thought I knew his role, but I do not regret it; it has changed little, and granted me more insight into them both.

Here, though, it means that they unite in finding Constance's presumption infuriating. And thus they unite exactly as I wish them to.

12th December 1371

The chapel, not the farmhouse. Kristiana's efforts are dedicated entirely to a show of prowess against Constance, and I do not think she realises how evident this is. I sometimes have to struggle not to smile.

Constance simply does not understand how she can have gone so wrong. Of course, until I dedicated my focus to Kristiana this cycle, I did not fully see how, either.

27th January 1372

Everything appears to be going entirely as it should. Sister Kristiana and Brother Mark have been persuaded not to move against Constance immediately, but they hold grudges. I will not even need to remind them of it as time moves on.

I understand Kristiana now, well enough at any rate to steer her with a minimum of effort. That will make the direction of others much smoother.

14th May 1372

It is done.

12th Cycle

15th May 1372

I have decided that on this occasion, I will turn my attention to Apollonia.

While she is one of the more easy for me to read, I am always fascinated by the descent of the more empathic in the group. Undoubtedly, Apollonia is an empathic person, if intensely focused, and so I look forward to twisting events to learn more of her past and motivations.

She is also one of those who trusts me most, which ought make this perhaps easier than looking into the others I have thus far. Even after I gave her rightful position as Head of the Nuns to Agnes, despite Apollonia being clearly more qualified and capable, still she trusts. It was certainly the best choice for keeping her broken, to keep her doubting herself.

She is ever so fascinating.

Tonight I returned later than usual. This gave her some cause to worry, and will be the first point that I use to guide her behaviours.

3rd June 1372

One nuance to the pin incident that I had not previously noted is Apollonia's disappointment with Anthony for pushing matters so. I suspect she believed Idonea's gift-giving was a sign of improvement in the girl, and that Anthony's rashness pushed her away.

As Idonea relies on Apollonia to protect her, Apollonia clearly finds someone who she can depend on in Idonea. Idonea is steady and predictable, and does not judge her. She feels more comfortable with someone to mother, but also with someone to care for her. In some ways, Idonea fills the position that the nuns as a whole would, were Sister Apollonia their Head.

This does put some of her difficulties with Agnes in a new light.

2nd October 1372

With sheep breeding season underway, I have been trying to convince Apollonia to discuss the source of her lusts with me in greater detail.

I have established that the ability to bring herself pleasure was one she came upon innocently, while learning bathing rituals after the onset of her woman's sin. It is pleasingly ironic that in the search for Godly cleanliness she came upon instead the sin of lust.

Still, the extent to which she feels shame for her pleasures indicates to me there is more to be learned.

5th October 1372

Today I convinced Apollonia to speak with me at length in confession.

I used the increase in her flagellations as a way to convince her to be more open. Although I know the amount is not so great currently to cause problems with her work, it was easy enough to make suggestions and hints towards such and see her more vulnerable. I can never underestimate the powers of insight that these repeating cycles offer me.

She spoke at length about her time in the Priory before we met - how the Prioress was a cold and distant woman, how she was discovered bathing in a stream by a local priest. How he took her to his chapel and raped her, and how she bore this shame for years to come, convinced it was a punishment from God.

I was torn then. It would have been so easy to agree, to call her lust a sin and further torment her, further twist the knife. And yet, I knew if I did that, I would be unlikely to find her so quick to speak with me and trust me again, and it is still over a year before I must push her over the edge. As such, I forgave her, and told her such matters were not her fault or God's punishment, but the sin of a false priest. There was such relief in her eyes, I wondered if I had absolved her of too much.

I will keep close watch on her as Constance arrives. Her jealousy of Agnes is yet a thorn under her skin, and I know that she will not be able to help but scratch.

18th October 1372

It is worth noting, for posterity's sake at least, that Fychan has recovered this time, and is doing well.

26th December 1372

Ah, how inevitable the rise of sin is. I noted that Apollonia watched carefully while Anthony spoke to Agnes, and noted the suspicion in her eyes. I do not know what she suspects him of, but there is something about Anthony's history that is deeply unsettling, and I suspect she senses it.

15th May 1373

I have been certain to favour Agnes greatly at this year's celebrations. It has vexed Apollonia greatly, and I am sure she will be best placed to manipulate come Constance's arrival.

I do wonder at what state the scapegoat must be in currently. Were I to take down the bricks, what would I see? Would her head still be shorn and ripped, her eyes bloody holes? Or would she be in some halfway state, half fed upon, half restored?

The very thought makes me shudder. That is one curiosity that I resolve to not indulge and, if Our Lady maintains a divine eternity of sorts within her space of Judgement, the question may be meaningless in any case.

17th August 1373

The more I witness, the easier it is to pick out individual details.

It is evident to me now that Apollonia has spent the last few days desperately trying to overcome her natural aggravation towards Agnes, and her jealousy at the happy reunion. I wonder, did she ever want children? Is it the specifics of the mother-daughter connection that she envies, or is it simply that Agnes's life seems to contain so many of the things that she desires?

It is not her jealousy that drives her, however. Indeed, now I note that my own connection with Constance seems to cause her anguish. Any mention of Constance's piousness, her connection to the Divine, elicits a small pained flicker in Apollonia's eyes.

And yet how she tries, how earnestly she wants to be pleased for Agnes. Never has her fall seemed so sweet.

21st August 1373

Would it ease Apollonia's insecurity if she knew that Agnes, too, was raped, or would that simply add to her pain?

Regardless, it is clear that this pain is where her overture towards Constance originates. As always, Constance is too concerned for her mother's privacy and emotions to respond in kind, and Apollonia is stung. She turns to Idonea, of course, for solace. Idonea's even temper makes her such a perfect solace.

I wonder, would it bother Apollonia if she knew? Would she care that Idonea feels so little, as long as they are able to fulfil the necessary roles for one another?

8th September 1373

Constance is a far more naturally organised person than either Agnes or Apollonia, and her work in the kitchen has been clearly irritating Apollonia more than I originally observed. As I have with others before, I am removing sanctuaries from her, forcing her to confront Constance wherever she goes.

5th October 1373

I am determined that I will spot the exact moment that Apollonia gives in to her urges and bathes herself. Already I see her watching Peter at work with the sheep, and the flush at her cheeks.

21st October 1373

No break yet, but I still wanted to record how frustrated Apollonia clearly is with Constance's prying into Idonea. I think it is a strange mix of possessiveness towards Idonea as her charge to protect, and also perceiving Constance's insistence on answers as being unkind.

The fact that Idonea can be quite abrasive when irritable doubtless exacerbates Apollonia's displeasure at such interference.

26th October 1373

It happened tonight. I am sure of it. I saw a moment of Apollonia looking at Constance with her breath caught in her throat, and then she fled for a long walk. There was definite relief in her when she returned, and if I am correct, she will confess to me tomorrow.

27th October 1373

What is it that causes these sapphic tendencies in Apollonia? I do not think she is inherently inclined in that manner, as I have seen no signs of it with any of the other Sisters. Not even Idonea, who is undoubtedly lovely and the pair very close. So what is it about Constance that brings this out in her?

It is my theory that she is shifting her sense of herself from victim to aggressor, and it is women she sees in the role of victim. In this deviancy she finds more agency than lustful thoughts about men - she wishes to possess and destroy Constance.

Of course, it is possible I am mistaken and she is just lusting and sinful by nature. Her confessions are so distraught and vague it is hard to be certain.

12th November 1373

Lachlann outed without unusual incident.

18th November 1373

Again, it is the day of Apollonia approaching me to ask about the reasons for Agnes's appointment. I write the word asking, and already I feel it is incorrect, as there is no shred of dignity or sense in the sobbed words she flings at me. I savour every syllable when I think of the shame that it shows her later.

The truth is Apollonia needs to feel needed, and I have done well in making her feel utterly replaceable.

5th December 1373

Here comes the desperate guilt, the gushing niceties, as Apollonia actively seeks Constance's presence and tries to help her. Even Constance, childish fool that she is, can sense the discomfort behind the gestures, and she withdraws at my suggestion.

Idonea treats the wounds on Apollonia's back, and hides from her responsibilities around the hermitage.

Wonderful to think how things that I never planned on can fit together so well.

30th January 1374

Do you know, I suspect Apollonia fears I may be in love with Constance.

Aside from the thought being so utterly laughable, I almost wish I could show her the truth, just to see the shock on her face. Love this creature, this scapegoat? Look, child, how I oversee her destruction over and over.

I cup my hand under Constance's chin and look into her trusting eyes and know this is truly the work of Our Lady.

25th April 1374

Tonight, Apollonia came to me, accompanied by Agnes, as they always do. Together they expressed their fears and their worries. Once more, Apollonia's assertion that I was too pure for Constance's advances filled me with both mirth and righteousness (for I am, am I not? Never have I been seduced by man or woman).

It is so much easier for Apollonia to see these effects as coming from a source of great evil and disruption than being a flaw in her own nature. Constance is, to her, the centre of all sin, and we will purge her, and see her clean.

More than that, when she perceives that I am opening up to her, that she is pure and needed and as special as she has always hoped, she will do anything to preserve that feeling.

14th May 1374

It is done. I am not of a mind to record the bloody details every time, but something did strike me about Apollonia's violence this time.

There is anger there, yes, and the violence done to her womanhood is doubtless a punishment for Constance's perceived lustfulness, as well as a mirror to Apollonia's own sin. And yet, I note that she knows the places to cut - not just to cause pain, but to remove the danger of sinful pleasure once more.

Although the thought fills me with sickness, I wonder if, in her own way, Apollonia is not trying to save Constance? Save her from her own slavery to lust, save her from temptation that in Apollonia's eyes, no one can overcome?

Is she perhaps trying to save herself, too? In more than just imparting these wounds on a scapegoat, but perhaps hoping that she is imparting her capacity for lust at all. Does she hope and pray that she will wake up the next morning as cold and unfeeling as the Prioress who so terrorised her?

If anything, that makes the tragedy of her choices all the more potent.

They slumber. I must leave, ready to return tomorrow. I have learned much.

13th Cycle

16th May 1374

In the last twenty-four years I have learned so much that listing it all would make this single entry as long as any single journal I have set down before now. There are many things that make a full record of my studies difficult, but this is the greatest; I cannot compile a digest.

I have begun taking stock of what I have learned, and will put as many of my theories into action as possible. I am curious how much time this will offer me with which to work on other things.

7th June 1374

Brother Fychan is looking healthy so far. If past cycles are any form of guidance, we can assume that he will be up and active by July, although still limping.

I consider this a boon; Fychan's arguments over Constance's winter are a great benefit when it comes to the pace of developments. I should have quite some time this cycle to consider strategies and identify where we fall short of perfection.

14th September 1374

If there is a sin still in me after so much has been taken by the scapegoat, it must be the sin of hubris. This is easily enough overcome, and I shall take the necessary steps to do so.

Yet it is the simplest explanation as to what befell us today. As I sat down to write on this, I saw my last entry, and reread it, and it is clear to me.

The day has been sunny. The ground is dry and secure. Over the years I have seen Brother Mark work in these and all other conditions a thousand times, more, and never has he so much as shaken for a moment, but today, his balance betrayed him, his skills betrayed him, and he fell.

He landed badly, extremely so, half on his waiting store of stone, half-off. I am told you could hear the snap of wood split for the fire from a distance, though I was too far away to see it for myself.

The death of Mark changes many things. I am not sure yet how many.

My plans for this cycle must be altered perforce.

15th September 1374

Brother Thomas came to me today. Asking as he did to speak to me in private, I naturally anticipated that his intent was confession, and I was vastly mistaken. Instead, Thomas confided to me news as startling to me as yesterday's death had been.

He believes that Mark - sure footed Mark, who fell all the same - was killed deliberately.

I must admit I heard little else of his thoughts, so loud was the commotion in my own mind from this idea. I believe I agreed that he should investigate.

Self-evidently he is wrong. None of them have murdered at any other time, and there is no reason that should have changed in any way. But self-evidently, Mark should not have fallen.

So which is true? And how? And why?

20th September 1374

Today my unusual visit came from Brother Peter, who considers the behaviour of Brother Thomas unacceptable. He calls it absurd that Thomas could even suspect any member of the hermitage. He says they could not have it in them, none of them.

I was startled by his certainty in this, particularly given what I have seen of them and what I have heard in confidence, but as I must consider those sides of their character revealed on Constance's final day to be under the same seal as the confessional I could not speak strongly against this.

I simply reminded him that Brother Thomas has been a reeve, and that he may have some talent in this area. I asked Peter if such a gift should be ignored, and he could not disagree, and I asked him, as a man close to the wisdom of God, to consider us all in his prayers and see if he could not see his way clear to defending his brothers or sisters if needed.

After all, as I pointed out, I have placed them into his charge.

22nd September 1374

I visited Thomas today. I cannot wait much longer without knowing if we have amongst us a hidden adder, one who will strike without the blessing and encouragement of Our Lady.

It seems that Thomas has begun to bring his suspicions together, and they hinge upon a very few of our number. Some few of us were already accounted for, as Brother William exonerates Sister Agnes, and she exonerates him in return.

Idonea and Apollonia are likewise exempt from suspicion, being placed elsewhere by one another's corroboration. Thomas holds, and I must agree, that this crime, if it happened, would be an act of sudden passion, for that he fell in such a way to die swiftly was in no small part in the hands of fate. A conspiracy seems overmuch.

Fychan, while recovered, we judge unable to bring to bear the leverage required. Brother Anthony was seen by Thomas against the hillside as he rushed to the scene of the fall. There are other reasons, some strong and some trivial, by which Thomas has reduced a suspect list to Brother Lachlann, Brother Ladislaus, and Sister Kristiana.

I have entreated him to allow me to speak with each of them in turn. If Lachlann has killed Mark, then I shall offer him up to Thomas's judgement this cycle and whet the hermitage's anticipation of justice ahead of Constance's arrival. But if not, I do not wish Thomas to stumble ahead of time on Lachlann's storehouse, not when so much can hinge on that.

23rd September 1374

I am confident that Lachlann did not murder Mark. While I shall have to devote greater attention to him in future, my belief after my questioning - and after so many more years of observation than Thomas can have had - is that he does not have it in him to do such a thing when there is nowhere to flee.

It is not in him to commit any crime that he does not think he can escape the consequences of easily.

I remain a little concerned that Mark's death may have been accidental, and Lachlann not have confessed to it; however, that question can be left on the path behind us if Thomas' suspicions are assuaged.

24th September 1374

I intended, today, to speak with Ladislaus. I have been delaying any questioning of Kristiana which might accuse her of the death of her brother until the very last moment, and I feel no shame in this. So I set myself an order in which I would speak with her last, in case I did discover a killer among us.

So today I intended to speak with Ladislaus. I reckoned, however, without Thomas, whose investigation today took Lachlann into his scope. It was foolish of me not to immediately tell him that I had become sure Lachlann was no killer, but it did result in my spending much of today working to prevent Thomas from stumbling upon his hiding place, revealing things too early and costing me one of my finer tools against Constance.

Fortunately, I have now set Thomas's mind at ease regarding Lachlann. Tomorrow, I must set my own mind at ease concerning Ladislaus.

25th September 1374

I cannot think of a single reason Ladislaus would have for killing Mark, having spoken with him. There is little in the way of connection between them, and what there is is the respect of craftsmen. Both use tools that they crafted in collaboration. Both understand one another. There seems no point on which dissent between them would turn.

I fear that I have had too long to think on this. There are only three causes apparent to me for changes in a cycle; the weather, my own actions, and the will of the Lord. This is surely not due to the weather. There is, then, a great chance that I have somehow brought this about.

I am thankful that Constance will absolve me soon enough.

Still I do not wish to accuse Kristiana in her hearing. I will commune with Our Lady instead and see what insight that brings.

30th September 1374

Thomas has pronounced himself satisfied that the death of Mark is due to happenstance. This was a day which provoked great difficulties, as hearing that led Kristiana to question the alternatives herself, and much of the afternoon was lost to raised voices and wild accusations which, so soon after a deep communion with Our Lady, I must admit I was not equal to.

Sometimes colloquy with her leaves me refreshed, motivated, and eager. Sometimes, however, it seems a drain on me, one I would rather not bear. I had expected this to be of the first stripe, seeking truth as I was.

I can only conclude that Our Lady found the question immaterial, saddened though she was by the temporary loss of Brother Mark. This is an interesting perspective, and perhaps a useful reminder. My flock is immortal, even if they die from time to time, and I do not believe them to be easily driven to murder.

I shall consider this an end to these worries, and simply work to ensure that the loss of Mark causes no difficulties.

29th August 1375

Constance's arrival has led me to the conclusion I shall have to juggle things. Her interest in design and craft, so crucial to turning the hermitage against her, seems to be leading her to want to work with Kristiana.

I know that I have remarked in the past that Kristiana must not be allowed to befriend Constance, and it seems now that I run the risk. I will not allow this.

As I have done before, I shall guide Constance early to befriend Thomas and work with him closely. Still suspecting that he may perhaps have missed a killer, I believe that when she demonstrates his failure to discover Lachlann's theft he will take the blow harder yet.

It allows me also to match Anthony to Kristiana, a pairing unlikely to add extra complications but who can be relied on to do the work which we still need. I am developing an eye for the English weather, and I expect this winter to be uncomfortable.

With Kristiana's heart in the chapel over Christmas, I would like for my own comfort to ensure that as much has been done to keep the hermitage proof against the snow as possible beforehand.

14th May 1376

It is done.

14th Cycle

16th May 1376

Brother Mark is a straightforward man, yet his death in the last cycle caused confusion and difficulty quite beyond that which I would expect by his mere absence.

I must come to a better understanding of this if I am not to be wrong-footed should he - or Kristiana - die again.

In fact, if Kristiana is to die, it occurs to me that that robs me of one of my finest holds on Mark. I shall accordingly find him work to do with others this year, whenever there is some peace to do so, and see if he can bond to any other such.

17th June 1376

Mark seems willing enough to work with Ladislaus for extended periods. We had seen this before the first cycle began, of course, but at that time Sister Kristiana was always present, instead of educating Anthony in the ways of the stonemason as she has been this past week.

I have contrived on many occasions to be passing the door to Brother Ladislaus's workshop, and to overhear their conversation. They come from such different places, enough that it is as if their worlds were entirely different. Despite this, the brotherhood of the craftsman unites them. The conviviality of their talk seeped through easily.

If nothing else works, uniting Mark with Ladislaus will allow me to guide him to where he needs to be. Yet I feel that there is another possibility which might be wiser.

12th August 1376

Uniting Mark with Brother Ralf was a disaster. Brother Peter tells me that at one point he had to call Brother Thomas to intercede when an argument was on the brink of becoming physical.

I have told Brother Peter that to my mind Sister Kristiana is better able to curb Mark's wrath, but I do not imagine he will follow the cue.

14th August 1376

If I could be granted one wish it would be that Sister Agnes finally perfect her pigeon pie. As each cycle unfolds her recipe grows closer to something delectable, and I regret each serving, knowing that it will never achieve the taste I crave, and knowing that each time it will instead revert to her inferior preparation.

It is as well that her other dishes are as sustaining and delicious as anything I have had in this country.

22nd September 1376

Brother Anthony is a willing student for Mark, and while Sister Kristiana is out supervising construction while her brother and Anthony cut stone to her requirements, they seem to bond well. There is something missing, somewhat, and I believe that I know what it is.

I believe that Mark does not consider Anthony more than a student. A more paternal attitude, I believe, would come in the event that I prepare for, in the event of Kristiana's death. Mark defines himself, it seems to me, by his family, and I believe that he is as protective of his sister and her talent as he is because there is no other family for him.

I am sure that if he lost her, he would open himself to the idea of others as part of his family.

6th November 1376

From Mark's side, I think a partnership with Sister Grace goes well. His efforts cooperating on her behalf, and his willing acceptance of a woman as having the capacity to be his equal as a craftsman, mean he affords her respect and welcomes her advice when it arrives.

However, I cannot consider this to be a sound match, as I do not care to encourage Sister Grace to be less protective of her brewery. As with Mark, she is a straightforward person, but there are very few issues on which she is likely to become irate with Constance.

I cannot afford to strip away the best.

14th January 1377

I struggle to enforce any other pairings for Mark in anything but the shortest term. Having tried to match him to Fychan, with little I could use to explain it, to Peter, with attendant complaints from both that he is not the right man, and to Idonea, to substantial protestation from Idonea and even greater displeasure from Mark, I must concede that any sufficient partnership for him must be one that I have already tried.

The path to direct Mark, if needed, will come either from his camaraderie with Ladislaus, or from making him greatly protective of Anthony after the death of Kristiana.

That temper of his, coupled with the protectiveness he feels for the weak and the respect he holds for the skilled, seem to me to be all the leverage I could need. After all, he has killed before, and while he avoids the question by simply noting that the bandits deserved to die, I do not believe it was purely to defend his family.

In Mark we have someone who is ready to kill. He has done it before and he has made his peace with it, and I will confess that I can be satisfied with that.

I must rest content with that, and for that matter I must spend the next few months soothing those whose feathers I have ruffled with these unorthodox arrangements.

At least I do not have long to go before Constance's arrival will distract them, and it is only nine months after that when, to them, it shall be as if I had done nothing.

14th May 1378

It is done.

15th Cycle

15th May 1378

As I mark another successful turn of the year, another notch of insight gathered on these poor wretches and their endless sin, I find myself thinking on a new challenge to attempt, alongside the matters of testing individuals. I am almost overwhelmed by the sheer number of possibilities, but for now my focus will be on trying to split the closest pairs and friendships: Apollonia and Idonea; the Cripplegates; and Agnes and Anthony. While the debating between Ralf, Hob and Fychan is also a potent group, they are as likely to disagree as to agree and I find that suits my purposes more closely.

I wish to create isolation, and see what effect this has.

3rd June 1378

In response to Idonea's rejection of Anthony, I have explicitly assigned the two to work together. Meanwhile, I press Apollonia to spend more time with Agnes in the kitchen. Setting them with their opposites seems the easiest way to split them, and I have kept us working hard enough that they have had little time to spend together outside their work.

8th July 1378

The Cripplegates are so much harder to separate when they work together so closely. I have wondered if some sabotage on some of our buildings might work, forcing them to concentrate on two separate places, but it seems risky and with much potential to fail.

13th August 1378

Sabotaging Idonea's work is much easier. I cut some threads loose on several robes and when they began wearing, was quick to comment that perhaps her work was not up to its usual standards. She has been sewing inside, while I focus Apollonia on gathering and trapping.

Encouraging criticism of Idonea's work is much easier without her present. I wonder if I can convince Apollonia that Idonea has betrayed her in some way.

29th August 1378

Fychan is recovering well and looks set to live.

9th October 1378

An opportunity presented itself today that I simply could not pass up.

The Cripplegates were working together as usual, and I noted that Kristiana was tending to more delicate, artistic work on a piece that Mark had locked into place. When they were distracted, I loosened the bindings, and Kristiana's next strike caused it to shift and fall.

This worked out better than I could have hoped, as in her attempt to catch it, her hand was caught underneath and she has broken several bones and three fingers. There is some uncertainty as to whether it will heal well enough for her to do the work she is accustomed to.

Mark is devastated, and has apologised profusely. Although she has not yet outwardly blamed him, I am sure it can be suggested in time, and for now I have good cause to keep them apart.

16th October 1378

Even better, I am using this to keep Anthony and Agnes separate, too. I have insisted that Anthony tend to Kristiana, and teach her some of the other skills out and about. She is frustrated by her inability to do the work at which she excels, and even more frustrated at how hard she is finding matters such as foraging and trapping with only one good hand.

Agnes has William in the kitchen, after all, and they are quite busy.

3rd November 1378

It has been a good year for our harvest, and food is plentiful. It will not do; I wish to exacerbate Agnes's stress while she is away from her companion.

Tonight I may drop some of Idonea's dyes across some of the food stores. She will deny the accident, but no one will believe her. No! Better yet, some of Apollonia's paints, and I will see about convincing her that Idonea has set her up.

5th November 1378

The arguments were loud and long, and at least forced Fychan, Hob and Ralf to be quiet for once. I stained the sleeves of Idonea's robe with one of the paints Apollonia uses, too, and Thomas noticed and pointed it out. The group called me in to arbitrate. I have been most stern with her, both for the 'act' and for lying about it.

6th November 1378

Fascinatingly, after I spoke with her at length, she has admitted to the crime! Even though I know it is not possible, it seems she is more interested in taking the path of least resistance than in the truth or her actual innocence.

26th December 1378

Apollonia continues to avoid Idonea, desperately upset. Tonight the moment Anthony began drinking, I sent him outside to walk the boundary in order to sober him up and keep him from speaking with Agnes. He returned long after dark, shivering and silent.

15th May 1379

The Founding celebration passed with little of note. Kristiana's hand is healing poorly, and although she has tried, she is not yet ready to return to her work as before. Her sullenness is doing nothing for Anthony's mood, although I keep placing them together. He seems far more withdrawn than usual.

17th August 1379

In the wake of Constance's arrival, I have been sure to comment frequently to Anthony how good it is that finally Agnes has her daughter here, that finally she may have a companion. He seems dejected by the thought.

Apollonia is struggling more than ever. Idonea regards Constance with doubt and contempt, although her own position within the flock has yet to recover. I have urged Peter and Agnes to keep putting her to work when she is shirking her duties, and they have both done so. Indeed, I place Constance as her companion to accompany her, that she may learn the ropes. This incites Apollonia's jealousy as well as exacerbating Idonea's irritation.

11th September 1379

By necessity, I have been allowing Constance and Agnes to spend more time together.

This cycle is taking far more input from me than any before. I am working hard to keep the rifts wide.

12th October 1379

If I thought that Kristiana was angered by the criticism before, it is nothing compared to now. When she is still unable to produce anything near the like of which she managed before, she nearly struck Constance in rage. Although she and Mark have been bitter towards one another and are not as close, at the sight of his sister's anger, Mark also joined in, his temper rising. It took quite a lot of effort to de-escalate the situation.

5th November 1379

And here is the cost for my experiments once more, as the unexpected strikes. I have learned much from this twist of ill-fortune, but my blood runs cold to think of it.

With her increasing frustration and isolation, it seems that Idonea tried to leave the hermitage, packing her things and walking for the southern boundary.

I had never expected that any of them would risk it - with the dangers of plague striking every other community, in the time they believe we are in and in our actual time alike, the thought that they might be pushed so far as to leave simply did not occur. Yet Idonea has never been one to go where matters are not easy, not convenient, and in making her work as hard as we have, I suspect I pushed her further than I meant to.

The moment I realised she was gone, I followed her with all due haste. I was, alas, too late. At the least I have learned that their exit is impossible, although when I found the girl babbling and sobbing near the border, I had no choice but to grab a nearby rock and dash in her skull.

It was not pleasant, indulging in such violence myself. I have buried her body, though the grave is shallow. The others I will simply tell that I was too late, and that she has chosen to leave and I could not talk her out of it. I think I will ease off on the experiment for now: I have learned much, and I do not want too many unexpected events.

14th May 1380

It is done.

16th Cycle

15th May 1380

I have buried the work of my previous notes once more, to avoid risk that they be found.

It has proven productive to spend a cycle focusing on one member of the Hermitage or another. Perhaps I have been delaying the two years' commitment for too long, but I must turn my eyes at last to Brother Ralf. He is a curious creature. On the one hand, he is capable of some of the most independent thought of any of them. On the other, this free thinking make him believe he is not subject to the pettiness that drives every man, and so does not guard himself against such weaknesses.

I selected him for the Hermitage because a man running from so many of his own misdeeds and his own history, and yet absolutely resolute that he deserves no blame, was perfect for my purposes. His capacity to rationalise and justify so much of what he sees and does marked him as the kind of man who could be moulded. He will twist and contort his thoughts and perspective to match his original belief, and wherever possible avoid judging himself. In his eyes, those who disagree with him simply do not understand his point yet, and will inevitably be swayed, though it is astonishing how a man who will so eagerly hurl himself into debate will nevertheless listen to very little.

I have been right that this righteousness, this narrow perspective, has made him malleable to my purpose. What I did not anticipate was that Brother Ralf would chafe so wildly with those around him that, until I found Constance, I sincerely considered him a candidate for the scapegoating.

His noble upbringing, his arrogance, his academic perspective - even to his peers he is a source of discontent and strife. It is true that over the years, they learn to indulge him in one manner or another. Those who find him vexing do not need to spend time with him. Those who do spend time with him find his irritations only to be that: minor frustrations, the like of which we endure every day. But I turned even milder feelings into hatred and resentment towards Constance.

I shall see how he fares over the coming months.

26th December 1380

For once I turned my eyes from the merriment of the festivities and to the discourses of the scholars. Over the decades it is from them, perhaps, that I have disconnected the most. It was always difficult to listen to their earnest debates, their unsophisticated beliefs as they regurgitate the naive and disengaged perspectives of the Church. I do not know if it is better or worse when they stumble upon a thread of truth, of true enlightenment, and then veer wildly away from it, oblivious to the kernel of understanding they have espied.

Ralf is perhaps the worst for that. He considers himself a man of independent insight, and it is true that he does not blindly subscribe to the dogma of the Church. And yet he will look often to the insipid works of Thomas Aquinas and his ilk, for the fundamental flaw in the perspective of them all is that everything flows from God. The rest of their disagreement is a matter of interpretation.

It is tiresome, truly tiresome, to pretend to engage with the same arguments over and over, especially when I must lie, when I must play the part of a less enlightened and informed figure. I must indulge their petty obsessions, and worst of all, when they argue, I must be even-handed on topics I do not care one jot for. Ralf shall give one of those opinions that almost had saw him branded a heretic, and he is perhaps fortunate that Hob and Fychan are more interested in proving themselves right than proving themselves righteous.

Truthfully, I did not listen to them very much during the festivities yesterday. There was nothing new to remark upon. Nothing said that has not been said a hundred times over.

3rd April 1381

A bad storm swept in from the north, and damaged the chapel roof. This would be unremarkable except that I am attempting to better observe the ways and means of Brother Ralf, and he ventured forth from his infirmary to lecture the labourers on the necessary caution, lest they find themselves requiring his ministrations. I also heard him suggest that maybe those tiles should be, 'a little to the left,' and I do believe I saw Kristiana contemplate where she could hide his body.

I wonder if they will murder him some time. It would be most awkward, as I do not want too much darkness in their hearts before I must turn their ire on Constance, but there are occasions I wonder how far from true rage he pushes some of them.

22th August 1381

She is arrived, and everything proceeds as it ever does. I have rarely watched Ralf upon Constance's arrival; his role with her has always come somewhat later, and there is usually so much to monitor and influence. But by now, controlling the key players comes as easy as breathing, and I may permit myself the odd chance to cast my eye further.

I do believe I spy a hint of jealousy in this loving reunion between mother and daughter, both of them joyfully returned to something they thought forever lost. Ralf does not believe his mother dead, but in confession he spoke of the role she played in his early years, and while he has never explicitly stated it, I sense he clung to her apron-strings until he left home. When he speaks of her, there is a hint of wistful bitterness that suggests a pampered youth saw this as an abandonment, a betrayal.

The first of many, of course, and that is what defines him more than his intellect ever will.

While I must not compromise Constance's other relationships, I will push her towards Ralf as soon as possible this time, I believe.

19th October 1381

It is the simple matters of life that bring joy. After all this time, they are perhaps all that brings passing satisfaction. In this instance, the joy comes from tossing one word out like a pebble, and observing the avalanche that ensues. In this case, the joy is that one, key word, 'quaint.'

Every time, Constance uses it so politely in front of Kristiana, and every time I see her bristle. It is not Constance's fault, of course, and of this I assure her. There are rougher temperaments in the Hermitage, but they will adapt. Her honesty and candour are virtues, and she should not shy away from them. Kristiana does not truly mind, I assure Constance. She may be quick to bristle, but she is quick to forgive, and it matters very little as Kristiana is made for simple labour.

But I am not writing of Kristiana; I forget myself. I watched Ralf as the exchange occurred in the courtyard. I saw the quirk of his lips as he heard Constance speak of a wider world than our little Hermitage, and offer something other than unconditional praise of our circumstances, however well she meant it. I know Ralf thinks of himself as more worldly than the others, and that while he accepts that this is where he should be, he prides himself on knowing there is more out there.

For once, I prompted Constance to offer Ralf some assistance in the Hermitage with some of the minor sprains that sprung up in the repair work. She later spoke to me of how he had been most kind and supportive; not at all what she had expected from the way the others look at him.

I must hold back in tossing them together until the new year. Once Grace is truly furious, then I may move on.

3rd January 1382

The frost is thick this year, and the theological bickers continue enough to split my skull with frustration. Normally I wait several weeks, but I have had quite enough; I have sent Constance to the Infirmary to help Ralf there. For the moment I will watch her reactions, as this is subtly different to previous occasions, but I cannot abide being a captive audience to Ralf, Fychan and Hob's turgid, circular discourse.

9th January 1382

After long days of Constance only helping Ralf with the menial labours of the Infirmary, finally she admitted that he had begun to engage her in his discussions and discourses. There was a nervousness to her, and I believe her education does make her cast a small suspicion upon the perspectives and views of our Infirmaryman. Theologians who spend little time with physicians may be often unsettled by their work.

I have issued the usual reassurances, reminded her of the importance of learning, and to encourage and discuss all these beliefs and perspectives with Ralf. Always do I have to guide her gently, for if I am too firm in pressing them together, she may balk when I later divide them. My best choice is to appear deeply busy, with time enough to listen and encourage, but too busy to perhaps look too closely at what Ralf tells her, at what ideas begin to take root.

28th January 1382

Here and there do I let snippets of Ralf's history escape from me in my discourses with Constance. The woman he lost is a perfect tale to let crumble into the light, morsel by morsel. At first, it makes her look

at him with sympathy for what he has suffered, and with some confidence that he will respect her opinions and beliefs even if she is a woman. This gives her an enthusiasm for her theological discourses she holds for nobody except, of course, myself.

I know Ralf has lent her books, has begun to explain to her medical theories and practices that very few others in his position would know or especially embrace. In her naive faith, she consumes it as new knowledge, and I have yet to sour her to it.

6th February 1382

Finishing the tale of those Ralf lost - morsel by morsel, clue by clue - has sown the usual seed of doubt in Constance's mind. It is only small, but it breeds in her a discomfort, a worry that he is using her to fill some hole inside him, to replace something long gone.

I shall let that fester for a day or two.

14th February 1382

I have made something of a show of sitting Constance down, my irrelevant distractions completed, and engaging her in a much longer discussion than we have enjoyed for months. She has my full attention, I have assured her, and so I am keen to listen to what has consumed her time while we have only had the opportunity to talk briefly.

She spoke of Ralf, of course, and I saw the mixture of enthusiasm and apprehension as she relayed the reading she has done with him, the perspectives he has opened to her. For the moment, all I have done is listened, but ensured there was a small, worried furrow to my brow, a certain edge to my hums.

20th February 1382

Constance spotted my facade of apprehension, and sought me out in short order to ask for my advice. I have assured her that Ralf is a skilled physician and an engaged theologian, but I confessed I was a little concerned that he was seeking out one as young as herself. It is one matter for him to debate with grown men whose opinions are fully-formed, but he has presented himself to her as an authority, and he is certainly no churchman.

That was yesterday. Today I know there was something of an argument between them, Constance baulking on some point or another of his views and values. Likely this stems from her own discomfort with the man himself, rather than genuine apprehension at his philosophies, but she has reacted as she always does, as she always has, and as anyone does. She runs to safe ground, and the safe ground is the perspectives of the church. The church, and their narrow perspectives that have frustrated Ralf for so long.

25th February 1382

It is done. Conversations with Constance about Ralf apparently drove me to saying something that she believes it pained me to admit. I huffed, I scowled, but at length - for her own good, of course, for her

own safety - I warned her of how Ralf came to me, warned her that he had sought me out because he was running. That the Church had rejected him, that only the chaos of the plague made them falter in taking action, and that had he lingered in the south for much longer, it was very likely he would have been branded heretic.

She was most distraught, and I apologised profusely. I had not expected him to try to spread his views to her while she helped him in the Infirmary, and I had been too distracted to realise that was what he has been doing these past weeks. But she is an intelligent young woman, she is not easily led astray. She knows her own heart and she knows God, and I told her I would not dictate what she should do. But Ralf and his views are best suited to himself, or for arguments with the likes of Hob and Fychan, and I would not have encouraged her to spend time with him had I known this would transpire.

The next day came the argument, in so far as Ralf argues. He does not shout, but his points become more persistent, more driven, and I believe he has been so stunned at Constance's sudden reluctance to listen that all he can do is run to his safe ground. And his safe ground is repeating his views.

She was ever so polite. Had he not pressed her, I am sure all she would have said was that, with spring coming, there was work she could do elsewhere in the Hermitage, but he was sharp enough, wounded enough over the years, to push for a better explanation. And push, and push, and then it came, that fateful word, that very quiet and fearful description of his views as, 'heresy.'

She phrased it more uncertainly, of course, with fear rather than condemnation, but the word came regardless, and it did its work regardless. She is back in the kitchens, and Ralf is back in the Infirmary, brooding like I have never seen him brood.

It is not his intellect that will be his undoing, though he has a nose for trouble and not the keen eyes to spot it. What struck me about him, over and over when he talked of his past, was his loneliness. He has struggled to find a place in the world, and so has latched so fiercely onto individuals in the past that it could only end in grief, for no one person will ever be the world for him, for anyone. His mother, who sent him into the world, the original betrayal and abandonment. Those he studied with, from whom he was always a little outside, the Dominican who befriended him and then almost condemned him. The woman who hurt him with the most cutting abandonment of all, death.

And now he has pinned his hopes on Constance, only for her to turn her back on him. Abandonment and betrayal. His need for belonging, or perhaps for someone to belong to him, have undone him far more than his intellect. His intellect simply greases the works.

9th March 1382

I always draw much amusement from this time of the cycle, the inevitable fight. When it happens changes, but the Hermitage is not so small that Ralf's anger at Constance and Ladislaus's burning, defensive emotions will not inevitably clash. That I have stoked the fires more than usual has brought it to a head sooner.

Ladislaus is perhaps the member of the Hermitage to whom Ralf speaks least, and it has been my observation that Ralf is a physical coward when it comes to confrontation. He cannot ramble at

Ladislau, he cannot voice his extensive opinions or attempt to engage him in discourse, because Ladislau's mind is as straightforward as his hammer and his faith as unvarying and uncomplicated. Ladislau does not care about Ralf's skills in debate, and Ladislau is a large, powerful man who, though he is not prone to violence in the Hermitage, is evidently comfortable with it. Truthfully, I do not expect Ladislau to punch Ralf simply for having a theological opinion, understandable though it would be. But I know Ladislau unnerves Ralf, his pure presence reminding him of violence, of physical force against which he is powerless.

The only reason this situation can arise, the only reason Ralf does not guard his tongue, is because he did not know of Ladislau's obsession with Constance, and so thought he was perfectly safe to grumble about her in his earshot.

He is most mistaken, and it is rather satisfying every time. Ralf watches Constance pass through the courtyard, and makes some comment to nobody in particular. It varies, though the gist is always something about narrow-mindedness, about scurrying off to lesser works, and it is always loud enough for Ladislau to hear.

There is no explosion, no blazing fury. Ladislau simply storms across the courtyard, Ralf turns to him with surprise, and then there is a crunch of knuckles on flesh. This time was particularly angry, because Ralf was particularly unkind and this has happened so early that Ladislau's feelings about Constance are particularly raw. Others come running, pull Ladislau back, but he does not struggle. His point is made, his anger unleashed, and he storms off.

I make a point of not punishing Ladislau. Ralf is so very quick, when we speak later, to not hold a grudge against him, because he remains afraid. It is easier, so much easier for this to become more fuel for his resentment of Constance, to blame her. Against her he is not powerless.

20th April 1382

I spend this time focusing on others, because even if I am watching Ralf I cannot abandon the parts everyone has to play. Besides, Ralf is at the prime point, where he needs but a push and he will tumble as I need him to. He broods, he keeps himself to himself, and he watches Constance with a continuing burn.

I do not believe that he was ever forced into proximity with one who had wronged him before. They died, or they left, or he fled. But she has betrayed him, abandoned him, condemned him like everyone inevitably does, and she is still here. Into her he may pour all past resentments, all past sufferings. It is not Constance alone that he shall despise, but in her he will see everyone who ever wronged him.

For now, I leave him be.

13th May 1382

Ralf is perhaps the one of them who comes closest to the truth, because with snippets of truth can I better ensnare him. The others are won over to the ritual with the belief of purging themselves of sin, or simply unleashing their hatred for Constance, or doing what is necessary for the community. Ralf is

certainly prepared to engage in the scapegoating for all of these reasons, but I may lure him a little further with simple curiosity.

It is an old ritual. I tell him when I begin to set the stage for what is to come. It has its roots in the Old Testament, of course, but there are machinations of God's work which go beyond what the Church teaches and encourages. I have spent many a year looking into such, though he should keep quiet. The others may balk if they think that what we are doing, what we must do to save them, strays too far. They are manipulated by their base urges. I assure Ralf, while we are reaching for the tools God has granted us, hidden away as they have been, and using them to save us, to save everyone.

He nods and feels a righteous, intelligent man, who has seen beyond the veil the Church casts upon the secrets of the world. He believes himself ordained, an accomplice of mine in the greater truths, and taking this action as a rational necessity. This is not about his hurt, his sense of betrayal, his weakness. They are weak, all of them - he is not. He is a rational man.

And thus does Ralf de l'Aigle justify himself into the most depraved acts most men and women would ever see in ten lifetimes. He believes himself rational, but he hates her just as much as any of them, and he does it for himself far, far more than he does it for his brothers and sisters.

Sometimes the most complicated men are the simplest.

17th Cycle

20th Day 1382

It is most of twelve years since Brother Fychan last died, and his participation in the theological and philosophical debates of which he, Hob, and Ralf in particular are so found has been of great use in leading Ralf to his final judgement of Constance.

Yet I cannot help but think that Fychan could be much more. His natural alliance with Hob and Hob's knack for persuasion mean that he could be part of a very useful combination. I have decided, therefore, that I shall dedicate this cycle to a greater understanding of his motivations, to better guide him and, through him, to less obviously guide Hob.

14th June 1382

Today was spent at Fychan's bedside, talking with him at some length regarding his outlook on life, his thoughts on the hermitage, and the like. With Brother Ralf always present it has been difficult to form a fully coherent picture, however, as Ralf is always ready to distract and confuse the issue by interjecting his own thoughts.

I do not believe he knows that he does it. He promises me that he expects Fychan's recovery at any day.

23rd June 1382

Ralf has latterly confessed to me that he believes his earlier attitude was optimistic. Having worked hard to cover for our short-handedness, Sister Grace is also in our makeshift infirmary and demanding much of his time, and it is easy to understand that, as less of a challenge, she receives much of his current effort so that she can return to her labours.

I believe, however, that Fychan will survive once again. There is little in his face of the pain that we have seen in the cycles marked by his death.

29th July 1382

Rereading my last words as I sit to write this, I must admit to frustration. Fychan spent one day outside Brother Ralf's care before succumbing again to his discomfort, returning to his bed. At this time Ralf's pessimism begins to ring truer for me, but I will persevere.

30th August 1382

I must change my opinion again. Never has Fychan lasted so long without living the full cycle. It is true that he has not left the bed since my last entry for more than an hour at a time, but I suspect that this summer, the rainiest we have had to date, is the explanation for that.

There is time yet for my project to succeed. All I need is the time to speak with him without Brother Ralf or Brother Hob in earshot.

1st October 1382

Today we buried Fychan. I have spent too much of this cycle neglecting the rest of my flock to embark upon the examination of Peter safely this late into the cycle; instead I must dedicate myself to ensuring that they develop the correct relationships and frustrations.

14th May 1384

It is done.

I made the mistake of assuming that Fate would look elsewhere from Fychan once again, but the pattern of survival was broken. I am confident that next cycle I shall accomplish my goal here.

18th Cycle

15th May 1384

Last night as I settled down to sleep a storm raged throughout Duddon Valley and beyond. As I prepared today to return, I noticed that the weather of the past month has broken, and my walk home was illuminated by sunlight worthy of Ra's mighty chariot.

I cannot help but consider this a good omen sent by Our Lady. I do not often disturb her so early in a cycle, when her efforts are taken up in the aftermath of our ritual, when she acts to purify us, and I do not intend to. But with better weather invariably comes a swift recovery for Fychan, and a swift recovery for Fychan will allow me to fulfil the purpose I was denied in the past cycle.

My spirits were lifted sufficiently to detour for a while and collect some wild herbs of Grace's favoured types. Is it a failing that after so many years I can recognise their appearance but their name has been consigned to oblivion rather than ever lodged in my memory? I can understand that some feel it may be. Perhaps it is.

Yet I have worked on this now long enough that many of my fellow students of theology at Avignon will surely be dead, and still I feel sometimes as if I am merely starting out. It is surely wise for me to pay attention only to my people. Trivial details like the names of plants would simply distract me.

21st May 1384

He has yet to begin walking once more, but Fychan thrives. Brother Ralf engages us, as we talk, with the same interruptions as he did nearly two years ago, when I visited them in hopes of progress. I find that my arguments in reply are little refined from the first time, though of course I had no reason at the time to devote much thought to them.

16th June 1384

Three weeks of nearly unbroken fog make this the most frustrating summer since Brother Mark died. Thomas, Hob, William and Lachlann walk through the fog to bring us food, but everyone else spends their days entirely within the hermitage.

I have never before seen such dedication to the scriptorium.

I deliver sermons at twice the rate I have before, and almost all are on the virtue of patience. Yet my own is at breaking point.

4th July 1384

One of the sheep fell from the woodland garden yesterday. It lives yet, but cannot walk and bleats piteously at all times.

Brother Peter has advocated simply ending its pain with a blade, offering all of us a chance to enjoy mutton stew at a time we usually would not, yet Brother Ralf has become involved in the dispute and, in consequence, there is a dispute.

Our physician wonders whether, drawing on his and Brother Hob's reserves of natural philosophy and relating human physick to the beast, it might be possible to nurse the animal back to health. With Hob at his side, it seems likely they shall get their way. I will not decide nor make my opinion known to either side. I admit a curiosity over whose will shall prevail, Peter's or Ralf's. Knowing for a certainty cannot help but be useful.

10th July 1384

By virtue of prolonging the dispute so long as they have with the sheep still alive, Ralf and Hob have won the day. I think Brother Peter is disgusted with this, yet his determination has caved. I cannot help but think he has only himself to blame.

I shall spend this month healing the rift between my fledgling theologians as I wait for Fychan to walk again.

14th August 1384

I am beginning to be concerned about the lack of attention Fychan is receiving. The sheep is very nearly more able to walk than he already, and Ralf proclaims this a triumph. I have warned him back to his fallen brother, but I am not certain that it will stick; like myself, he has found a riddle to solve, and solving it is important to him.

I spent yesterday within the hermitage, and while others were caught up in their duties, I found I had little focus, with the various tasks unfolding as they should in any case.

I presume that it was this which meant I was the one to hear Fychan calling out. The lack of power in his efforts to summon help is saddening, but more so is the realisation that I have misjudged his condition once again.

I had hoped that after seeing these events play out eighteen times my eye for his healing would be astute, yet it seems I can still be mistaken.

I did my best for him, but I am no physician, and when I attempted to engage him in conversation, Ralf being absent, he was not able to concentrate well enough to answer a single question.

6th August 1384

Sister Agnes does not complain, but it was easily seen today that her soup was not the well-seasoned thing it usually is. And why? Her time today and yesterday has been occupied mostly in keeping the stone floors of the hermitage clean despite Fychan's illness.

He convulses regularly at present, each interval of pained thrashing accompanied by a new wash of vomit which must be dealt with, and it is Agnes who is best placed to smell it first. Agnes who will invariably be distracted and have to rush to attend to it.

Everything is behind where it should be for my purposes, and the fact the food is not all we are used to renders everyone tenser still.

There is no question here; I must attend to this. Tension, apprehension, and dissension have begun.

10th August 1384

Ralf's precious sheep is dead. I am sure nobody saw me attend to the matter, and if there is one man whose hand will not be suspected, it is mine.

I shall counsel them tomorrow to accept the present on its own terms rather than dwell on the past. Hopefully we can put this all behind us swiftly.

26th August 1384

A belated acknowledgement of the trouble from Brother Ralf; Fychan's health falters, but he is sure it would not have done so had he not been distracted by the sheep. I have professed sympathy, and I can still show sadness at Fychan's likely loss even after all the times before. This time, however, I need feign nothing.

A schism has been wrought between Ralf and Peter. Ralf himself seems troubled as he never has been before by Fychan's likely death, and I think it likely that this is the first time he considers himself at all culpable. A death he should have prevented will weigh heavily upon him.

I have much to fix before we are done if Fychan does not survive. It will surprise me if he does, but there is hope.

13th September 1384

Fychan is dead.

I have lost another cycle to this. There is time, now, time I could use to begin a new project, if I only believed that I would not be needed repairing the damage wrought by - no, during; there is no fault in this to be laid at my feet - my project this time.

I say the right things for my flock, but inwardly I am furious. My wrath shall be contained; if only they were privy to the example I set them, refraining from sin as I do.

25th December 1385

Mutton for Christmas. Hardly worth recording, save that it is the first in a long time. Brother Peter has been strict with the slaughter this time, and I think Ralf resents that.

I have pushed Constance as clearly as I dare to criticise Peter's management of his flock. The reckoning this May will be satisfying, and not merely as it brings us to another cycle.

Fychan has only died in three cycles without interruption once. It is surely time for this to be done.

14th May 1386

It is done.

10th Cycle

10th May 1386

I returned to Ulpha after the immurement was complete. It has been a long time since last they saw me there, and with my hair unbound this time I expected to pass unrecognised. Indeed I did, I think, though the landlord of the Newfield Inn told me I bore a resemblance to a pastor who used to visit from time to time, from a small monastery nobody looks for.

I was pleased to tell him that I am that Abbot's younger brother, here to visit him from the family's holdings, which I told him lay in the fortress town of Liverpool through which Lachlann has told me he passed.

I took my time in Ulpha on this occasion. My temper has not been helped through being twice denied, and a chance to pass some time without discussing theology with contrarian Ralf or dissembling well enough to mislead sharp-witted Thomas and shrewd Kristiana is a relief. By the time I returned today I was greatly refreshed, and eager for more.

I made a point of calling upon Brother Ralf's patient immediately. He has taken no swift turn for the worse on this occasion.

8th June 1386

There are not many things which qualify as a first left to us here in Duddon, though it seems that every cycle something occurs the result of which is that I endure another discussion of the 'first occurrence' of something which seems, to me, quite mundane and pedestrian.

Nonetheless, we lost much of this week to the consequences of a first. The oppressive heat of this summer - much greater than that we are used to - is agreed by those among us who know to be the cause of a fire which started in the lower fields by the river, and which it took us most of a day to tamp out, several days to clear up from.

Those fields will yield no degree of harvest this year, and it will be a rough winter though I am sure Anthony will still enjoy his Christmas.

I found the whole thing exhilarating; it is not certain in my mind that I will survive as my flock do beyond their deaths, indeed, if my presumptions about Our Lady's rituals are correct, I must assume that I will not. But I could not stand by when none of them know, and the realisation, as I worked, that I have been alive so long now, and that my body is still as strong and fit as ever it was - that to me is triumph.

13th July 1386

Fychan is dead once more.

Damn everything. This cycle will be a hungry one for us all. I shall spend it in improving our lot here, that we will live in comfort until it is time for the scapegoat. Projects must wait.

14th May 1388

It is done. And not a moment too soon.

20th Cycle

16th May 1388

This time, before I give any thought to plans for the cycle, I shall wait until I know whether or not Fychan is to live.

The weather is comparatively clement, but I can hardly let that decide my course of action for me. I refuse to lose another cycle to cruel Fate.

9th September 1388

Fychan has been walking these past four days without relapse. I am hopeful.

15th September 1388

It is a project I have grown used to attending to myself, and so at breakfast today when Fychan announced his plans to work within the hermitage to equip a scriptorium I was, I admit, surprised.

His declaration was heartily supported by a great many of the hermitage, Sister Grace and the Cripplegates in particular taking the opportunity to congratulate him and assure him that now he has work to be attending to, he will soon feel his place here to be deserved, and they related numerous shared tales of injury delay or of awaiting a chance to do their jobs while we still travelled, before Our Lady led us to this place.

Brother Fychan received these plaudits stoically, and as I watched, I formed the distinct opinion that this had not been his goal. Rather he had found a thing that should be done and determined by process of elimination that doing so should be his duty.

I shall help where I can, and offer some observations on philosophical and theological matters as I do. I am never certain how many of the beliefs he espouses in broader discussions do not in fact emerge out of response to the others. Now I have the chance to discover this.

22nd September 1388

Work on the scriptorium is slow but methodical. In the past three cycles I have grown accustomed to achieving the same effect in less time, but I must remind myself not to be impatient, that mine is a skill born of long practice, if skill is even the correct way to describe a situation where I already know everything that must be done and have only to find the time to do it.

Yet it has always been Fychan's method that I believed I followed. When he died that first time it was a short while before I realised that a scriptorium would be my responsibility, and I attended to it, as best I could, with the memory of how his scriptorium looked always in mind.

It is natural under those circumstances to think that you have duplicated the method, but it seems I duplicated only the result, creating a new approach of my own.

So intent on his work has Fychan been that our discussions have been slow and unhelpful, yet I am gleaning much of his thinking simply by watching the differences in his way of ordering this work and my own.

12th October 1388

Fychan has education. I have been thinking, through my focus on the untutored members of my flock in recent cycles, of this as something you either have or do not have. In this I have made a key mistake, and my conversations here have made me realise that.

Fychan's education and my own are completely different things. It is not merely that following my education I went on to investigate the archives in Avignon. It is also that our tutors, when we had them, were of very different stripes. I was taught always to consider my actions as best I could in the manner that a disinterested angel might, to better approach purity in my behaviour. Fychan was taught a set of rules for living with as little sin as possible.

He has accepted those rules, for they are known to be true, and merely tests the difficult areas at the sides. Too, his experiments with the health of animals are also of a very direct nature. Our approaches and our deductions are of entirely different form as a result.

This month he helps Brother Peter with the shearing. I marshal my thoughts and my memories of times past, ready to enter the debates and discussions over Christmas.

Knowing Fychan's approach better than I did, I believe I will be able to identify those ideas which are truly representative of his beliefs and which do not simply arise from confrontation with the others.

14th November 1388

The discussions bring nothing to mind so strongly as my time at Avignon, and once again I find myself frustrated with the style of debate practiced by Brother Ralf.

I have never felt that the Devil needed an advocate, and I do not feel that those attempting to live in Godliness should adopt such a position. We all of us can see the lure of the sinful, the wrong, and we must simply find it in ourselves to be better than that.

Fychan has died many times. Brother Mark has died once. And Ralf remains untouched.

There is something wrong in this.

9th February 1388

There is quite a gap since last I wrote here, and yet that time has been most productive. From early November through to the New Year, the discussions enjoyed long evenings in which to happen, and therefore many ideas were put forward and dissected. Brother Peter set the group onto a question of the constitution of good and the definitions of evil, though he then fell back from much of the discussion.

Ralf and Hob formed a spirited rivalry, and Fychan spent much of his time developing propositions that would balance between them. Eventually something of a consensus was reached, and, even better by my lights, they have decided to set down their thoughts.

At the end of this cycle I shall collect these papers and enclose them with this journal when I bury it, for much easier reference. While all in the scriptorium strive for similar lettering, there is something in how Fychan makes his loops which makes his portions easily recognisable.

Better yet, these entries are nothing if they are not a treatise on how all three men can be directed in making certain decisions on moral questions, and study of it will surely give me an advantage on all three.

14th September 1389

With Constance present, the whole hermitage's mood changes, and this time as I dedicate particular attention to Fychan in this, I note that it is not her directly but her effect on others which frustrates him.

I had observed how eagerly Fychan entered into the discussions of last winter, as he does the first winter of each cycle that he lives. What I had not fully realised is the extent to which he had looked forward to resuming those discussions once the longer nights and colder weather drew them all together again. With Ralf and Hob focused on new questions through Constance's presence, much has changed.

20th November 1389

I almost wish death on Lachlann this cycle. The discussions have resumed at last and Fychan has livened up with them, but he finds himself greatly frustrated as Hob and Peter, in particular, continually broach topics on which they have some half-buried disagreement with the others.

Whenever these cast aspersions on Constance, Ralf leaps to her defence, and she to his when the situation reverses, but I cannot help but feel the times spent dwelling on the concept of personal property do little to illuminate Fychan's thought processes. Still, he grows greatly frustrated.

30th December 1389

It is not the question of good and evil which will steer Fychan. It is sheer parochialism, the defence of that group he considers close to him against an intellectual outsider. The more the voices raise in anger, the greater his own frustration. Last night I sat silent and simply watched, and for much of an hour Fychan's eyes never left Constance, and a fury burned in his gaze that almost made me uncomfortable.

It was the first time outside the ritual itself that I have seen the Fychan who willingly enters into that fray. I must admit satisfaction with that.

3rd January 1390

Fychan no longer joins in with the debates. Lately he has instead languished in the scriptorium late into the evening, then simply made his way to his bed rather than debate and dispute.

17th January 1390

I cannot find the manuscript of last year's seminars anywhere in the scriptorium. Fychan evades answer on the subject. I can only suspect that, out of some sense of pettiness or bitterness, he has destroyed it. I will continue to search, although I must not let it distract me too greatly when other matters are reaching a head. It irks me to think that if it has not been destroyed but merely hidden, it will not survive the rebirth into a new cycle. Only my own work holds that honour.

If I had not gained a different insight into his motivations, I should be furious. As it stands, I merely regret that I have not the chance to look over the comments made by the others.

I shall examine their own motivations in future, of course, but it would have been satisfying to have slain three birds with one stone.

14th May 1390

For the twentieth time, it is done.

21st Cycle

15th May 1390

With Fychan finally dealt with, now my task turns to the Head of the Brothers: Peter.

Peter is another man who I consider to be quite straightforward. As I have just had the fortune to witness once more, his punishment of the scapegoat is one that men have been inflicting on women since the dawn of time. Yet there are nuances even to rapists, to why he rapes. These I intend to examine in closer detail.

I came back to the hermitage late tonight, and most of them were already sleeping. I prefer to let Peter have to take the lead more, to start.

20th May 1390

It has always been clear to me that Peter suffers from an unusually strong draw towards the sins of the flesh. Never is this more apparent than during sheep breeding season and lambing, and yet he is one of our most dedicated shepherds.

It is also clear to me that his feelings do not produce any true sort of pleasure for him. The guilt and burden of such inclinations far outweighs the pleasure they bring, and as such he does not deliberately seek out things that stimulate him thus. There is less of the pleasure-guilt cycle in the way that there is with Apollonia; doubtless he has always seen this as a source of shame and stigma and as such even during his masturbations, I imagine guilt must plague his thoughts.

Does he self stimulate, or is it always nightly emissions that Idonea finds on his sheets? These are questions that I have, and I intend to find the answer. Is he untouched by woman before he rapes Constance? Has he raped before?

23rd May 1390

As a method of testing his interactions with the women at the hermitage, I have set Peter to manage the disagreement between Grace, Anthony and Idonea. As when I was learning of Idonea's sins, I have encouraged Grace to confess directly to them, only this time Peter will be the one monitoring the discussion. I will remain close enough to observe, but not to interact.

24th May 1390

How carefully Peter tries to cover his unhappiness with the proximity of the women. He speaks sternly, taking time to listen and consider both sides, and if you did not know to look for it, you might not notice the shifting of his weight or the tension in his brow. Afterwards, he washed his hands extensively, and spent some time in prayer.

I wonder what would happen if I were to direct him towards Apollonia's difficulties.

It is worth testing, but not yet.

17th July 1390

Fychan's leg is looking worse for wear again. I am not averse to the idea of him dying on this cycle, as it would give me reason to push Peter further into a leading role. The grief after his death can be useful at times, but I do not want to rely on it yet. It would not do to make plans only for him to recover.

2nd October 1390

It is clear that sheep breeding is a part of his duty that concerns Peter greatly, and I find myself wondering whether he would surrender the task, were that an option. I am starting to suspect that the guilt failing at his work would produce would be too great for such a choice.

Without doubt, he sees his lusts as a failure. I suspect he does not masturbate, but I could not say for certain. Perhaps if he did he would cause Idonea less difficulty, in fact, for presumably the boy would have the sense not to wet his sheets each time, but rather find a quiet space away from the others.

I am eager to question him further and push certain matters towards him, and yet I know that they will have greater impact if I wait until Constance is present.

13th October 1390

Fychan is dead. It was particularly drawn out and gruesome this time, and the others are most distressed. Very useful indeed.

26th December 1390

Peter's concern is for propriety as much as it is for purity, I suspect. His sternness with Anthony is not from the fear that Anthony's drinking may be a regular matter, but from the sense that Anthony has spoken too much and his judgement is lapsed.

He would much rather that the sins are hidden and forgotten than faced.

Having learned a little more of what sins Anthony is hiding, on this rare occasion I find myself agreeing, although that will not dissuade me from testing Anthony, too, in his turn.

12th February 1391

Today I suggested to Peter that he ought to develop his more creative side, as creativity is also a gift from God. I could see the doubt in him, but he has agreed that perhaps widening his interests may help form a strong distraction from earthly temptations.

I have suggested Apollonia as our most artistic. It is my intent that he know her better before I reveal her lustfulness to him.

1st May 1391

I note that my stepping back in matters has had some positive effects. Peter and Apollonia often speak together, although they are careful to keep a distance. I encourage them both separately to learn from one another's strengths. I know that Peter wonders yet again why I chose Agnes over Apollonia, and that is the highest compliment he can give.

On that note, Agnes has noticed their closeness, and seems concerned and tense. Perhaps I will focus on her next cycle, as I have learned a few methods for getting under her skin this way.

17th August 1391

Putting Peter in a position of more authority has had a side effect I had not envisioned. With Constance's arrival, it has always been my wont to relax some of the strictness of our routine. Peter has done no such thing, and for now I am allowing this to continue, although it has made Constance's first few days rather more trying.

Indeed, I am passing more of her pastoral care onto him. It is incredibly important that I also remain her confidante, to keep a firm hand on her behaviour and undermine her just concerns, but I think her closeness to Peter will bring as much intrigue as it does trouble.

Thus far, he has put her to work with Idonea in the matters of laundry. She has had less time than usual to spend with her mother, and I think they are both struggling as a result. Idonea is certainly displeased to have so much company. I wonder if Peter will note these difficulties and rectify his choice, or if he will adhere to the strictness of rule above all else.

21st August 1391

Peter does not seem to be relenting. An interesting choice, then - his is the kind to value structure over all else. Perhaps that is how he avoids the worst of his temptations?

I wonder what would happen were I to remove some of that structure? Another matter to attempt later.

25th August 1391

Once more, Peter's sheets are soaked with his seed and Idonea is annoyed. I wonder if Constance, too, has noticed. Certainly she is shying from him a little. This will not do in the long term, but for now it allows him to continue growing closer to Apollonia.

I have been certain to compare the two from time to time. When I spoke with him about his difficulties, I compared them more directly - particularly in regard to their feminine virtue, their purity and selfless dedication. The closer I can tie them in his mind, the more volatile it will be when I reveal Apollonia's self stimulations.

5th September 1391

Peter has finally relented on the matter of Constance, and is allowing her to work in other areas of the hermitage. I have praised his wisdom in this matter highly, and am glad it came before I had to intervene too directly.

He spoke with me in confession today, about how often he has been thinking on events from his childhood. Apollonia shared with him a poem that made him think of a time when his father nearly drowned him in a horse trough, after he failed to be successful enough in learning to ride. She described Christ's agony in such potent terms, similar to the vision he saw dance before him while he breathed in his true baptism.

There was an uncertainty to his voice that I sensed his doubts ran deeper, and that there was more to such a feeling than he was confessing, but instead of pushing I sternly reminded him of his duty to the Brothers and Sisters of Our Lady, and that he must not let childish memories stand in the way.

I believe that will have a greater effect in the long term.

15th September 1391

Yet again, I have recommended an extra hour of prayer for Peter's nightly emissions, and yet again he is seeming increasingly tired. This will make him much more pliable.

12th October 1391

I nearly faltered, nearly made a mistake. With so much focus on Constance's relations to Peter, I forgot entirely to work to plant the word 'quaint' into her head. Fortunately, she spoke it regardless, but I am most annoyed with myself for this lapse in judgement.

Still, sheep breeding season has arrived without any matters going notably different. I await Apollonia's confession of self stimulation as the next point on my plan.

27th October 1391

Apollonia came right on time. Rather than push her to confess this directly to Peter as well, I made the decision tonight that I would simply ask his counsel on the matter away from the rest of the hermitage, and it went better than I could have hoped.

The disgust on his face was too potent for him to hide, even in the darkness of the coming evening. His voice was strained and when I mentioned that the flagellation he has witnessed from her is to overcome these inclinations, he responded with, 'Good!' Indeed, I suspect he was quite nauseated at the thought.

This is a fascinating insight. I had wondered if perhaps he would be aroused, or intrigued by her tendencies, but this outright repulsion would indicate that perhaps his guilt comes from two directions: Perhaps he is not just horrified at his own weakness, but inherently disgusted by the idea of female

sexuality. Thus, does he avoid the women here not because they tempt him, but because they sicken him in and of themselves? Does this hatred of them add to his lust, or does it stem from his lust?

How complex is the mind of the rapist.

1st November 1391

In all matters, at all times, Peter is avoiding eye contact or proximity to Apollonia. She is clearly hurt and distressed by such, and has made several attempts to engage him on topics of Divinity and Art, but he rejects her each time.

12th November 1391

Lachlann's discovery was met with additional tension, and Peter himself lost his temper, shouting at the man for his weakness. He is not usually the most vociferous of those in these accusations. Interesting.

No one raised a fist this time.

19th December 1391

I have been busy with some of the usual other matters, and not had time to make many changes, but I note that Peter remains distant from Apollonia. Their friendship, brief though it was, it thoroughly over.

18th January 1392

Around the discussions and compliments of Constance's brew, I chose this as the best moment to speak with Peter again. I was certain to mention my disappointment in his relations with Apollonia, and muse on her distance from Constance.

I also mentioned that Apollonia's lustings included Constance in her thoughts. I had not thought it possible to make him more uncomfortable, and yet I continue to find new ways.

28th January 1392

Ladislav is becoming more obvious in his care for Constance, and that, too, I have pointed out to Peter.

4th March 1392

Lambing season has arrived, and Peter is struggling more this cycle than any before. I know soon he will see her amid the flock as the vile temptress, and in the meantime I try to encourage him to confess his troubles to me.

He speaks of his past, again. He speaks of a whore who accosted him, of a serf's daughter who guided his hand between her thighs only to find herself bloody with sin and push him away. Letha, her name was, and he has spoken of her to me before, although never with quite so much candour. Striking the

whore, knocking her down, when he recounted that memory to me tonight I wondered if he intended to beat her to death or to rape the sin from her.

As I observed nearly two years ago now, he is both so simple and yet so complex in his sinfulness.

8th March 1392

The vision troubled him once more. I confessed that I too was concerned, but would see to speaking with her. I told him that we must be the strength and will to rise these weak and sinful women up to a state of holiness. He nodded fervently.

24th March 1392

I am certain that Peter notes both Apollonia's increased self-flagellation and also Ladislaus's difficulties. Although Apollonia would never guess that he knows what each bloody strip on her back signifies, I see the curl of his lip when she winces in movement or makes sound of pain as I clap her shoulder. Each bloody split of her skin to him is the ripe split of her groin.

He resents the thought of false chastity as much as he does wantonness, I believe. More than ever I think he rapes Constance to destroy her, to lay her low in the darkest and most destitute way he knows.

3rd May 1392

Today I mentioned to Peter that he might wish to spend more time with Constance, as she will now be Head of the Nuns and they must work together closely.

He has pleaded with me to replace him in his position, terrified that he cannot fulfil his duty as is needed. I told him that I believed in him, and that his strength would overcome any sin - that sin must be purged.

14th May 1392

It is done.

22nd Cycle

15th May 1392

I have perhaps delayed the purpose behind this cycle. Taking my time to observe and understand each of the Hermitage for these two years serves only so much purpose in mastering the mechanisms if I do not look to the very heart of everything. The heart of everything here being, of course, Agnes.

Constance is but a blank slate upon which I make sure everyone writes - no, etches - their sins and pains. It is not true to say that it could have been anyone, because it could not. Her grace and charm and intelligence have made her perfect all by herself. And yet she would be so much lesser were not for her mother.

I first saw in Agnes, when we met so long ago, another bitter woman with genuine loss that had turned her against possible joy. She exemplified that which I needed: a being who had been touched by true pain, but had allowed that pain to breed a selfish sin to overwhelm it. Hers was a dark beginning, but it was many would think she had escaped with her sister. The darkness and pain, of course, went with her, and she is naive to think she has fled it here. As a cornerstone of our community, she spreads that darkness to all of them.

The first sin, simply, is Agnes'. And so it is to here I must look these two years.

8th June 1392

I have found myself caring less and less about these long months before Constance's arrival, but I must record the incidents of note, especially if I am to observe Agnes's work in the kitchens. This does make for rather tastier observations, and she seems genuinely pleased at my presence so long as I do not disturb her work. In exchange, she is eager to see if I approve of this experimentation or that dish. Some of these new concoctions are, of course, not new to me, but I must indulge her nevertheless.

I am seeing the occasional incident which I never had before, or of which I had only heard. I knew so many of the community come to Agnes with their woes when they wish a gentler reassurance, a more personal kindness than the absolution from sin I would offer. For instance, I knew this month that Anthony would approach Idonea to, in his naive, kind way, offer her help with the dye work, and that she would rebuff him, and that he would seek Agnes for sympathy. This time I have witnessed it discreetly from afar.

She is mother to so many of them, and I must wonder if she despises them their joys as she despised her sister's.

29th December 1392

It is less pleasant to spend so much time with Agnes when this only makes her happier to send every inconsolable lamb of the Hermitage to me. Once, I would have welcomed these confidences, for even if they themselves were irrelevant, they granted me fresh insights into these hearts and minds. Now I

wonder if there is anything new that I might learn, and yet still I must listen to Anthony speak of his mother presenting her nakedness to him.

It is a trial I ensure I have enjoyed a good amount of Grace's specially prepared beer beforehand.

12th May 1393

I have been chased out of the kitchen as a nuisance in the preparations for the founding celebrations. I am the master of these lands, unbound by time itself, with insights into the petty darkness within everyone, and yet Agnes has thwapped me out of her workspace as if I were a misbehaving novice.

I do not know if I am impressed at her audacity or if I am reinforced in my cause to make her torture her own daughter with a kitchen knife. Either way I do believe I will sneak back later and snatch one of those fruit tarts, whatever the harpy tells me.

1st August 1393

Constance will be here soon, and so I have made sure to speak directly with Agnes on her past, on the circumstances of her daughter's birth. She sought to speak first of that huntsman who entranced her and died before she realised his abuses or his inevitable turn to cruelty. I had no choice but to indulge this, and remain astonished at how she may herald one man as so pure and perfect and view the next as almost a demon. I wonder if there will ever be the right time to drive this realisation home.

Then we spoke of what truly mattered, that earl's son and his appetites. For the moment, my intention is clear: to speak of something beautiful emerging from all that sin and all that pain, an absolution for Agnes which is nevertheless so wholly separate from her, beyond her.

While she must be ready to welcome Constance with open arms, the seeds of her eventual bitterness must be planted now, for she will not listen if I am too late.

14th August 1393

Constance is arrived, and I have resolved to keep a step back and observe for the moment. I felt like an indulgent uncle might when offering a present at the reunion, and have encouraged everyone to permit Constance and Agnes some space and time together. This, of course, leaves Agnes required to speak with her daughter extensively, and my insistence that Constance helps her in the kitchens only reinforces that.

I do not need Agnes to confide in me to know how she feels, and not simply because we have done this over and over. She is joyful at the return of what she had lost, bitter and pained at the reminder of what is gone forever, and exquisitely, beautifully guilty.

28th August 1393

I have sought Agnes for a direct conversation for the first time since Constance's return. She fell over herself so ardently in thanking me for arranging this that I knew her doubts were close to the surface.

She feared offending me, feared I might think her ungrateful or without love, and so I accepted her assurances without reservation.

Her doubts, I told her, were normal and natural and would fade with time. It matters not how Constance came into this world, it matters not how they have been separated for so long; what matters is the time we have now. It would almost be truly useful advice, except it is in Agnes's nature to resent those who have what she has been denied, even - or perhaps especially - if it is the people she loves.

10th September 1393

There is very little I need to do in these months. Constance settles, and I while I must make sure that the Hermitage sees her as welcomed by Agnes with open arms, while those who resent her arrival must think her beloved by the community, this takes very little work. She is a charming young woman who easily wins over those who have no reservations, and Agnes is resolved to move forward. For the moment, I shall let her.

8th October 1393

Now that Constance is settled, I am making sure to spend time with her often, and making sure she spends time with others. The very first time, this was my purpose so that she would build a connection with everyone I could eventually exploit, and so that I was with her every step of the way. While it still serves this purpose, I later discovered that Agnes was growing bitter at how even I seemed to prefer Constance to her.

I am thus very swift to compliment the girl to her mother, which for the moment she is taking as a reflection upon herself. That does well for now; I do not wish to start breeding a divide until the new year.

17th November 1393

Lachlann's theft has been revealed, an altogether more mild affair than on some occasions. We have had milder weather the last season, and so our supplies are sufficiently bounteous that everyone is angry about the theft, but there is no whining from Hob about our food. The kitchen, certainly, is more inclined to tut and disapprove than lament, as has happened on occasion, of how much we will have to tighten our belts.

Sometimes it is worthwhile or simply entertaining to see and exploit the ripples which stem from this incident. But I wish to watch Agnes this cycle, and so the more predictable and reliable the rest of the Hermitage is, the easier that shall be. Everything stems from this relationship, and I do not wish to yet tackle ripples disrupting the centre.

21st December 1393

I had forgotten how Constance's closeness to Agnes encouraged Anthony. These are always long, tiresome nights trying to steer the boy's damaged sense of family in the most useful direction. Of everyone I have gathered, he is the one whose history has presented a multitude of surprises. They have

all been useful surprises, but every time I thought I understood the boy, I found some new, twisted horror which he would present as if it were a pleasant anecdote.

As such, I am hurling myself into the festive arrangements for as long as I can. Constance's beer will be brought out soon, and that is perhaps my favourite disruption. The beer is tasty, if unrefined, and Grace's simple, petty anger at how someone else has earned approval is an easy victory.

This entry has reflected very little on Agnes. She continues to bustle about the kitchens and fuss over her daughter, but in the new year I will begin to change my tactics, set her on the path for bitterness. Let this be one final, happy time for all of them, and one final rest for myself.

11th January 1394

I am encouraging Agnes to speak with me again of her history, of Ranulf and Arnald and her sister. These are problems, I tell her, which linger with her still, and if she could ever wish to be happy with her daughter in her life then she must confront and release these pains.

She was surprised that I had noticed any upset, which I had not particularly in the first cycle, but I know her habits by now. I was reassuring, but I know she is rattled at the thought that her doubts and growing bitterness might be visible; it makes them feel larger, and it confirms that they are real.

28th January 1394

Agnes has not yet in this cycle told me of the full story between her and the earl's son; the tale as a whole she has made clear, but the details are supposed to be a mystery to me still. We spoke a little of the time before her rape, of her grief and apprehension, and I continue to tell her that Constance is something beautiful that has emerged from her pain.

She is beginning to see that Constance's beauty and grace, born of her pain, have been denied her. Agnes has suffered, has been dealt wounds that scar her still, and yet Constance emerges, intelligent and beloved.

13th February 1394

I continue to speak of Constance in only the most blissful and gleaming of terms to Agnes, so that she will continue to feel as if she is the only one who harbours a dislike for the girl. Eventually, I must prompt her into opening up on her pain fully, and I must eventually turn against her myself, but it is far too early.

I watch Agnes now about the kitchens, and while to most observers she would seem the same, there is certainly a change. She is a harsher taskmaster, quicker to snap at William or especially Constance, all the more keen to perfect her work, all the more keen to shine in her place.

18th March 1394

Agnes has been working so hard in the kitchens, and I told her for several days that I was pleased to see her increased efforts. I watched her puff with pride, confident and comfortable in her place, and then last night spoke most earnestly with her about Constance's future. As Agnes is so much more focused on the kitchens, and as Constance is settling, and coming along so delightfully well in her theological studies, perhaps Constance should take her place as the Head of the Nuns?

Agnes was astonished, and all she could do at first was stammer that this was a fine idea, a necessary idea. I could see the hurt in her eyes as she lumbered her way through the rest of our talks, and she beat a hasty retreat soon after. The true consequences of this suggestion will come in time.

13th April 1394

Agnes has done what she always does, usually within this week, and finally thrown herself on my mercy. She asked to speak with me and the moment the door was closed she burst into angry, guilty, but utterly earnest tears. She has done so much, so much for the community, and now Constance might replace her? Has her work not been enough, or are we going to cast her aside? Is Constance to be another who benefits from all of Agnes's hard work?

I acted as if stunned, as if I had not considered any of this might be causing her pain. I comforted and soothed her, and assured her that she and the rest of the community will always, must always be put before newcomers such as Constance. But this was what I had thought Agnes had wanted, only now I see, I told her, that there is great pain inside her, a great pain I had not imagined.

Agnes was quick to ascribe guilt to her feelings, to act as if it is entirely her own fault for viewing Constance in such a way, but I know she said that only for my benefit and the time for denial is drawing to an end. I shook my head and said that, while I agreed that Constance's arrival should have been a cause for only joy, it is never so simple that only Agnes is to blame for the hurt.

I have told her I will reflect on the situation, and speak with her again soon.

1st May 1394

I have had quiet conversation with Agnes, but at last we spoke properly for the first time in weeks. I made sure to be sombre and thoughtful, and hold a hint of long-suffering guilt about me, for she is one of the Hermitage who must think I as much mistaken by Constance as them.

Constance has been a disruption to the Hermitage, I said, and Agnes and I spoke a little of the various discontents that had sprung up. Individually, we agreed, they could have been simple cases of clashing personalities, but for one person to be at the centre of so much upset, so much anger? It speaks ill of that person.

I had thought Constance was an absolution of Agnes's pain, I told her, a light that has sprung from the darkness, but I said I feared it was not that simple. For the first time in this cycle, I bade Agnes sit with me and tell of Arnald, of the rapes, of the circumstances and pains of the girl's conception. It was a long and arduous evening, and I did not press matters after that. Agnes was in no condition to hear anything I said, and I will let her simmer on such memories, brought freshly to mind, for a day or so.

9th May 1394

We spoke again, Agnes jittery from all she feels and all I have dredged up. It was not difficult to drive her down the right path.

There has been suffering, so much suffering in her life, and for Constance to be a beam of light in the darkness takes away any possible reprieve for Agnes herself. It gives Constance the fruits of all of Agnes's labour, it means that Agnes will suffer and Constance - her sister - the Hermitage - will all be the ones who emerge stronger and better for it.

We had looked at Constance in error, I told her. We had looked at the girl and thought she was absolution, but what was she, really? A creature born of rape, a creature born of all of the darkness and pain that swirled around Agnes's youth. Had Ranulf not died, had his son not died, then Arnald would likely have never looked at her. But he did, and he forced himself upon her, and there was nothing Agnes could do to either stop him or even keep her own child. Every circumstance which led to Constance's birth, and her life in the nunnery, came from suffering, and surely that has left a mark upon the girl as much as it has left a mark upon Agnes.

Constance is not absolution from Agnes's suffering. She is the personification of it, she has been birthed from Agnes's pain and darkness. In Constance do Agnes's sins take root and fester, and so do the sins of others, the sins of the Hermitage as a whole. Something must be done to save us all, and something must be done to save Agnes.

Distressed by her feelings towards Constance, agonised by the recollection of all of her suffering and, I know, so very eager to be told that this is not her fault, Agnes was swift to agree. And thus has Agnes once again refused to see the ones she loves joyful if she is denied that joy herself. Only this time she will not run from that joy, as she ran from her sister - she will destroy it.

I must make my preparations with the others in the coming days. I do not believe this cycle has told me anything new, and I do not believe that it has granted me insights into Agnes that I did not previously hold, but it has been useful to look into this, the very start of Constance, the very start of sin.

22nd Cycle

15th May 1394

I have previously decided that this cycle I ought to dedicate to Anthony. As always, the sight of his specific form of violence inflicted on the scapegoat leaves me feeling a little nauseous. It is odd, after so many times, so much of what they do I can view with perfect clarity and no emotional response at all, and yet Anthony's unique desperation and neediness still gives me pause.

Sometimes I consider the wisdom of digging deeper into such a mind, but I am determined I will finish what I have begun. The more I know him, the more I will be able to move him.

This time I chose to return earlier than usual, and shared dinner with them.

16th May 1394

The pin - what direction to take this? How can I manipulate these events to learn something new about him, or have I learned all there is to know? I advised Grace to return it without letting him know that she had stolen it. Could I perhaps reveal the truth anyway, but keep him from telling her he knows? How well would he manage that sort of duplicity?

Might it bring out some of his problems earlier? I know that once Constance is present he will stay very close to her and Agnes, but what of the time before that?

I will see what I can manage.

17th May 1394

I spoke with Anthony at length today, and in light of his relief at the return of the pin, I opted simply to plant the seeds of doubt in his head rather than explicitly suggest Grace's guilt. Instead I drew his attention to how odd it was that it would disappear for so long, and then resurface with no exact idea as to where it was? And the place that Grace said she found it - had we not looked there?

The sadness he clearly feels at such a possibility is somewhat like strangling one of the newborn lambs. He is desperate to trust, more than anything else.

3rd June 1394

I suspect there is nothing more I can learn from Anthony's rejection at Idonea's hands - at least not about him. So much of his motivation is that simple urge to belong.

1st October 1394

Fychan's leg is recovering well and it seems he will live. I wonder if we will have another spate of years of his existence after the unfortunate 1380s.

5th October 1394

I am so used to watching those so potently affected by the sheep breeding that I had not previously noted just how strenuously Anthony avoids it. He will do absolutely anything else to get away from it.

I think next year I will have him assist Peter in the matter. Assuming I have not found out enough matters by then.

26th December 1394

This cycle I was certain to position myself carefully by Anthony and Agnes, in order to quietly eavesdrop on his indiscretions. He clings to her as a mother, and she treats him almost as a son sometimes.

Yet the words he spoke are nothing particularly new to me - the sight of his mother appearing naked, the wrath of his father at such matters. This time I will pry rather more carefully when he comes to me, as I heard her urging him to.

29th December 1394

That was an enlightening evening.

The relation to his parents is complex, far more complex than even I had imagined. I admit I gave him wine to ease his speaking, and pushing revealed a few more details. His father hated him from the beginning, he is certain, and when he was younger his mother would beat him for seemingly no reason. He eventually came to the conclusion that this was a problem with him, rather than his parents, as he would see them being kind to one another.

How much more he has in common with Constance than he'd ever realise.

As he grew older, his mother started to go out of her way to be found naked by him, and would offer him smiles and winks, a matter than continued until his father found them and beat him unconscious. Speaking with him today, I sensed there was still some confusion in him about these events, but as I pushed him to recount them, there was an edge of dawning realisation in his voice.

I did not push him further today. Already I sense he was shaken by these revelations, and I do not want to break him too soon.

Once Constance is here, it may be easier to push.

15th May 1395

Sometimes even I am impressed with the patience that my work here has taught me. I am more capable of waiting than any man I have ever met.

Once again, I encouraged Anthony to drink a little too much of Grace's wonderful brews, and once again, I encouraged him to open up about incidents of his past. This time he spoke of his father's death, the man having been imprisoned for hunting animals. In hindsight, we were able to work out that he was poaching, and eventually he died in prison before he could be sentenced. I encouraged Anthony to remember his feelings at the time, and he admitted that he couldn't really remember feeling very much other than happy that he might spend more time with his sister.

It is his sister that I will press him on next.

23rd July 1395

Agnes came to me today, expressing her concern about Anthony. In the time that they have spent together in the kitchen, he has been saying things that worry her. He seems greatly affected by his childhood, she told me, and she fears he is thinking on dark matters far too frequently.

I listened carefully. It is useful to know, even if I intend to push him further before I stop. All must be correctly timed.

15th August 1395

The arrival of Constance today went as expected.

She has been the perfect way to get Anthony to speak about his sister, seeing as she is Agnes's child, and he himself sees Agnes as mother figure. It did not take much to get him to speak of it, although it did rather dampen the delight to his mood.

From what he spoke to me of the time following his father's death, Anthony was free to spend more time with his sister, and he speaks of his mother seeming to encourage this at first. Though he did not tell me much more yet, I sensed that there was more to this story than he was revealing, and have settled for now on waiting. It clearly weighs heavily on his mind.

12th November 1395

Lachlann's discovery went without complications.

For the last few months I have been letting things progress rather more naturally, focusing once again on making certain that the disputes with the Cripplegates go according to plan. I have observed Anthony spending as much time as possible with Constance and Agnes, seeming almost fixated on watching the growing discomfort between them. The tension there is starting to be noticeable if you think to look for it, and I think it is that very tension that draws him in.

In the aftermath of the arguments tonight, I intend to push him again tomorrow. I will write how it went as soon as I can.

13th November 1395

Success! A trembling and shaking Anthony confided in me yet more of his concerns, and his past.

Agnes loves Constance more, he is certain. He feels replaced, he told me, and sees Constance as both sister - and yet sometimes when he speaks of her, she clearly reminds him of his mother, so unfathomable and hard to understand. His sister used to creep into his room to sleep at night, he told me, and his mother would get angry about this. He doesn't want to risk loving Constance more than he loves Agnes. He's worried for both of them, and what might be coming.

He told me that he is afraid he might hurt one or both of them somehow, or that they might hurt one another. The aptness with which he spoke actually took me back for a moment, but then he confessed his deep suspicion that his mother had killed his sister, and how she wanted him just for herself.

And how he sobbed, then, as he spoke of how desperately and greatly he had wanted her affection, how he had wanted her love more than anything but when it came it felt as if he had wished a great darkness on those he loved. He asked me if it was his fault, and, wary that in a few months I will need him to enact more violence, I told him that perhaps it was - perhaps he ought to have stepped in and struck the blow before she could?

But I held him as he cried, and told him God forgives him, and that next time he will simply have to be stronger.

I think that I have learned all there is to be learned of his story, and so I will simply focus on keeping things on track from now, and let the details of what happened settle in his mind.

17th November 1395

I did not expect to write again so soon.

Every word I move to write, I am cursing myself. I did not think it through. How could I, I who knows them all so well, not foresee this possibility?

Brother Anthony is dead, by his own hand. We found him hanging from a tree out the back of the chapel.

This is irritating, to have been shown my own limitations once more. I have been doing this for forty-five years and yet I did not see his suicide coming. At least I learned everything I needed of him first.

And yet I find myself concerned, anxious in a way I have not felt since Fychan's first passing. Suicide is not like a natural death, or even a death at the hands of fellow man - it is a base sin, and a deliberate removal of oneself from the world. I have no specific reason to believe that it will be any different, and yet I find myself frequently looking at the spaces where Anthony would once have been, and pondering if it will be possible for him to return from this.

I must move on from my mistake, and vow to learn. The next few weeks I will focus on keeping everything else strictly on track.

14th May 1396

It is done.

24th Cycle

15th May 1396

Anthony has returned, much to my relief. It would seem there is no passage for them to escape these repetitions, by their hand or mine or fate alone.

My attention turns now to William. This, at least, will be somewhat less disturbing - or so I hope.

The brand that he wears is undoubtedly a mark of crime. He has confessed little in our time together, although I sense that his regret is genuine. Still, he is often something of an outsider among the group, and I am keen to see what I can offer to get him to reveal his past.

The methods I will attempt are not yet clear to me, but I will persevere. These things always come in time.

25th May 1396

Cooking would be an obvious in, perhaps, but he shares that with Agnes and it would be too risky to remove her. She is the centre of too much.

The choir, maybe? Can I involve Constance in that more closely?

I must think on what I know to be true. He wishes to silence Constance, to keep not only words from being spoken, but also any sound from being made. His aggravation comes in her disruption of his sanctuary. This is, to him, a safe place. Undoubtedly he has suffered from a lack of them before.

I will try several angles, but I suspect I will need to await her arrival to disrupt him. He is one of the more stable of the hermitage, and hard to rattle through subtle means.

31st August 1396

Fychan's wound is certainly healing well. I doubt he will perish.

29th September 1396

I have been thinking more on William's place in the kitchen, and his relationship with Agnes. While she undoubtedly takes charge, he often brings flavour to dishes, or moves outside the expected to experiment. She learned to cook in a household; I wonder if I can find out where he learned such a skill.

He is as comfortable working with Ladislaus as he is with Agnes when it comes to butchering and storing the meat. He does not seem to find Ladislaus intimidating in the way that some do.

1st October 1396

When I spoke with William last night, he was off-hand, mentioning time on the road and the value of herbs and their combinations. He spoke again of Thomas - not Brother Thomas, of our hermitage, but the man who taught him how to read and write. This is a name I have heard him speak before, but he is reluctant to go into any great detail on the matter.

I have learned enough of human frailty and emotion, however, to know that Thomas was a mentor to him, and meant a great deal. I suspect he even sees some of my own 'qualities' as being mirrored, which does lead me to wonder if the man was as shrewd as I, or if he was a genuine kind soul who took in William when he needed it most.

I am ever patient. Constance will be here in less than a year, and then I can begin in earnest.

28th November 1396

I do find it interesting to see who does and does not interact with the debates. William has no interest in Ralf's assertions on medicine, or Hob's hypotheticals. He is very much grounded in the here and now, even in the colder months.

15th May 1397

There is such joy in him when he is free to work in the kitchen. He and Agnes work well together in ways that I did not care to pay much attention to before. She seems to like him.

23rd July 1397

We are now in the time of year when Anthony spends more time with Agnes in the kitchen. Never before have I stopped to note how this affects William, and I am surprised to find him mostly indifferent to the change.

On the one hand, I clearly chose well with him, as he is as quick to scapegoat Constance as any; on the other, he is proving irritatingly difficult to read.

15th August 1397

Finally, Constance is here, and I can actually move on with matters. I have already encouraged her to speak with William for lessons in her singing, that she might be a better member of the choir.

His initial reaction to her is one of slight suspicion, but otherwise he seems unconcerned about a new addition to the hermitage. She is seen as any of the others are: someone to be polite with, but not to grow close.

This, I intend to change.

13th September 1397

I had not previously noted how, during this crucial time between Agnes and Constance, William is often away with Ladislaus preparing the meat.

For now, I have reassigned him to check on the kitchen more regularly, and sent Agnes to work on the meat. I have told Peter that I believe this will keep Agnes from distractions, and he agrees it is a wise plan. In truth, I imagine the distance will work nearly as well as building Agnes's resentments as the proximity, and it will give me more of a chance to draw William and Constance together.

I am very grateful that she is quite this easy to manipulate.

20th September 1397

Proximity to Constance seems to be having no alternative effects yet. I must rethink my approach.

12th November 1397

Once again, I am reminded of how patience and careful observation can offer much that overt machinations cannot.

Lachlann's exposure, the disputes with the Cripplegates: all are matters where previously I had not looked, specifically, to William. Yet here I have the freedom to.

The arguments with Kristiana caused him mild consternation. The revelation of Lachlann's practices yet more - and unlike many of the others, his concern was less towards what Lachlann was stealing, and more towards Constance's role in such. It is as if it is not the subjects of the arguments, but the fact of argument itself that spurs his displeasure. He sees Constance as a disruption far before any of the others.

In fact, I would go so far as to say that he sees her as less of a person than any other that I have tried and tested so far. He does not see Our Lady in individuals, but as a collective whole - and it is that whole, and wholeness, that he loves.

These are the topics I must approach him to discuss, as matters progress.

18th January 1398

He is one of the few who notes Grace's unhappiness at the compliments of Constance. He is a shrewd man, and quick to note changes in demeanour. I overheard him speaking favourably of Grace's work in comparison to Constance's, and assuring Grace that it was simply her newness that brought her such praise from the others. While I know his words are not enough to ease the sting, I find it interesting that he tried.

27th February 1398

I spoke with William tonight about home, and about disruptions. I confessed that I had some concerns regarding Constance, and he cautiously agreed. I had hoped he might be more vociferous upon hearing

someone validate his feelings, but I learn now that one thing William does not seek is validation. He is confident in who he is - it is the place of others around him that he seeks to validate.

After some time, he did speak briefly of Thomas once again. The old hermit died, he said, after he and William officiated the marriage of a young couple who were fleeing the wrath of their parents. It was this crime for which William was branded, as two newcomers came into his world and disrupted it.

No, William will not stand for disruptions.

13th March 1398

From matters that I have learned, and thinking back on previous times, I am chilled to consider that I believe William suspects me of having a hand in matters that have passed. Indeed, I believe that he has had these suspicions on previous times, and that he has been dubious of the girl, but has gone along with what I am planning for the greater good.

He watches me, I note, as I watch others. He is shrewd and observant, and knows how to make himself unnoticed, how to encourage others to underestimate his intelligence. He cooks, and he sings, and he watches.

Have I perhaps chosen with greater intelligence than even I had guessed? What a risk this feels, now, to have one who might see through some of what I tell them.

Of course, I retain the advantage. He loses his memory each time as they all do. Only I am fully able to comprehend the whole of it, the entire matter of what we do here.

12th April 1398

I made the announcement tonight, as I always do, placing Constance as Head of the Nuns. I met his eyes as he watched me, unspoken, but I saw the wariness there.

I am unnerved, and intend to speak with him soon. Yet, I cannot help but worry that each time we speak, I am revealing as much to him as he is to me. This sensation is new and entirely unpleasant.

2nd May 1398

Finally, we spoke, watching he and I.

He told me that he cares not for why I do what I do, as long as his home remains. My fears that he had seen through me entirely faded as he went on to discuss his past - how he had been penniless, and parentless, how he had been a whore and a thief and would do anything to avoid falling back to that life once more.

Yes, he is greedy - greedy for safety, an insatiable need for stability that he has never known. Each word he spoke, I realised that while he may witness and observe nearly as well as I, he will never know

how to steer and direct as I have learned. No, he watches to gather and hoard, to clutch to himself a sense of belonging and safety.

No more am I afraid or unnerved. I have assured him that all will right itself, and that our sanctuary will remain undisturbed. In times to come, I will know how to manage him should he ever become a problem.

14th May 1398

It is done.

25th Cycle

20th May 1398

I think that I have avoided my next close study for too long, but it is for good reason. I am somewhat daunted by the difficulties inherent in examining Grace, which is to say that the discussions which give me my best advantage come in private, yet when I speak often with Grace in private, I accustom her to the idea of the brevery as a place of little privacy and deprive myself of my one sure tool to turn her against Constance.

Little wonder, I think, that I am concerned as to how this cycle will unfold. One thing I truly do not wish to test is what would happen if a member of the hermitage were to refuse to purify themselves upon Constance.

My plan at present is to always offer a conciliatory gift of gathered herbs. Yet even there I must take care; I do not wish to show too much knowledge of the herbs she requires, in case she wonders how I have learned so much of plants.

I have, however, spent the past few days gathering and drying much of what I know she requires.

30th May 1398

I presented Grace with my gatherings today, surprising her with them and, I think, causing a certain confusion. It always seems so trivial, but she is wracked with guilt at this time over the theft of Anthony's pin.

It's not uncommon for it to take some time before she visits me and confesses of her own accord, but usually I do not, as I am sure she must have imagined, confront her.

It was in my mind for a moment to ask her if she had seen the pin for which Anthony was searching, but it disappeared, and Anthony's search took place, while I was away from the hermitage, and I would have difficulty explaining myself if she were to ask Anthony even a few questions on its return.

In such ways do I risk unmaking Our Lady's plans, and so I held back with care from any such risk.

Still, that makes it clear that I shall have to wait until after her confession comes on its own accord before I can talk with her, and that also means that my herb collection was, on this occasion, wasted.

Our Lady's plan touches on so many factors it seems impossible to cater for them all. But I shall have purity, I shall perfect a cycle and achieve paradise. It will happen.

31st May 1398

Grace came to me today to confess. It's rare that she caves so early on; I must assume it was occasioned by my visit surprising her earlier. I gave her as good counsel as always, of course, for I have no reason to cultivate a rift between she and Brother Anthony nor she and Sister Idonea.

In truth, it has always struck me that Grace is one of our friendliest. Once her first brews were ready and ever onward, she would visit with people around the hermitage when she thought there might be a need, providing refreshment as they worked, though she would then always retreat again.

It is companionship she seeks, I think, true, but it is companionship only on her own terms.

16th August 1398

Achieving more than short, unrevealing conversations with Grace without also destroying her privacy in advance of Constance's arrival has proved very difficult. In early July I decided to hold off until this time of year, when as I noted above she travels much. I have appointed myself her aide, and walk with her as she makes her rounds, passing out the mugs of ale and watching her bask in the appreciation.

And yet it is still difficult to glean much from her even over the course of a day. Each presentation of a new drink ends private conversation, and she remains secretive about much.

3rd December 1398

As always, Grace's special Christmas brew is unveiled early in the month to help us make merry.

Has it really been August since I last set down observations? It seems to me truly no time at all. I have made little progress, however. What Grace keeps secret, she hides effectively, and yet what Grace would wish to keep secret is for me likewise a mystery.

I know, after all, of her many thefts or, at least, many of her thefts. I know of the executions of others suspected of stealing the things she took.

Is there more to her activities in the covenant than simply the pin? Would I have been wiser, this cycle, to invent suspicions and pass them to Thomas to investigate? Does Grace slip often, even as we push for purity?

I find it difficult to believe that she would confess to the pin but to nothing else. So what is hidden?

There must be a way to break through her reserve and find out.

12th December 1398

I chanced to be in the corridor today when Grace was leaving the scriptorium. This was something of a surprise; that is not often a place she enters. There was something furtive in her demeanour, but I was only able to follow her as far as the closing door of her brevery.

I will have to find an opportunity to search that place.

15th Day 1399

I believe that today I am the only individual in the hermitage neither drunk nor sleeping off the pain of their drunkenness. Grace's brews always provoke deep revelry on this occasion, and usually I permit myself to indulge as the others do; this time, however, that was not possible. I had a duty to perform here.

I have at last searched the brevery without the risk of Grace's watchful eye. Knowing she had been to the scriptorium, I was looking for something small, easily hidden, and in the end I found it when I moved one upright barrel, finding a few sheets of paper folded beneath.

Grace has written a letter for last Christmas for her daughter. A daughter! I knew she had been married. I knew she had borne a son, and that he had died as her husband did of the plague.

Her daughter, by contrast, was simply put into another's care while she continued to travel. There is an attempt to explain why to this child - Roseia is her name. Of course, that explanation is only what Grace wishes to tell her daughter, and there is no guarantee at all that it be true.

For myself, I suspect the choice to stem from confused desperation more than anything else. Yet it is mostly important as it tells me why it is that Grace becomes hostile not only to Constance but to Sister Agnes.

There are so many chance remarks I can make to intensify this. I look forward to experimenting.

16th May 1399

It would be wise, I think, if I did not experiment with those remarks on this cycle. I thought I had set everything in the brevery back as it was, yet today Grace demanded of myself, Sister Agnes, and Brother Peter that the flock be reminded of the sin of trespass.

She knows someone to have found the letter, I must assume. She cannot imagine that it was me, and so for the time being I am safe, but any undue hints might lead to suspicion, and the speed and vehemence of her outburst tells me that she would both be suspicious and willing to act on that suspicion.

Above all else, I cannot lose my hold on the reins by which I steer my flock. If they turn on me, we will fail Our Lady.

If they turn on me there is a great chance that we shall all be damned.

I cannot allow that.

12th November 1399

I cannot wait for this cycle to be over. Sometimes when I speak of Constance in Grace's hearing I trip over my words, so watchful of them am I. When she again has no reason to suspect my knowledge, the knowledge is a useful tool, yet until then my scalpel is the sword of Damocles, and the head over which it is suspended is my own.

14th May 1400

It is done.

26th Cycle

15th May 1400

Disgusting, horrible weather brings me back to the safety of our farmhouse earlier than I would usually, and earlier than I should really have liked. It has been fifty years since the first cycle began. Fifty! The very number underscores how absurd this has already become.

Yet my quest for perfection continues, and I still feel sure that it can be achieved, that it will be achieved. With few of my flock still unknown quantities as far as our intent and work is concerned, I feel confident that with a few more experiments I will soon have a recipe for something better.

It is not so much the question of these experiments themselves, as it is the work I must do to balance them. I test the limits of Mark's friendships, and I must deal with the frustration Kristiana accrues. I address the difficulties Brother Ralf encounters in the infirmary, and I am not there to ensure Hob and Ladislaus have a particular conversation.

I fear, among other things, the consequences, waves of them breaking against the shore, if Thomas uncovers Lachlann's thefts early. I have seen in most cycles a growing suspicion of Lachlann in his eyes, and while he has yet to reach a dangerous peak, there is always the possibility some other chance will give him the opportunity.

And so, this cycle, I intend to work with Brother Lachlann, to discover more of his past than I have yet heard, to understand and infer the rest.

19th June 1400

Brother Lachlann grows more secretive when I attempt to accompany him on his foraging. In hindsight this should truly have been evident to me; it's clear that any accompaniment hinders his ability to hide away the food he considers 'excess'.

I shall devise some other approach.

20th August 1400

It dawned on me as I was settling into my bed last night that after this cycle is over my actions in it shall again be unremarkable.

This is a realisation that I find I have at least once every cycle, and typically more often. Yet it never becomes something I have truly learned.

I contrived to be present in the kitchen when Lachlann came through with his bounty, and I took a piece of meat from the pot before his eyes and those of Sister Agnes. While I knew Sister Agnes would be displeased, I knew she would not object, and meeting Lachlann's eyes, I smiled.

It will take some time. But I shall become his fellow conspirator without ever authorising his thefts, and through that I shall find all I need of him.

And in the interim I will amuse myself with Agnes's reactions.

12th November 1400

Yesterday Lachlann and I spoke at length about his travels before Liverpool. I learned how much of his life has been caught up with one form of crime or another, of the castration of his mentor to teach him a lesson, of the death of his father which was thought to be his fault.

He has been many forms of outlaw, and he has done all of it to keep from being hungry.

And yet still I feel that he is, despite these confessions, still withholding something else.

He came to Duddon Valley fleeing the men who took his mentor, who sent him the grisliest trophy as a warning. He was seeking to escape punishment by other criminals as, before, he had hoped to avoid justice.

And yet he is holding more back.

He is driven by need. His tales make that clear even if he does not appear to have noticed himself. Perhaps that is the problem. Perhaps, along with all these small individual sins, he fears that I will eject him because of the deadly sin of gluttony.

Perhaps, but perhaps not.

And I must be sure.

Soon I shall be. If he is merely hiding from me that his theft of food continues, then I have what I need. But if there is more, then I must know.

5th February 1401

Lachlann Irvine. No. The name is Lachlann of Irvine. Named for his home. Named for the place he was found.

Lachlann, the foundling.

He was not born to any woman of Irvine. He was nobody's niece. Nobody's cousin. He appeared one morning on the shore, and was taken in by fisherman and fishwife.

When his father was found dead, he stood trial. This much I had known, but I had never realised it was a sanctified trial, a trial by ordeal in sight of a clergyman. The question, was he man or something else, something fey.

Lachlann has never known. Mostly he has faced this fear by not facing it, by simply remaining himself and avoiding questions of what that means.

He came into Duddon Valley before the boundary was completed, and I welcomed him in.

I will have to speak with Our Lady.

I may have nestled to my breast a viper in paradise.

8th February 1401

Our Lady assures me Lachlann's parentage is not a difficulty. That his presence alone does not prevent perfection.

Our Lady assures me that all is well. That my fear of the past few days is not justified.

That I have not squandered fifty years in work that could never have succeeded.

Perfection can be achieved, and it can be achieved without finding a way to banish him.

27th February 1401

Would that Our Lady had also assured me Lachlann is no otherworldly thing.

4th January 1402

A question occurred to me today, and I decided to answer it.

Brother Lachlann, having been discovered, has returned to his tricks. He is again hiding food for himself.

I removed it, and will see how things change.

17th March 1402

There is no helping some people.

14th May 1402

It is done.

27th Cycle

15th Day 1402

Already this year is off to an ill-omened start. Spring is late, and the valley is cold but dry. I am glad that I did not wait until this cycle to tend to Lachlann, for he is always so much harder to manage when we are short on food.

And short on food I suspect we will be.

5th June 1402

Although some of the cold is starting to abate, the sky has not gifted us with as much rain as usual, and things grow poorly. Fychan's leg is causing him much pain, and I do not look forward to the winter.

29th August 1402

Fychan has passed away once more. The ground we buried him in was near-solid with frost.

2nd October 1402

As sheep breeding season comes to us, I ponder the value of killing an extra sheep for the food it would bring. Pigeon pie is so dull and stringy.

Whatever choice we make, I have resolved to make no alterations this cycle unless the weather improves and our food becomes more plentiful. I think there is too much at stake with empty stomachs.

20th November 1402

The cold is terrible, the harvest poor, and finally the rain has come. Although I know it is a good omen for next spring, for now it is miserable.

2nd December 1402

Heavy snow is keeping us mostly indoors. Peter and Apollonia are taking less than the others in portions, I note. Despite myself, I find it fascinating how some react to scarcity with self-sacrifice, while others, such as Hob and Lachlann, fight for every scrap they can obtain.

15th Day 1403

It was something of a meagre celebration today, and the cold has not yet left us, but with luck spring will bring some relief.

19th August 1403

The warmth of the last few months has been most welcome. The stores are looking healthier now, though not as well as I would prefer. Constance's arrival has been unremarkable.

10th September 1403

The cold has hit once more, with a force that worries me. If this winter is as poor as the last then it may be harder to manage their reactions to Lachlann's theft. At least if they wish to banish him from the hermitage I can probably convince them to wait until spring, as to send him out in this cold would be undoubtedly a death sentence.

12th November 1403

Matters were tense, but we managed.

1st January 1404

Another death that I did not see coming has struck us. The snowfall has been heavy, as always. Peter has been ever vigilant in watching his flock, but today one of the ewes strayed and he insisted on going out to find her and return her to the others. While she is likely to lamb this year and it was an understandable choice, it was nevertheless a foolish one.

He did return, smiling, assuring us that God had seen to him: for after a short walk, he had been filled with divine warmth and strength, and was able to find the ewe and return her with no issues. Indeed, he had even removed his robe, for the walk had caused him to grow hot and flustered.

He died within the hour.

10th January 1404

I have appointed Brother Thomas as Head of the Monks. He is not the second choice I would pick if I were intending to keep him longer than a few months, but he will see us through until Constance is dealt with.

14th May 1404

It is done.

28th Cycle

15th May 1404

After some time to rest and reflect, I must continue my works. While it is true that I know each of them inside and out by now, for I can twist and turn them to my cause with very little conscious thought, if I am to perfect this mechanism then there must be a full and frank account of every intricacy. Of every piece.

Ladislaus Hebenstreit was an odd piece. I saw great potential in him from the beginning, of course. He is one so driven and yet so broken, so despising of sin and yet as much the sinner as any other. He could not be a keystone of the community, for he cares so very little for many of them, but in a manner he is a keystone for sin. The most perfect righteous punishment of others to purge the sin within.

Once I picked Constance for the scapegoat, I was unsure where he would fit. When I had contemplated Ralf for the role, I had no doubts of his role. There, he would physically strike down the man of thought whose intellectualism had led him down a dark and heretical road. It would be the clashing of two opposites. With Constance - Constance the pure and innocent - I had hoped faintly for some reaction to the feminine that I could exploit.

Thusly was I reminded that there is little as unpredictable as the human heart. I could not have planned for how it has transpired in a hundred cycles.

But there are curiosities to the man, and by exploiting his emotions I have perhaps been neglectful of the other elements at play. He is no uneducated brute, nor is he the simple, reliable smith. His is perhaps an ecclesiastic pedigree to which the others should aspire, for we are truly blessed to have an inquisitor of the Church in our midst.

Let us find the truth.

12th August 1404

I suspect most of our fellows miss the intricacies of Ladislaus. It is true that his talents provide us with some very necessary services, the butchery and metalwork filling intricate roles within the community. But I wonder how much truly pay him attention? I wonder how many of them realise his life has belonged to God far longer than most. He may not hurl himself into the singing of the hymns and he may be as sombre and dour as anyone during the sermons, but there is extra care he takes to dedicate himself and his time to his faith.

23rd October 1404

Watching him at work today, I was struck by how few have noticed his incredible resilience to pain. He is seen as tough, but only the most astute watch how his eyes always follow his hands, watch how deliberate and particular every motion is in his smithing. It is curious that a man of so much anger lives a life of such control. In some men that control is restraint, a fear of their inner darkness, but Ladislaus seeks only his own protection.

Drawing confessions out of him has been, over the years, difficult. I do not believe there has been a single cycle where he has admitted all to me; over the decades does the tapestry of his life spill out to me. I have his respect and I have his trust, but not always does guilt seize him, not always does it simply occur to him to speak of matters. There are guarded men and women in the Hermitage, but I believe Ladislaus's reticence puts all of them to shame.

2nd April 1405

Today I made sure I cleared the paths of snow alongside Ladislaus; refreshingly, he is one of the few who has never shown any discomfort at my joining them in physical labour. We have spent time together over work and we have spent time together in confession, but very rarely do we talk as men.

It is because, I was reminded, he is a shocking conversationalist. In others I can spin out some discourse, find some matter for debate or coax some tale out of them, but I was left with the uncomfortable impression of being a distraction to his humble labours.

I would be impressed if it were not so vexing. I find myself curious, with Constance's arrival scuttling closer, how near to the edge of his fury and hatred I can drive him, so long as it is not too far?

7th June 1405

I have been watching Ladislaus so intently I stopped paying attention to Fychan's condition. He passed away from fever and infection this morning. That is, I forget, a dozen times now?

19th August 1405

The arrival of Constance is often like surfacing after a long struggle underwater. Months of turgid repetition burst into fresh colour, sights, smells. The world becomes like one of Idonea's paintings, bright and vivid sometimes beyond all sense and realism.

She settles with her mother in the kitchen, of course, and this is as smooth as it ever is. My eyes turn inevitably to Ladislaus, for I have often had to do so very little to twist and turn him through the events. He is drawn to her, he will despise himself for such feelings, and inevitably he will blame her. The occasional confession, the reminder of his vows, the odd off-hand comment of the wickedness of feminine wiles is all I need to offer.

Usually. So long as he does not kill her, I know by now that I can push and prod and get the full gauge of his flaws and sins. Let us begin.

28th August 1405

I see only the clues in Ladislaus's manner because I know to look for them. It took me several days, originally, to realise he seeks any opportunity, any excuse to go to the kitchens and lend his assistance there. But he is like a smitten schoolboy, not comprehending his own feelings and acting on a simple instinct which tells him to be close to her.

3rd September 1405

I am ensuring I speak with Ladislaus weekly, which I believe he might find suspicious if he were not so diverted. I have made a point of speaking about his history, asking questions of his formative years. It is a story which has been told a hundred times before by a hundred men of the cloth - the poor boy goes to the Church - so I do not care greatly for those details. But in our formative years do we boys become men, and in our formative years do we explore and master or are mastered by our baser desires.

For a man with such a fascination with flesh, with the intricacies and contortions of the human form, Ladislaus Hebenstreit is shockingly unaware of women. I suppose I should not be surprised; the physical world holds only so many interests for him, and so I must wonder if he is even capable of indulging in pleasures of the flesh?

I will endeavour to lay the seeds of such a question in his mind, and be sure to make mention of Constance a breath later. Let him see her as the key to parts inside himself he has never explored, for soon enough he shall despise her for unlocking them.

17th September 1405

For the moment, he only watches. He has gone out of his way to be in the same place as her, to spend more time in the kitchens than necessary, but that is for his butcher's work, and he speaks more with William and Agnes. While I wish to push him, I know he will make the approach of his own accord. To press before that point may send him skittering off and that will not do.

23rd September 1405

I asked him directly of his opinion on Constance, and he was swift to say he had no opinion. She is but another sister of the Hermitage. And yet it was hardly difficult to nudge the matter along, and then the words came. Some minstrel would love to record this as eloquence flowing from this stoic man once his heart was overwhelmed by blossoming feeling, but in truth he said maybe only five more words about her than he has said about any other woman. There is meaning in those five words, for mentioning her charm and her intellect is a gush of warmth from Ladislaus. All he brings himself to say about Idonea is that she is competent at laundry.

I observed that while it is delightful to see Constance reunited with her mother, I hope that she will begin to make friendships elsewhere in the Hermitage. Let us see if he takes the bait.

29th September 1405

For a man of such anger and impulse, on some matters Ladislaus does nothing without extensive deliberation. In this case, he took a week after my comment before going to the kitchens to speak with Constance. He was helpful, of course, and Agnes will always be happy to thrust a knife into his hands and command him to chop roots while she bustles, but she was most evidently at the heart of all of his focus.

3rd October 1405

In the past, I have needed to do nothing to exacerbate the situation between the two. Ladislaus is perfectly capable of seeking out Constance and then being most upset when he discovers spending time with a charming young woman can invoke emotions.

But I must perfect my understanding of the mechanism, and after all these years I know the mechanism can sustain all manner of disruptions. In the extremes do we see the best of men.

I have quietly implied to Constance that Ladislaus may be suffering some mild ailment, a faint flu of the oncoming winter, and is too prideful to seek the aid of the Infirmarian. He has too much work to do, and will refuse to neglect his duty due to physical ailments. She, predictably, is making sure to stop by his smithy, to bring him water and food, to offer even a helping hand where necessary.

He is quite taken aback by her seeking him out, for of course there is no ailment. The object of his affections is merely, of her own volition, spending her time with him.

15th October 1405

In our time together, Ladislaus is speaking more and more of sin. Of how so much of the heresy and wayward thinking he witnessed came from sin, and while rooting out Catharism was more about hunting men of pride than men of baser needs, the first step came from the distraction of sin. A pious man will dedicate his hours and days to God's work, but simple sin - gluttony and lust and greed - will urge him to be wasteful. Sin may not urge him to dark acts, but it will turn his thoughts away from God, and in the shadows of that diversion does heresy fester.

I wonder if he is distracted by simple sin.

21st October 1404

The offence against Kristiana's masonry was caused today, and I watched Ladislaus glare across the courtyard as the Cripplegates brooded. For the moment, all he has done is glare, but I must monitor the situation. He cannot turn too violent, too quickly.

Delightfully, he sought out Constance soon after to offer her reassurance. That he is becoming her faithful supporter in all matters saves me the effort of reassuring her myself.

29th October 1404

I dare say I have witnessed something new. Sheep breeding season is always a time for long, awkward gazes across the paddock, especially from Peter, Apollonia and Anthony, but now I may add Ladislaus to the list of this year's spectators.

It is a subtle watching, a subtle yearning, but his previous disinterest has faded. I suspect a curiosity instead of the raging fires within felt by some of his fellows. But never before has he shown much, if any physical interest.

9th November 1405

Earlier than usual, Ladislaus is approaching me to speak with some concern about his own distractions and feelings. He does not name Constance, but his meaning is clear. He does not comprehend his emotions, but he knows he is drawn to her and is, at the least, uncertain.

I have agreed that physical attachments should be beneath us, but I have also reminded him that we are a community, and we should all remain bound together. I believe that, if left unattended, he has spent time with Constance and then withdrawn himself. I am curious to find his breaking point this cycle.

21st November 1405

Lachlann's theft was revealed once again, and this time I kept my gaze on Ladislaus in the confrontation. That Constance had discovered the truth prompted what I believe was a surge of pride within him, and when Lachlann's accusing eyes turned on her when the crowd gathered, I would swear that Ladislaus bristled.

Had Lachlann been foolish, as he has sometimes been, to speak against her I am not sure it would have ended well for him. But Ladislaus is already more attached, which I can only observe with satisfaction.

6th December 1405

The man is becoming like a puppy. Constance is very much in the habit now of stopping by the smithy to speak with him, and on one occasion I have crossed the courtyard to hear her laughing. Truthfully I have no idea what Ladislaus could possibly have said to make her laugh, but she is a happy being who sees the best in everyone, and the world works in many, many mysterious ways.

Despite being a creature of habits, Ladislaus has taken to diverting his paths about the Hermitage to be more sure of passing her, or stopping by the kitchens, or lingering so that he is where she will be. The oncoming winter has made their opportunities of spending time together alone fewer as we are encouraged inside, but they are making do.

19th December 1405

Constance has begun to worry if Ladislaus attentiveness towards her is anything less than brotherly. I have assured her that he is a Godly man who would never intend such. Brother Ladislaus, I told her, has often kept to himself, and so it is easy to misunderstand his manner when he finds one worthy of time. The candour with which he speaks to her is no different to his candour when he and I speak in private, she has been assured.

In truth, I told her, I have worried about Ladislaus and his isolation for a long time. He is a deeply lonely man, I have feared, and so it is heartening to see him find companionship in another as devout as him. She has been happy to be reassured and, so armed, continues to seek his company.

5th January 1405

Ladislaus works in the warmth of the forge in all but the harshest of temperatures, and I have discreetly urged Constance to spend this time with him whenever possible. I told him, when last we spoke, that it does him no good to be alone, and where he has found a bond with another he should embrace it. Our faith brings us together, and another pious soul should be held close.

22nd January 1406

Earlier than he might, Ladislaus is truly suspecting his feelings for Constance are inappropriate. This should not surprise me, for I have urged the two together more than on any other occasion. The usual words are issued - this is a test of his faith, something to be endured, but I have been sure to discourage any separation from Constance. They are kindred spirits, united in their faith and piety, and for sinful feelings to rise within him is the work of darker forces that would wish to tear our community apart.

For the sake of his soul and his faith, he should not pull away from Constance. Such an action would be allowing his sin to sow division.

7th February 1406

Ladislaus's prayers are fervent, desperate like I have never heard them before, and after he has asked for strength he emerges into the world and once again is confronted with Constance, the object of his desire. In any other man, I would assume he is gripped by nothing but a base lust, but for all his physicality, our former Inquisitor is less prone to such simple urges.

A trial is not avoided, I tell him; it is overcome.

19th February 1406

Against my plans I have had to divide Ladislaus and Constance, for she must spend more time with Ralf if he is to truly turn against her. This has worked better than I feared, for in her absence he looks forlornly across the courtyard where he expects to see her, and I have spotted his glowers at Ralf. Jealousy is not a feeling he has mastered any more than love or lust, and he is not prepared for his own reactions.

While I use Constance elsewhere to turn the rest of the Hermitage against her, I shall use this absence to only increase Ladislaus's yearning.

28th February 1406

Constance and Ralf have had their argument and parted ways as they ever do. I made sure that Ladislaus was the first she spoke to on the matter after myself, and I could see him puff with anger on her behalf as she tearfully relayed the course of events, repeated Ralf's words. He bristles because he hates Ralf more than he ever has, he bristles because he knows she is right to turn away from Ralf, and he bristles because she is hurt.

The extent of his physical comfort was an awkward, earnest hand on her shoulder, but from Ladislaus Febenstreit, that was the world.

4th March 1406

Constance is mercifully too distressed by the argument with Ralf to notice that Ladislaus's yearning only deepens. Now she is free to spend time with him, he will be there on any occasion, conjuring any excuse for her attention. On previous cycles he would avoid her by now, locked in a maelstrom of self-doubt, but it seems my urgings for him to endure have allowed him to manipulate himself.

His feelings for her are a test, and the way to pass the test is to indulge the desire to be close to her. I should not be surprised that a man like him does not see the lack of logic in thrusting his hand into the fire to avoid burning.

17th March 1406

It is possible I have pushed too far.

Today came the inevitable, the dark mutterings of Ralf against Constance which provoke a fight between him and Ladislaus. But this time 'fight' is the wrong word. Ralf has been left bloodied and beaten, with several broken bones before Thomas and Mark could pull the Inquisitor off him. Normally, he delivers one strike, maybe two, and then stalks off, unleashing his anger and then controlling it.

Control is gone, and Ladislaus knows it. I am not concerned that he beat Ralf; truly, it was refreshing to see. But Ladislaus stormed from the Hermitage and has not yet returned, and I must confess I am apprehensive as to his condition when we do speak again.

18th March 1406

I was the first to whom Ladislaus spoke when he did return, late at night. He is furious and it is a mercy this anger has blinded him. First I received a diatribe against Ralf I struggled to maintain my composure in the face of, as I suspect this is the most eloquent Ladislaus has been about anyone but Constance. But soon enough that burned out, and I was left with his doubt - and accusations.

I had urged him to spend time with her, he raged, and this did not dull the fires within him, it stoked them. I assured him that this should not have happened, that in time he should have mastered them, but perhaps I had underestimated his strength of feeling. Which was when I was struck with a clarity of my purpose so acute it was a struggle to not smile.

Had Constance been a virtuous woman, I said deliberately, then in time it is doubtless he would have mastered his feelings. But proximity alone does not stoke the fires. Surely she has been saying things, surely she has been giving him looks and glances that slip past his conscious notice and reach into the heart of things. If she were a virtuous woman, this would not happen, but perhaps his fears are right. Perhaps she is disruptive, and perhaps she has encouraged the sin within him.

For the moment, I am appearing as if this is the first time such a thought has occurred. I have encouraged him to stay away from her for the moment, and I will monitor this carefully.

25th March 1406

This cycle has perhaps been more trouble than it is worth. Ladislaus is angrier than he has ever been, but he is also more volatile and unpredictable. I am learning little new, except that perhaps I should not provoke him in future unless I truly wish for chaos.

While he had heeded my words and avoided Constance while I assured him I would watch her, it was inevitable they would come face to face. I had encouraged her quietly to give him time, for she was startled by the depth of his reaction to Ralf, but it has been a week and the two spending time together has been such a normal part of her life this time that of course she visited him.

I cannot call the result an argument, for an argument requires two people. Ladislaus's fury brought me from my rooms as he bellowed at her, accused her of deception and manipulation, of base, feminine cruelty and weakness. It is fortuitous that the Cripplegates intervened, for the less I do here the better, but they cut the confrontation short.

Constance is with her mother, and a quiet word in Agnes's ear may make her doubt the girl's innocence in Ladislaus's condition.

16th April 1406

Ladislaus has withdrawn completely, which is for the best. All is, in many ways, as it ever is by now, except the depth of feeling is considerably deeper. Ladislaus has come so much closer to Constance; where before, I have wondered if he obsesses over an imagination of her nature, the feminine ideal instead of a reality, I cannot doubt that now he knows the girl fully. For her part, she is much more shocked and shaken, because previously she has been left ignorant of her effect on him. But thankfully her thoughts in this matter not, so long as she remains malleable.

He prays fervently. We talk at length, and he opens up to me as he has never before, talking of his upbringing in the Church, confessing of his pride at how detached from base urges and sin he felt for so many years. He knows now that he is undone by that pride, and he knows that Constance is the one to blame, the one who has slipped past all of his vigilance and discipline and left him as weak as any other man.

This is the true sin, Ladislaus tells me. Not those who gather in grand philosophies that go against the word of God; their heresies are simple to see and struck down with righteous fury. Even the witches and

their dark magics are rooted out and destroyed, but these sinners are outsiders. The worst sins of all take root in the community, in honest hearts, and would turn pious men into monsters.

I agree with him, and lament that I, too, have been deceived by Constance. I had thought her innocent, not this manipulative creature of sin, and I may only beg for Ladislaus's forgiveness in that I did not see the truth sooner.

He thinks us brothers in arms against this cause, united now to watch her, to root out the sin, and to make amends for our lack of vigilance. The only difficulty comes in assuring him that the time for action is not yet; there will be a solution that will save us all, if he grants me only a little time.

I have had to humble myself towards him so he does not doubt me. Now I must hope that humility will make him respect and listen to me. I need a month.

13th March 1406

There have been cycles which surprise me, and some which ran with the predictability of the rising and setting of the sun. Never before has there been a cycle which twisted and turned so fervently, only to end exactly as it always does.

What does it matter if Ladislaus is more furious than he has ever been? He is still furious enough to take part in the ritual, and he understands that he must not kill her. But times before he played with the idea of his feelings; now he has confronted every dark crevice of his own weakness.

I will not do this again. The argument with Ralf could have escalated, his fury at Constance could have turned to violence. He could have doubted me for tossing them together. There has been too much risk for too little gain.

But soon it will be over.

29th Cycle

15th May 1406

Sometimes I find myself pondering on what those I have taken into my care might have become. What would they have been without my influence? Would they have sinned so greatly, so deeply, or would they simply have notched away at their purity until they fell into a slow, burning damnation, unable to keep themselves from falling down the path of the damned?

Is it God's hand that guides me in this, or have I, too, fallen? Is Our Lady's purpose true and holy?

Then I find myself wondering where these thoughts have come from. They are of little purpose, after all, and will not change my course. Who or what the Brothers and Sister beneath me would have become is irrelevant. If it were not for my hand, they would all be dead by now, dust and ashes in the ground.

Yet I find my thoughts come back to Apollonia, for this once. I have worked hard to bring her down from her position as pious, devoted daughter of God into the monster that I just witnessed. Had I made even such a small change as to put her as Head of the Nuns, what greatness could she have achieved? What have I taken from her? Many of the others would have eked out a petty existence and landed in the gutter. Peter, I am convinced would have raped one day or another. Agnes would be old and bitter, never knowing the daughter who she so violently grows to resent.

They I have risen above a life of pettiness, dirt, and pain. I find myself oddly compelled to be certain that the same is true for Apollonia.

10th September 1406

Fychan died in a feverish haze early this morning. I heard the death rattle escape his throat myself.

For once, let me indulge in this petty viciousness that I feel - let me break from the cycle of observation. I will dirty the scourge that Apollonia uses in her beatings and see what God decides for her. I will let her fate rest in his hands also.

11th May 1407

I continue to tamper with Apollonia's tools, as I believe her beatings do not start in earnest and true bloody violence until Constance arrives. Yet again, my patience serves as a virtue.

15th August 1407

Constance's introduction has gone as planned. I find myself tempted to push on Apollonia, but I am convinced that this test must lie in God's hands alone.

27th October 1407

When she came to confess to me tonight, I was sure to place a hand on her shoulder, and once again I saw that flinch. Most useful. I will watch and wait.

4th November 1407

She is flushed and feverish, but still insisting on working. I am deliberately not moving to point Ralf in her direction - I have my own matters to watch, with the upcoming disputes, and if she is foolish enough to let herself grow ill, then that is further evidence still.

13th November 1407

Perhaps I spoke too soon, for Apollonia has been seeing Ralf frequently the last few days.

23rd November 1407

She is bedbound. Ralf has come to warn me that he fears she may not survive, although he is applying leeches regularly. I have told him to pray and trust in God's hands in this.

It was only after that I paused to think how once, this behaviour would have shocked even me. How careless I have become with their lives and deaths, now that I am the one to sustain them through Our Lady's grace. I went to sit with Apollonia for a while, and she looked up at me with such trust in her eyes that I did wonder, briefly, if this is a lesson meant for me.

If she survives, I will have to consider this further.

1st December 1407

God has spoken.

She is dead.

16th December 1407

The aftermath of Apollonia's death has been both interesting and frustrating to watch.

In many ways, it has broken some of the barriers between Constance and Agnes, which is something I will have to watch carefully. Many of the others are more on edge, and Idonea is sullen and resentful. Constance clearly feels no small amount of guilt for not noticing Apollonia's injuries sooner, guilt which I have been certain to gently enhance, if only through failing to give the assurances she seeks and instead telling her that I am certain God will forgive her.

God may, but the mortal men and women here will not.

Undoubtedly Christ's birth will be a sombre celebration this year. Anthony is taking it harder than I thought, also.

5th January 1408

The resentment in Agnes is clearly building once more. Not even death can stop the inevitability of their sin.

14th May 1408

It is done.

30th Cycle

15th May 1408

I believe I have turned my eye for a full cycle to every one of my brothers and sisters of the Hermitage but one. The last will not be a notable ending, I expect, but sometimes it is best to close on a quiet matters.

Not that Brother Hob is quiet, but he has never been a leader in the community, one to precipitate action. He prefers his world to be comfortable and reliable, which is exactly why he turns against Constance. But it has meant that in past cycles I have been perfectly comfortable letting him only react, rather than needing to push him into misdeeds.

While I am curious as to his depth of feeling on many matters, I do not at present intent to twist and turn his interactions with Constance. There is little to be gained, and more insights to be discovered on the man himself. Perhaps another time.

19th October 1408

Hob's fussy nature raises its head in the autumn months. While he has no particular responsibility towards the food stores, he makes it his business to be appraised of their condition, and I have just overheard him assuring Agnes that our supplies are adequate. I am sure Agnes is thrilled to receive his assurances.

Perhaps some added discomfort on his obsessions with food will prompt something new and interesting.

3rd April 1409

I have begun to slip more and more vegetables from our supplies. We will have more than enough meat, thanks to Ladislaus and Peter, but I shall see how Hob reacts when he is denied that on which he could normally rely.

20th June 1409

Hob has been spending some time fussing about how adequate our supplies are. They are, indeed, adequate - but only barely. To anyone else, even Agnes, this is sufficient. Harsh years are a reality of life, but I can see a seed of anxiety blossoming within Hob.

19th August 1409

Constance is arrived and for once my primary concern is not how someone reacts to her. It is interesting, however, for I believe Hob's welcome of her is the coldest of anyone's save for Idonea. She is something new, a disruption to his comfort and his habits, and while he is not opposed to her presence I suspect he would be happier if she simply went away.

11th September 1409

It is time for the preservation of our supplies for the upcoming winter, and I have encouraged Ladislaus to be unrestrained when it comes to the meats. More and more is Agnes cooking stews and pies with the lamb and fowl, for we have them in far greater abundance than our unhappy vegetable stocks.

I have started to speak with Hob on his concerns about food and control, and while I have usually indulged him - because it fits my purposes for him to be obsessive on such matters - I have started to point out the impracticalities. We must all be fit and strong for the sake of the community, I remind him.

8th October 1409

Hob is noticing the depleted food sources and becoming increasingly unhappy. Agnes has banished him from the kitchen on several occasions, and fortuitously he is viewing Constance as distracting her from her true duties, from what truly matters.

18th November 1409

With all food supplies a little depleted, this cycle it has taken longer for the truth about Lachlann's theft to emerge. The reaction has been accordingly furious, however, for while Hob is the most affected, everyone is angry.

In confession, Hob has been most agitated. I have never seen him despise Lachlann so much for the theft, though I encourage forgiveness as I always do, because it is Constance he must hate, not Lachlann. His self-doubt churns, for in all of his awareness of our limited supplies, never did he notice the thefts themselves. I must be a little more careful in my own sabotage, for I suspect Hob will be watching for foul play like a hawk.

9th December 1409

Constance has been permitted to be indulgent with our supplies for brewing, and Hob is beside himself. We have so little, he complains at Agnes and then at me. She dismisses him, points out there is plenty for all and he is making mountains out of molehills. I am forced to indulge him, but I point out we have had a good lambing season, and there is plenty of meat. It is an off-hand comment, of course, but it places the conundrum in his mind.

We shall see if he chooses the absence of food, or a food he abhors.

26th December 1409

I sabotaged our supplies immediately before the Christmas dinner, leaving a rather slim selection of foods which Hob found appropriate. Constance's beer was a success, and the succulent meats filled plenty of stomachs, and all of this has only agitated Hob further. He despises that beer as an indulgence and still avoids the meats for the memories they invoke, and I believe I have never seen him more sombre around the dinner table.

13th January 1410

Agnes has chased Hob from the kitchens, more or less literally, after his fussing about their supplies. With long months until the next harvest, I believe many of his waking moments are consumed by what he will consume.

18th January 1410

The discourses of the theologians have never been so miserable. Hob is short-tempered and snappish, and Ralf swelling in the confidence of Constance's company in the Infirmary. Perhaps it would have been better for Fychan had he perished this time.

14th March 1410

I have contemplated this petty gambit for some time, but I required an ally in the weather, as well as Constance. I finally appeared to submit to Hob's nagging and prompted Agnes to cook a rather light dinner last night, one which I know left bellies grumbling after and nobody happy.

The next step came in the morning, when Constance, at my prompting, sought out Hob. With our supply situation so poor, perhaps it was worth examining the state of the vegetable patches and the techniques of the foragers, to ensure such circumstances do not arise again? With the encouragement and opportunity to fuss and obsess, Hob was quick to agree to such an excursion.

It was a long day of intense work for them both, and I knew Hob, after a light dinner the previous night, would be famished and anxious for a good meal when they returned. The right words in Agnes's ears prompted a dinner of more meat than vegetables, an unusual treat for most of the Hermitage, but it ensured the serving on Hob's plate was meagre indeed.

He stared at his plate, and it took great work for my composure to be disciplined when I offered him some of the meat from my own serving, so sorry did his dinner look. He was miserable and hungry, not just from the day's efforts and the previous night's paltry fare, but long months of anxiety over exactly this situation coming to pass. I acted as if to misinterpret his single moment's hesitation, and passed a single morsel onto his plate, unprompted.

It sat, alone now he had devoured anything else he could eat, as if it were waiting for him. I had made sure we served some of Constance's most excellent, wholly indulgent ale, which I knew would sit heavy in Hob's belly to intoxicate and remind him of our wastefulness. After five minutes of sombre silence, when the others made to finish the meal, I saw him pop that single morsel of lamb in his mouth.

His demeanour the rest of the night was akin to that I have seen in men burning to confess of the most darkest deeds, but he did not seek me out.

3rd April 1410

Constance's presence is wreaking its usual disruptions, and as I watch Hob he is becoming increasingly beleaguered. He no longer wishes to obsess over our food supplies, for he has tasted the solution and would much rather ignore it, so he looks to the community as a whole. Those with whom he would sit in theological debate are distracted, Fychan glovering at all around him, Ralf reduced to utter misery over Constance's betrayal.

If Hob tries to look beyond his usual companions for support, at every turn he encounters upset and factionalism, and all of it with Constance as the root. It seems I was right to agitate him on a matter which had little to do with Constance; it leaves him ready and willing to turn on her, for he is eager to lash out at anything he can identify as a cause for discontent.

28th April 1410

Hob has been demonstrating his greatest asset at last. Some of the Hermitage speak amongst themselves of Constance in dark mutters and unhappy conversations, and of course it is to Hob they turn. Hob, who assures them that they are not wrong to think ill of her - that if they have such thoughts, surely there is a good reason? Hob, who will remind them that everything was happy and settled before her arrival. Hob, who is so quick to proclaim himself an innocent of any misdeed in his life that he will pass that gift on to those who listen.

When one wishes to believe that they are not at fault for their troubles, they turn to Hob. Everyone has so many troubles, and so they all turn to Hob. And Hob knows exactly who must be blamed.

10th May 1410

We approach the end. This has not been the most disruptive of cycles, and in truth the effort at manipulating Hob was perhaps more work than it was worth. Stealing and sabotaging supplies has been hard work, for too much and I would kill us all, and too little and it would be worthless. Furthermore, I have had to evade detection, which was troublesome after Lachlann's thefts were revealed.

That my success was rewarded with only one small morsel of meat is perhaps a paltry payment. But I will look back on the memory fondly, of how that furtive, single mouthful was received with such self-loathing at the end of a long and troublesome past. What is perhaps most satisfying is that one mouthful was no solution at all, and thus the gesture was wholly worthless. He broke his principles out of a greed that he himself had created, and after taking the first step, wavered and retreated before there could be purpose.

At the least, I know he will blame Constance, which will make the ritual particularly venomous from one who is always so loud and righteous in his punishment.

31st Cycle

[CUT]

32nd Cycle

15th May 1412

All of the sheep are restored as expected.

I had plans to test the supply of something else this cycle, perhaps tampering with Brother William's garden or introducing a small leak to some of Sister Grace's barrels. But after a year without Sister Agnes's succulent mutton stew, I have decided against doing so.

I will take this cycle as it comes, I deserve some rest.

29th May 1412

Damn and blast. In the process of gathering my notes of the previous cycle I managed to knock a freshly-filled jar of ink across the papers. Any efforts to lessen the damage threatened to ruin the rest of my paper and, indeed, my robes. Idonea will be quite sour with me.

I attempted to pressure the flock by removing ready meat from their diets. Many of the herd fell victim to contrived accidents leaving Brother Peter in a weakened position. Brother Thomas came close to suspicion but I am beyond reproach. What business would their Prior have in killing sheep?

It was a pointless study, ultimately. They became quite inventive in finding ways and means to supplement their diet. I was already aware that the sheep would return to life, just as their shepherds will do.

I am most frustrated. What a wasted two years.

16th August 1412

Brother Fychan will not last the night, I do not think. It is sad, but it seems inevitable.

17th October 1412

Brother William tells us a great storm is coming, one which is likely to last us some weeks or more. It seems the work of the hermitage will cease early this year.

18th October 1412

Despite Brother William's warnings, Brother Ralf went out this morning to gather in what he needs for poultices. I admire his intent and his confidence, but it has proved misplaced. Toward mid-afternoon Brother Peter and I felt obliged to turn out much of the hermitage to find him and bring him back.

He was found waterlogged, breathing shallowly, and rendered unable to return on his own by a nasty twist his ankle took stepping on sodden ground which gave way.

In addition to his wet state I believe him to be quite deeply ill. Given the drenching we others took, I suspect he will not be the only one to be sick as the days unfold.

Privately I have decided that he will be the last for my attentions until others are recovered.

2nd November 1412

Brother Ralf continues to suffer. We have none to equal him in understanding of the human ailment, and with Fychan dead, none who should be quick studies at it. Brother Peter is applying what little he deems appropriate from his understanding of diseases of the sheep, and Sister Agnes is preparing remedies she has picked up at various times, with Sister Idonea pressed into service to help.

I believe Sister Idonea chafes at this.

26th December 1412

Brother Ralf's death cast a pall over Christmas for all but Brother Anthony, who became as merry as ever once sufficient of Sister Grace's brew had been imbibed.

It is as well I had chosen to take part in no projects this cycle. I had expected that Brother Ralf should make a recovery, but it seems that I must attempt to take his place as physician to the hermitage.

This is most vexing.

12th May 1413

Whoever knew there were so many minor ailments afflicting us? It seems they multiply whenever I turn my back.

20th August 1413

Sister Constance's arrival is fraught with more questions this time. I counselled her on our approach that it would be unwise to push for responsibility early, so she will not join me in the infirmary.

This is crucial. I cannot allow her to be cut off from Brother Ladislaus and the others.

14th May 1414

It is done, and I cannot be relieved of my post in the infirmary swiftly enough.

74th Cycle

25th June 1496

Fychan is dead. This is becoming quite tiresome. To my certain knowledge this is twenty times and more he has died.

Many have not died at all, and only Thomas has died more than once. It is not Fychan's fault, but it does irk me all the same.

13th December 1496

If I were to ask Our Lord to change one thing about the hermitage, to help Our Lady's plan, I would make the surroundings entirely flat.

It is rare that there is no limping anywhere in the farmhouse. Almost always someone has misplaced their footing. Their ankle has twisted, or they have fallen, and Ralf has had to splint their leg. Peter has spent much of a cycle supported solely by his crook.

But these are trivial things, and have been since before the first cycle began. It is the nature of the land we live in to see someone uncomfortable on their feet at any time.

Yet what does not typically happen is an accident that leaves one of our number in Ralf's infirmary for any length of time.

Grace is in such a situation, and before she had unveiled her Christmas brew. It is a shame, both for Anthony's progression and for all of our entertainment.

14th December 1496

I have attended to the matter of the Christmas brew. In doing so, I discovered again Grace's letter to her secret daughter, but unfortunately I was not the only one. Agnes visited with Grace this afternoon to talk with her about it, and there is no some confusion brought from her into the wider hermitage about my knowledge of Grace's surprise.

I can, of course, devise a story for the occasion, but Grace can gainsay it.

15th December 1496

I have attended to the matter of Grace. After a decent interval, I shall challenge William to see if his skills are equal to the post of new hermitage brewmaster. In future, I must be more careful.

14th May 1498

It is done. Two deaths; this is carelessness.

75th Cycle

15th May 1498

By the time I end this cycle, I will have entered a new century. It is not the first I have marked in its passing. I wonder at how many I will see, at how the world will change. Will we always be safe in our sanctuary here?

I did not travel to Ulpha today, but simply wandered the borders until such time had passed that it seemed wise to return. To think, they still call it 1350, still carry on unknowing that nearly a hundred and fifty years has passed them by. They do not know the immortality I have granted them.

I wonder, would they be grateful?

23rd July 1498

Fychan is faring ill once more. I am considering setting him to bedrest, if only to ease the complaints. Although I know my face falls into concern as easily as I wake in the morning, I do find it so terribly dull to watch him suffer.

27th September 1498

I spoke too soon, I fear. Although Fychan's health is improving despite a difficult summer, this morning there was an accident that I fear may cause an as-yet unseen death in our group.

Some early autumn storms have hit us hard over the last week, and as such there was some small repair-work to be done on the roof. Both Mark and Kristiana were seeing to it, when Kristiana lost her balance and fell to the floor, striking her head. Ralf was away collecting water at the time, and so it fell to Hob to treat her. He wrapped her head tightly with cloth and we have brought her inside, but she has yet to wake.

This may have more potent effects on Mark than any other, of course, and it will make it harder for me to cause the rift between Constance and he. Or will it? Surely any criticism of Kristiana's work will strike him thrice as hard if his beloved sister is now dead and Constance insults her memory? I wonder, even, if I can say to Constance that she left, and tell her not to speak of it, and leave her with the impression that his sister chose instead to live in sin. That would make her words less careful, and less kind.

I ought not plan too far ahead, for she might yet awaken.

3rd October 1498

It is worth noting that Fychan has made a full recovery this year. Kristiana remains alive, but no sign of waking. She is responsive enough that Ralf has been able to feed her and get her to swallow water, but no more.

12th November 1498

As the nights grow longer, a terrible mood has settled over the hermitage. I wager this is almost worse than if she had died, as certainly I have not seen any of the previous deaths cause such dourness. Mark

is constantly fretful, barely leaving her side, and the work that needs doing about the buildings goes untended. Ladislaus has done what he can to take over the tasks, but the strain of the extra workload is showing.

The heated discussions I am used to this time of year are replaced by only silence. I wonder if I should order Mark away and back to work, or if I should quietly smother Kristiana while she sleeps and let the news of the worst take them.

20th November 1498

Just as I was considering finishing Kristiana quickly, she shows signs of waking.

These signs are not as positive as I would hope, however. Her eyes have opened, and she has been able to eat some small food, but spittle runs from her lips and she makes no sound save pained groaning. She has lost much weight and her back and legs have sores from staying so still. Mark is intent that she will recover. I did not even need the quiet word from Ralf after to let me know how unlikely this is.

15th December 1498

One of the sores on Kristiana's leg is becoming gangrenous.

They have seen Fychan die, over and over, feverish and lost in terrible dreams, although they do not remember it. When he comes to visit and treat Kristiana, I wonder if some deep part of him remembers, for he stares at her with a look of unfathomable horror.

So many cycles, and I have not doubted my success in over a century, and yet I find myself daunted at the thought of how this might ripple through the group.

17th December 1498

I have sat now with Fychan and spoken as directly as I can of his reaction to Kristiana's ailment. It is difficult to coax a man to confess memories of his death when you cannot admit that you know, but I did my best to steer him to thoughts of his own mortality.

I think he does remember, perhaps, but vaguely, as a dream. He spoke to me of rising one morning, after a celebration, with his thoughts full of the death that his leg might have brought him. It must be that, having died the cycle before, he did not fully partake of the ritual, did not drink the draught.

He does not recall clearly. I am sure that that is better. I shall have to consider those who have died more carefully in future, on their return.

26th December 1498

I have not known such a quiet celebration from my flock before. Brother Anthony still took to the brews that Grace made, but instead of merry exuberance, he quickly descended into tears and excused himself.

I sent Agnes to follow and comfort him. Some matters must stay the same if I am to have any control over the next year.

3rd January 1499

She finally passed away a few minutes ago. Tomorrow I break the news to Brother Mark, who for once was sleeping, rather than by her side. He will blame himself, undoubtedly.

4th January 1499

If his reaction had not been so predictable, and I had not failed so utterly to see it coming, it would have been less aggravating. As it is, Mark struck me when I broke the news. Never before have I been subject to any of their violence, and I do not care for it.

Peter and Thomas pulled him back and he has gone for a walk to calm himself. I have managed to keep my temper, though the swelling in my eye is most irritating.

Tonight Ladislaus and I will bury Kristiana in the place that I have used for Fychan so many times.

13th February 1499

Matters are starting to settle again. I received an apology from Mark some days after my last entry, and I have been bringing people back to work. Fychan, Hob and Ralf are starting to debate again, and while I do my hardest not to strangle them sometimes, it is at least an indicator that people's moods are settling.

15th May 1499

The fourth anniversary passed without anyone breaking into tears, and an appropriate amount of merriment. Only Mark is still suffering, and I distract him with work. We do suffer from her absence in terms of repairs to the chapel, but I have seen them be forced to take on more work before without it causing too much disruption.

15th August 1499

Constance's introductions went well.

As was my plan last autumn, I have been careful in how to speak of Kristiana to Constance. I have used the word 'left', and placed heavy emphasis when I said she had 'a fall'. Certainly none of the flock really speak of her often, so I do not think there is any likelihood that my deception will be revealed - and if it is, I will feign shock and horror at Constance's misunderstanding, and at how she could jump to such a sinful conclusion.

In the meantime, I will ready myself to use the word 'quaint' again, and perhaps even subtly indicate to Mark that Constance is to replace and improve upon Kristiana. The family tension will at least please Anthony.

12th October 1499

In many ways, this argument was more effective with Kristiana dead, and Constance so unaware as to be careless in her words with Mark. He is in quite the rage, and even the most sympathetic of the others is looking to Constance with some resentment. I suspect this is as much at them having to endure an angered Mark as it is at her lack of respect for the dead, but either way works just as well for me.

15th October 1499

Yet more poor luck. It is clearly an unfortunate time of year.

Earlier today, Apollonia sent Idonea out to gather some of the herbs and mushrooms needed for once of her concoctions. Apollonia herself was busy educating Constance on some matter or other, and mostly, I suspect, trying to keep her from making any further alterations while Apollonia was away.

It is now long past dark, and Idonea has not yet returned. At first light tomorrow I will lead some of the flock in searching for her, but I can tell from the tension in them that they are all thinking of Kristiana.

My deception may well be revealed sooner than I hoped, but it has already done sufficient work that I am not concerned.

16th October 1499

These short days and the poor weather do make searching so much harder, and it is not as if I can order all the Brothers and Sister to entirely ignore any and all tasks they would usually be putting their minds to. I have kept Agnes in the kitchen, and Apollonia too, for the most part. This has left her incredibly frustrated, which will work to my advantage later, and also alleviates the fear I have that she might be too utterly distraught should she be the one to find the body.

For now, I just want her found and buried so I can continue.

17th October 1499

Constance found her shortly before sundown. It seems that Idonea stumbled onto one of the traps left for the rabbits, and the subsequent fall broke her legs. How long after that she was alive it was not clear, but certainly some of the animals reached her several hours before we did.

Ladislaus and I buried her beside Kristiana. Apollonia still weeps now - I can hear her outside my window. Constance tried to comfort her, but to no avail.

It is another irritating setback, but I can think of worse people to die.

12th November 1499

With tensions running high, I was somewhat wary that Constance would fail to find Lachlann's hidden food, but it only took a few comments on the strange shortness of certain ingredients to see her prying once more.

Mark was a concern, and I was grateful to have Thomas present to help control him, but he only struck Lachlann the once before we pulled him off.

18th November 1499

I note that Apollonia did not come to speak with me tonight, as she usually does. Her resentment of Constance is clearly building, however, and I know that I can twist her thoughts towards blaming the scapegoat for Idonea's death. After all, had she not been present, Apollonia would have gone herself, and she would never have stepped in the trap.

1st January 1500

Another century turns. I have nothing new to record, or even of particular note. It just struck me as an appropriate day to muse on the passing of time.

Though this cycle has at least taught me that surprises continue to occur, I am finding a doubt that has not beset me in years raising its ugly head. Yes, perhaps I can find petty entertainment in their bickerings, in the meaningless rises and falls, and this may be the eternity I am promised. And yet, and yet, I cannot help but feel that this is not all I was meant for.

Truly, am I to spend a hundred lifetimes repeating the same events over and over? Is there not something beyond this to which I can aspire? Worse, what if something else goes wrong, and it is my own health and life that is at risk? Without my input to complete the cycle, surely all here would perish, and all our work would be for nought.

The only thing more frightening than the thought of a lifetime completing these events is the thought of death, and what might come beyond.

Did I not intend to create Eden when I came here? Was I not seeking a Heaven on Earth? When did I stop pursuing that dream? There has to be more to it than this, I am certain now. This cycle has been a test, or a message from God. I must resume my attempts at perfection, at running all events so that they fit together without fault or distraction. I must be the perfect manipulator, to drive them into a frenzy of sin at heights previously unheard of.

Then, only then, will I see it through and be released into the true paradise.

31st January 1500

Every piece of work that Constance completes that once would have been Kristiana's or Idonea's drives them further in their hatred of her. I am almost worried that they might peak too early.

14th May 1500

It is done.

76th Cycle

15th May 1500

The year is a sign, I am certain. Seventy-five times I have repeated this work, and I am sure this will be the last. I am gathering my thoughts, remembering conversations and twists and turns learnt, and preparing to make this the last two years before my ascent to holiness.

Tonight I returned as the sun was setting, early enough to speak with Grace, but late enough that they were relieved to see me home safe. I have usually found this to be the perfect point.

21st May 1500

I advised Grace to keep her theft a secret. Although it has been successful in the past, I remain confident that overall revealing her sins this early disrupts the balance in the group.

3rd June 1500

Still I keep a light touch at this stage, observing the dispute between Idonea and Anthony, which went smoothly without my intervention.

15th July 1500

Fychan had better not die. That would ruin the whole thing and there is nothing I can do to change it.

12th August 1500

He recovers well. Good.

17th November 1500

Tonight I directed Hob, Fychan and Ralf to the topic of scapegoating. Seeding the thought early in their minds, even if they may not recall it consciously.

This is the first risk I have taken, but matters progress smoothly nonetheless, and I cannot manage wholeness without some danger.

26th December 1500

I made sure to fill Anthony's cup whenever it ran dry, and I believe the confessions he has made to Agnes are closer to the truth than usual. Certainly she looks at him with some uncertainty.

29th December 1500

Anthony's confessions to me came as expected, and I have made a few careful, gentle comparisons between his mother and Agnes.

15th May 1501

The Founding celebrations have gone as well as ever.

15th August 1501

Here comes the true tests. Constance's introduction was perfect, and I find myself looking on her with an odd new fondness that I have not felt before. The pretty fool, how she has suffered so many times for my ends, and how she will suffer again - just this once more.

21st August 1501

I think this genuine affection is actually working to my advantage. Apollonia is seeming tenser sooner than usual.

12th October 1501

The argument with the Cripplegates has not gone this well since the first time, I think. For the first time in years there was a freshness to the heat in Mark's voice, in Kristiana's indignant frustration. I wonder if I imagine that he is being more protective towards her, or if some part of him remembers also. Whenever I see her face, I am struck by the memory of those low moans, and the vacant gaze.

12th November 1501

How righteous and angry Constance was in her discovery of Lachlann's hidden food; how easy to direct they all are. Thomas's frustration, Agnes's doubts in herself - they all rise together like a symphony of angels.

8th February 1502

I have not written in so long, so busy have matters kept me. All progresses, all parts are being played out to their fullest. In Ladislaus's love, in Peter's violent lust, in Apollonia's fears, I find myself become a mirror to reflect these sins back unto them. They see them so crisply, so clearly, and yet they are already long walking down a path from whence they cannot return.

Tonight she referred to Ralf's works as heretical, and I can feel the frenzy and power building among them.

14th February 1502

How brilliantly my insights allow me to subtly direct or change conversations in such delicate ways. Today I was speaking with Anthony and called Constance as a sister to him, as Agnes is near-mother. Last night I told Peter a fable centering on a young, pure woman working in a stable and her strength in resisting temptation. Around William I talk of home and the security against the plague outside our walls (though I believe it has long since passed its course).

I am exhilarated by this feeling, this connection. I feel closer to God than ever.

8th March 1502

Their sins are a storm, and I am at the heart of it. The tension that builds in every step and word within Our Lady's walls is ripe and ready to overflow. So close, so soon.

12th April 1502

Making the announcement of Constance's appointment as Head of the Nuns has sent the Brothers and Sisters out like a storm of bees after kicking the hive.

One of the things I have managed this time that I had lacked before is how much I have been able to remove my direct intervention. I have been able to play the innocent, the besotted, with much more potency. All conversations and concerns that must rise I am able to create simply with small tugs and suggestions in the right ears. The alliance between Apollonia and Agnes that is to come is the perfect example of such. I have seen Ladislaus looking at Constance with more wariness, although I have not directly called to attention her deficits.

And Constance, sweet scapegoat, she is closer to the edge of her own destruction than ever before. I have danced so elegantly with her that she barely understands the hostility she senses, and she trusts me absolutely. I have mixed truth and lie to her in a way that has surprised even myself.

Pride is a sin, and I must be wary of it, but this is God's work that I look on with such admiration. My accomplishments here have all been to reach this point, I am sure of it. Our Lady is ready, and hungry, and their sins are ripe for harvest.

No more will I witness Fychan moaning and sweating his life away. No more will I endure Anthony's wide-eyed vulnerability. They will all fall away, all be consumed in the fire of their own making, and I will emerge victorious and immortal.

14th May 1502

Never have I seen them enact their revenge with such violence and hatred.

It is done. This will be my last entry.

77th Cycle

15th May 1502

I do not understand.

I did everything right.

It was perfect. Every moment that required my intervention, I was present. Every time I could simply guide them and allow them to destroy themselves, I showed patience and restraint. I have never seen them so sinful, so furious.

Did I miss some important nuance, some individual moment? I am thinking desperately on all I have learned. I wish I had kept more extensive notes, and yet, the more I consider it, the more convinced I am that it was done to the best of my ability. Any gain I could have made in individual moments would lose more overall from the tasks it would take me from.

I come to the conclusion, then, that I have indeed achieved the height of my work, and that I cannot possibly have it all fall into place like that again. If that is the case, what does this mean? I have woken like any other cycle, like so many times before. I spent hours wandering the boundary, waiting to see if things would change - if there would be a flash, a moment, a call from God.

All was silent. All was still.

When dark had settled so firmly that I had no choice but to return or risk injury, I did, avoiding the piteous creatures that I call my flock and retiring immediately to my quarters.

These grotesque, predictable, unending creatures - is that my immortality? And if God has not chosen to take me to Heaven or grant me Paradise on Earth, then is all my work truly the work of man?

No. Ammit is real. I can hear her, speak to her, touch her. Tomorrow I must converse with her again, and see if I can find answers from the words she shares. I cannot rest, cannot sleep. I feel sick to my stomach, and yet utterly hollow.

16th May 1502

What little consolation or sense Ammit's words were. If I even understood her, and she me, and we are not simply saying words in two separate languages that sound the same and yet have diametric meanings. After sleep, and rest, and thought, I have come to the bitter conclusion that I was wrong. There is no way to escape this cycle.

The only escape is death, and I will not take that risk.

I will endure, I do not doubt, but for now, my throat is thick with anger and my mind numb with loss of what I never truly had.

I had such hopes when we first came here.

23rd August 1502

Fychan seems likely to live.

30th September 1502

Is there even a point to the detailed notes I have taken before? Is there something hidden in these endless cycles that I can divulge, some truth that will reveal itself if I study them?

Tomorrow I will dig up one of my caches and see whether there is enlightenment within.

2nd October 1502

I nurse a splitting pain between my ears, and barely let in enough light to see this page.

Though my memories of yesterday are crude and dulled by drink, I recall enough. I left early to dig up some of the middling cycles, pages and pages of notes from the 33rd cycle up to the 49th. I hoped to find some answer within - perhaps in Thomas's first death, or some of the time I spent away in Ulpha and my observations there.

Nothing. Nothing that I had not already considered in my last attempt, and used to the best of my ability.

In my rage and frustration, I took several bottles from the kitchen and locked myself in. At some point I thought to start a fire, and so empty and hopeless my record-keeping seemed that I cast away that cache, and threw it into the flame to burn. From 1414 to 1448, I now hold no record.

In the cold light of day, I am furious with myself and vow to not let drink cloud my judgement again. Such a waste.

I will dig up no more caches, but focus only on completing what must be done.

15th May 1503

The Founding Ceremony went as planned.

15th August 1503

Constance has arrived.

I can barely stand the sight of her.

12th November 1503

Matters with Lachlann progressed as usual. I nearly punched him myself, thinking it might make me feel better to actually strike him, but I decided not to risk it.

8th January 1504

A change worth noting - Ladislaus injured himself at the forge without realising it, and the wound went untreated for a day. It is looking quite severe, and I suspect Constance distracting him is the cause of it.

21st January 1504

Ladislaus is dead. The wound became blackened with gangrene, and no amount of leeches could save him. I wonder how it will end, without him there to burn the girl.

I must not allow my frustration to make me complacent. This life is better than no life.

12th April 1504

Constance was announced as Head of the Nuns.

14th May 1504

Once more, it is done.

There was little change without the fire, although I found myself missing the spectacle somewhat, and I will look forward to its return next cycle. Thomas still finished her with the strike of his sword to her gut, disemboweling her, and I carried her down for immurement as always.

Things must continue. I am set in my path.

78th Cycle

19th September 1504

I should expect that Fychan would be on his feet by now if he were going to make it. His leg looks terrible when I venture into the infirmary.

I shall attend to the scriptorium myself.

1st October 1504

Fychan is dead. I do wonder if he died of his affliction or if Ralf decided to show mercy, but I know only one of those answers is likely to be given to me.

12th October 1504

Fob has confessed to the death of his friend, though only privately and to me. It is another illustration, I think, of his flexibility when someone must do the right thing. I admire his tenacity, and am surprised by his confession, as much so as I am surprised that I did not even consider him as the active party.

I have told him I must think on this, but I shall do nothing.

14th May 1506

Amid the worst rain in decades, it is done once more.

79th Cycle

16th May 1506

Vile English mud is everywhere. I cannot walk from the kitchen to the chapel without risking the loss of a shoe.

Most distasteful.

9th August 1506

My face is a mask whenever Fychan takes a turn for the worse now. I have had such practice in his death I no longer feel any risk of letting my true disinterest show.

It is a minor annoyance, no more. I sometimes wonder if I should simply kill him at the beginning of each cycle. It might be a kindness.

20th May 1509

Ulpha thrives, materially though not spiritually. The whole place has changed so much, and the hermitage nearby has, in their conversation, become a mythical monastery. It was all I could do to keep from laughter.

14th May 1510

It is done. Fychan the only death.

80th Cycle

15th May 1508

It is perhaps my imagination but the scapegoating seemed more vigorous yesterday, on a par with my perfect cycle.

Are there other factors at play, or do I simply wish there to be?

6th August 1508

Fychan is walking again. He will likely live.

14th May 1510

It is done. No deaths.

81st Cycle

15th May 1510

I must keep telling myself that things will change at the hundredth cycle. Perfection alone is not enough.

16th July 1510

Fychan begins work on the scriptorium. Seems to be in fine health.

14th May 1512

It is done. No deaths. I am content enough.

82nd Cycle

15th May 1512

From the ashes, we rise again.

11th September 1512

Fychan is recovering well. Likely will not die.

14th May 1514

It is done.

83rd Cycle

15th May 1514

Ammit is fed, all returns to as it was.

23rd August 1514

Fychan's leg is healing well.

14th May 1516

It is done.

84th Cycle

15th May 1516

All returns to as it was.

8th September 1516

Ralf tells me Fychan's leg is healing fine.

14th May 1518

It is done.

85th Cycle

15th May 1518

The weather this year is particularly bright. All dawns as new.

12th July 1518

Fychan's leg is looking particularly ill this year.

18th August 1518

Fychan is dead. It was at least less prolonged than last time.

14th May 1520

It is done.

86th Cycle

15th May 1520

I came home later this time.

12th August 1520

It appears as if Fychan will survive this time. He is in good health yet.

14th May 1522

It is done.

87th Cycle

15th May 1522

All is well, all as planned.

13th August 1522

Fychan is healing as well as can be expected.

22nd December 1523

The first deviation from the usual in some time occurred tonight.

A storm the likes of which I have never seen struck the land, with lightning forking the skies and thunder closely following. It was as if the wrath of God himself had fallen on our heads, and all we could do was stay inside and wait for it to pass. The rain was freezing cold, and there was some worry for the sheep. Peter declared we ought to head out and bring them inside.

Volunteers, including Constance, left to assist with this. In hindsight I should not have let her go, and am just fortunate that this was not a more drastic matter. As it was, Kristiana and Mark were chasing some of the sheep down the field when they passed underneath a tree. At that very moment, lightning struck, and leaping from the tree it caught both brother and sister in its arc. They died immediately.

It will be a sombre year, but we were able to save the sheep, at least, and no serious damage has been done to the building itself.

14th May 1524

It is done.

88th Cycle

15th 7Day 1524

Let us hope the weather is better this time.

1st September 1524

Fychan's leg is recovered.

14th 7Day 1526

It is done.

89th Cycle

15th August 1526

Fychan yet lives.

14th 7Day 1528

It is done.

90th Cycle

3rd August 1528

Fychan is dead.

14th 7Day 1528

It is done.

91st Cycle

15th 7Day 1530

Fychan is back. Let us hope he survives longer this time.

21st August 1530

Fychan is indeed doing much better, nearly recovered.

14th 7Day 1532

It is done. I look back on the last recording, and recall those before it, and worry that I ought to be keeping more detail - and yet, what is there to record? Still, I shall strive to, and see how it fares.

92nd Cycle

15th May 1532

I wonder if perhaps I ought to have taken more texts while on my travels, or if I might purchase some more books in Ulpha. Would that offer me new paths for my mind to take, solace in my preserved immortality? It is always hardest right after the reset, as I look ahead to another two years where no change will have any lasting meaning. At least during the course I can focus on the manipulations to be done.

16th September 1532

Fychan seems to be recovering well enough. Another time where he survives.

23rd November 1532

Tonight Ralf and Fob had their most heated debate I have yet seen. Ralf began the problems, I believe, with some sort of reference to some heretical method of medicine he learned on the road. It later turned to the sin of the flesh and I confess I cared so little I left them to it. It was only when Peter called me down an hour later to calm them both that I realised the dispute had escalated quite so much.

I am sure with time they will calm their tempers and return to their usual selves.

14th May 1533

The fourth anniversary brought with it a terrible cold that seems to seep into the bones of everyone here. I am used to this cold in winter, but it is an ill omen in spring. I hope we will not see another year of hardship with the crops. It would be most unfortunate.

11th June 1533

My fears for the crops it appears were unfounded, but yesterday two of the sheep were killed by some wild animal or another. Peter is blaming himself for not keeping a more careful watch. I am finding it hard not to blame him myself, but I keep the peace.

15th August 1533

Constance's arrival is at least distracting from the dead sheep.

14th May 1534

It is done.

93rd Cycle

15th May 1534

It is a particularly wet and miserable day. I came home perhaps earlier than was sensible for I could not stand being out in the wet for one minute longer. I told them that I could not sleep and so left during the night. Apollonia fussed at me, but at least I am dry now.

21st July 1534

Fychan is feverish, and Ralf is taking extra time to treat him. I am finding it hard to muster up the worry that I know I must display, so often have I seen it played out now. Still, I spent the early part of today sitting with him. This keeps up appearances nicely, and with Fychan so lost in his own mind, it gave me space to think.

As the farmer tends his sheep, so I tend my flock still.

11th August 1534

After that setback, Fychan is doing much better. Perhaps he will survive this time after all.

17th December 1534

Grace dropped one of the barrels of her brew this morning and it broke. Apollonia is fretting about ants being drawn to the sweetness. We have been clearing up all afternoon and they are sniping at one another.

I am letting them snipe. It will not matter.

26th December 1534

Not enough brew for Anthony to become sufficiently inebriated to speak with Agnes. I have resolved to spike his wine tomorrow with some of Ralf's medicinal spirits.

27th December 1534

The spirits worked, although Anthony is now unconscious.

12th November 1535

Some concern at the Lachlann incident. For reasons unknown, Ladislaus was far more angry and violent this time, and he struck Lachlann hard enough to blind him in one eye. The levels of their violence must be contained until the appropriate time. I will endeavour to note this date more carefully in future.

14th May 1536

It is done.

94th Cycle

15 May 1537

It has been many a year since I visited Ulpha. The town flourishes, and it would be heartening to know that the land recovers so from the plague, were it not for the most unfathomable news that reached my ears. I attended upon the inn, for after all these years I had thought perhaps I might enjoy seeing new faces, hearing new voices. Speaking with those whose every word I could not anticipate before they even thought it.

I have not been so surprised in decades. England has taken leave of its senses. The King - a Henry, though I confess I have much lost track of the monarchs over the last two hundred years - has formally separated the country from Rome. The word of the Papacy is no longer the supreme religious authority in these lands; that right lands now with the monarchy.

Or so I have inferred from subtle conversation and eavesdropping in Ulpha, of all places. There is only so much ignorance I may confess to, and this is a poor source for knowledge. A town in Cumberland is hardly the centre of affairs for the country, and I burn with curiosity to know more. How did this come about, what has been the response from Rome? If we wondered whether the plague was the coming of the fall of humanity, is the failure of Christendom upon us? Have the English finally understood what I have seen for so many years: God cares nothing for our mewling prayers. God is but the master of a mechanism, as I am the master of the mechanisms of the Hermitage.

This is distressing more for what I do not know than for what I do. It does not affect us, it does not affect me, and yet for the first time in decades I wish to leave, to pursue knowledge, to see what wisdom or chaos has fallen upon the land. But I cannot leave the Hermitage for more than a matter of nights!

I comfort myself with the confidence that this is naught but the politics of men. King Henry will doubtless have had no theological revelation, no insight into the truths of the universe. They still pray, the churches keep their power. Perhaps they are a step closer to enlightenment, but it is one small step, and were I to leave and indulge my curiosity, I have no doubt I would be disappointed as to the smallness of their minds.

28 September 1537

Fychan is feverish; I do believe he will succumb to that leg injury once again.

13 October 1537

Constance broke one of Agnes's favourite bowls by sheer inattention. I am forced to play peacemaker over a most domestic squabble, because it is too early for them to turn against one another. I must advise Agnes that such material matters are irrelevant compared to the companionship of family.

The new brew will not be ready until January. These are most trying times.

21 October 1537

Fychan is dead. By now I know exactly which plot of land is the easiest in which to dig a grave. It is sometimes appropriate to lead them in such physical exertions after all, and I have no desire to waste my time.

95th Cycle

15th Day 1538

I do not think I will venture out this time. I am sick of the outside world. I must focus on my work.

19th September 1538

Fychan seems likely to live.

11th January 1539

An unexpected accident, the first in some time. William slipped on wet rocks on his way home and has broken his leg. The fracture is quite severe and Ralf worries he may get an infection.

29th January 1539

William is dead.

12th November 1539

Lachlann incident as usual.

14th Day 1540

It is done.

96th Cycle

19th September 1540

Fychan seems likely to live.

12th November 1541

Lachlann incident occurred with no unusual altercations.

14th Day 1542

Constance immured. It is done.

97th Cycle

15th Day 1542

With the scapegoat locked up once more, I do wonder if I could perhaps try something new this cycle, but for now I find I have little interest in playing with the flock here. Perhaps at some point I will seek a new group to tend to these matters - more minds to learn, more changes to make. But I am not of a mind to go out just yet, and the practicalities of such would take much planning.

For now I am content to remain.

21st September 1542

I suppose Fychan will probably live, as he is nearly well again.

13th April 1543

I thought I would record more this time, for some reason, and yet I have seen so little new worth noting.

Sometimes when I sleep, I see Ammit in my dreams.

12th November 1543

Lachlann is discovered without any dismemberment.

14th May 1544

It is done.

98th Cycle

14th May 1546

It is done. No one died.

99th Cycle

14th October 1546

Fychan is dead again.

12th November 1547

Lachlann matter as normal.

14th May 1548

It is done.

100th Cycle

14th May 1550

It is done. No one died. No other change. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about this cycle is that Fychan did not die.

I strove for perfection. I had such hopes, and they did not change a thing. A hundred times have I sealed my pact with Our Lady, and this, too, has changed nothing.

And yet, I still live. I still have my flock to work with. To toy with.

I suppose I can be content.

There is always the final point in twelve cycles of twelve cycles. There is no reason Our Lord would not return to his original covenant with a chosen people for his gift.

101st Cycle

14th May 1552

It is done. No one died.

107th Cycle

15th May 1562

And once again. The last time was much as anticipated. As ever there is little to say. I utter the commands and they play their parts. Once I winced at the screams, once I hesitated as they did, but after a hundred times an atrocity is nothing but habit.

I intended to bury the last ten year's passing notes and diaries on my return to the Hermitage, but I had inadequately wrapped the papers and rain blew into my shelter in the night. They are quite thoroughly ruined. In some ways this is irrelevant. What has happened the last ten years that has not happened over and over before? There was no value to the notes in themselves.

But in many ways they are the sole physical evidence of the passage of time, for my thoughts - well-ordered as they are - impact the world not. My body is as it has ever been. And what am I if I am not studying the process, recording it, seeking opportunities to improve it? No, for the last ten years I have succumbed to, on occasion, one lone entry a cycle. Six years ago, all I wrote was, 'I wish Agnes could learn over the centuries how to make better pigeon pie.' For the entire period. This will not do.

It may prove turgid, but a well-ordered record is necessary for a well-ordered mind. I shall return to more detailed records, lest I become complacent.

I find this first year so tiresome. It happens over and over, the same every time. Variations are proven to be meaningless. On occasion Fychan will succumb to infection. On occasion Nicholas' drunken revelries at Christmas provide some idle diversion. Once, there was a value to watching them go about their meaningless, petty existences. I could learn to know them better under different circumstances, under different pressures. Now I know them better than perhaps I know myself.

There is interest only once she arrives, and even that has proven fleeting.

13th October 1562

My efforts at maintaining records have proven troublesome. So little happens that feels worthy of note. So little happens that has not happened again and again. Even the lambing season holds not its petty diversions of past decades.

2nd December 1562

Brother Fychan has spoken to me once again of how helpless he feels with his leg injury. In the past, if he has succumbed before, it has happened before now. Perhaps he shall survive this cycle.

It has been no surprise that over time their mewling and discontent has proven tiresome. The only curiosity comes that it ebbs and flows. There are occasions where I recall some distant fondness for

their petty issues. There are occasions where it is easy to appear sincere, to guide them in the word of a God who has so plainly ceased giving them any interest. And then there are occasions where dredging even the pretense of compassion is a trial where only the knowledge that I cannot afford failure grants me the strength.

25th December 1562

Christmas celebrations are upon us once again. Brother Nicholas has consumed more alcohol than is fit for him. By now I can predict the pattern of reactions down the dinner table, anticipate who will notice first, who will grow irritated first. It is what passes as tolerable diversion.

12th May 1563

The Third Founding Ceremony is always a joyful reprieve. No doubt for the brothers and sisters of the hermitage, but I am due for Ulpha to attend to necessary trade, or so they believe. I have long made arrangements that we are self-sufficient, without any use for the outside world. But every cycle I may leave this dolorous repetition, and every cycle I find myself wondering if the rest of the world will have succumbed to its sickness and its sin.

I do not always go to Ulpha. There is no letter to retrieve from Constance, after all. Sometimes it is pleasant to take the day to myself, to find a high point beyond the boundary stones and regard the changing world. But after spending maybe twenty years without seeing the town, only to visit and find how much it had flourished in my absence, it seemed wise to monitor the situation. This year I should attend upon the town.

15th May 1563

I do not know if it is a rank indignity to let the townsfolk of Ulpha see me as no more than a hermit. It has become less judicious to present myself as even a wandering friar in recent times, but charity remains a virtue whatever madness may grip the world. But such a deception allows me passage through the growing streets.

The world holds a stench. I do not know if it is the purity of the home I have made for myself that leaves me weakened against the depravities that were always there, or if time has withered away the soul of the land. To walk these roads and hear the babble of such foreign voices and faces is unsettling. We speak a common tongue and yet there are so many of their words and values I cannot understand.

Long years have passed since England began its descent. They have not changed their course; even their churches are proving unrecognisable. I find it bewildering. It is as if they understand that God cares nothing for their lives, and yet they still menl desperately to please him. They reject the path they have been shown, as if they understand that it is empty, and instead of forging their own futures they simply seek another route. Like dogs they are, beaten and shunned by their master and endeavouring to find new tricks for his approval.

I did not stay long. While the Hermitage is dull, there is comfort in its familiarity, and for a time I know all that I found tiresome will be welcome once again. Staring beyond the boundaries is like staring into an abyss of the unknown, the wild, the chaotic.

This is my home, and this is my domain. Here there is peace. Here there is order.

3rd July 1563

The quill quavers in my grip even as I attempt to pen these words. It is a curious sensation; it has been years since I felt fear, uncertainty, perhaps even grief. What hums through my veins? Terror? Elation? I have felt nothing but the turgid monotony for so long, I cannot comprehend even my own heart. But I dither in the face of the storm.

Sister Agnes is dead. She slipped in the kitchen somehow, splashed with boiling water before the cast-iron pot fell on her. It struck her head and crushed her skull, and by the time Brother William had called in Brother Ralf, she was already gone.

The Hermitage is consumed by shock, because of course they have not lost one of their own before, and for once I find myself able to share in their horror. I have pretended to mourn Brother Fychan over and over, I have mourned almost all of them at least once for some happenstance error. After so long, I had thought all possible accidents that could strike would have struck. But this has never happened before.

I cannot think clearly. Sister Agnes is the key to so much, surely. It is through her fierce, fierce pride in her daughter and her accomplishments that resentment is blossomed amongst so many of the women. Perhaps Constance's charm shall speak for itself?

I have some months yet.

15th July 1563

The hermitage fusses over such menial issues such a who shall cook their next meal? Listen to their woes? They have come to be so reliant upon Agnes as a mother figure that I would almost believe they remember turning to her for decades. It is as if it is ingrained in them.

For my part, I can only worry about the times ahead. They will endure without Agnes to protect and nurture them, but they will be different, unpredictable. What I once took for granted is now gone from me.

I have appointed Apollonia to lead the sisters of the Hermitage, though I confess it was not a well-considered move. She is the natural successor. Perhaps she will take Constance under her wing, perhaps I can repeat a simple pattern? Apollonia has done such work indulging Idonea's selfishness every time, oblivious to her flaws and sheltering her from all criticism. A new young, naive girl towards whom she

can find some semblance of matronly instinct may be all Apollonia needs. Her jealousy can be nurtured later.

Yes. Not all is lost. It shall be to Apollonia I turn, in her I shall instill a sense of responsibility for Constance's introduction and well-being. Guilt, likely, and grief at Constance being denied a reunion with her mother, will soften her towards the girl until I twist the rope.

In the meantime, I must return to the others. They are so sombre, still, in their grief. Everything proves so frightfully dull after a death. At least their frayed nerves may provide some new anger for my diversion.

12th August 1563

Sister Apollonia has taken to her new responsibilities splendidly. I have some concerns that between her and Peter, the guiding hands are more tense, but a little chafing under their intractable natures may work to the betterment.

I wish for a degree of stability before I bring them Constance next week. Everything has changed for once, and while this has me feeling more alive than I have in decades, more engaged and with greater purpose, it is because I stand on a precipice.

Our Lady cannot be denied her prize. We have worked for too long, she and I, and I refuse to consider what fate may await us all if I do not meet my end of the bargain.

20th August 1563

I have long steeled myself against all compassion or weakness towards the girl, but for the first time in many cycles, something stirred in me as I brought her forth. Had she been capable of receiving letters, I might have written to her, warned her of her mother's passing.

But she is, of course, incapable of receiving a letter. And so she came to me, trembling and anxious of this delicate reunion with the mother that once abandoned her, only for me to dash such mundane concerns. Agnes is dead. A reunion is the least of her trials.

It may be for the best that Constance grieves only for the idea of Agnes; she has not known her to grieve for the woman. I may paint in the hearts of some of our brothers and sisters that she is a cold creature, caring nothing, in truth, for her mother. But that is merely conjecture. It is so difficult to plan! Every endeavour, every move I have made a dozen times over, is nothing because everything is different! But I am the master of their fates, over and over, and I shall not be bested by mere happenstance.

Sister Apollonia is playing her part beautifully. It took only a quiet word, a gentle encouragement, and she sees herself as taking this young woman under her wing. Of course she wanted to do this every time, but was rebuffed by Agnes's pride and selfishness. Now there is no Agnes to drive her off, and

Apollonia has been so kind to Constance, so considerate, making sure she knows everyone and finds her place.

Perhaps I shall turn Idonea against her through jealousy? If Constance diverts Apollonia's attention and affections, nobody shall shield her. And in Peter I shall sow the seeds of suspicion; in them he may see a vile unity of feminine iniquity, in time.

29th August 1563

Perhaps it is best nobody goes near the kitchens. Perhaps Our Lady has been displeased with my work and is expressing her discontent indirectly. Though the kitchens was not the scene of my latest undoing, I do wonder who is going to see to the cooking.

Brother William is dead. He took some sort of tumble while seeing to his herb gardens; the ground must have given way beneath his feet and sent him over an edge. We found his broken form at the foot of the hillside, hours after he was expected back. Brother Ralf looked to see if he perished on impact or if he had succumbed of his injuries after a long, painful wait. In truth I did not care for the answer.

William is nothing to Constance. His loss alone would not give me cause for concern, but with Agnes also gone, the Hermitage is denied the simple pleasure and comfort of good food. I can make use of this; have their bellies tighter, have them accustomed to plainer fare. I have seen hunger bring out the demon in a man just as effectively as all the twisted words. But it is a complication on top of a complication.

I am setting Constance and Apollonia, with Grace's aid, to work in the kitchens. But Constance must have the liberty of movement, else she will not be known to enough of them. I must encourage her to work on the ales with Grace, for certain, and to work with Brother Ralf in the infirmary, and to take some time for her painting. She must be a free spirit, not a simple labourer.

Hymns were sung tonight, and I must confess they sounded all the more dull without the voice of Brother William. He gave me such less trouble than most of them. I find myself valuing that now he is gone. Perhaps I should show him some kindness next time.

8th September 1563

Grace is proving reluctant to work with Constance on the next batch of ales. So long as Constance has duties in the kitchen, Grace may argue that she needs no help with her brewing, and that Constance is better put to work elsewhere.

I am encouraging Sister Apollonia that Constance must have the chance to express herself and experience all the work we do here. For now, Apollonia finds this enchanting and will speak with Grace.

13th September 1563

In consideration for Constance's grief and responsibilities, Ladislaus is admiring her from afar and not approaching her. This will not do. I am going to order him to help with the meat in the kitchens to relieve the burdens of the cooks.

Upon close observation, Lachlann is hoarding even more food than usual. I believe him quite discontented by the losses of our cooks. The situation must be monitored; he cannot be the centrepiece of the Hermitage's frustration.

22nd September 1563

Today is a most fortuitous day. Grace continues to protest at me that she does not need Constance's assistance with the brewing. I have decided to respond to this as a detached, paternal figure who thinks she is simply being foolish, and waved away her worries.

Ladislaus is helping in the kitchen far more than ever before. There is a mercy in how the base needs of man will drive them better than all my calls to order. He helps Constance, she speaks with him and finds him a comforting presence, and so it is as it has always been.

I must watch so this does not escalate too swiftly, but my confidence returns. Mishaps alone will not undo my hard work.

28th September 1563

Sister Idonea is proving most cold towards Constance, and I do believe Apollonia is granting her much less attention than is usual. Perhaps this cycle shall prove as predictable after all.

18th October 1563

It is merciful that some habits are so deeply ingrained within me after all these decades. My mind, body and soul are mechanisms of this greater order, after all, and that I play my part sometimes beyond conscious thought is a comfort. There is so much chaos, so much uncertainty; so many ways in which I must adapt. I find reassurance in acting with the certainty of the rising sun.

Constance has been quieter this time, more withdrawn, but as I always do, I have spoken with her of the differences between the chapel and her home. I have dropped that fateful word, 'quaint,' several times. I barely contemplated my actions this time, but despite all the disruption, she played her part beautifully; Kristiana is offended deeply by that lone, fateful word, and a little order is returned to the storm.

11th November 1563

Close observation of Brother Lachlann's hoarding would suggest that it will come to light as it ever does. Tomorrow I anticipate a public reveal, but certainly nerves are frayed when everyone has less hot food in their bellies. I must be most careful to ensure that they do not resent Constance for serving them lesser fare, or not yet. That would be a paltry sin for them to unleash upon her.

After Lachlann's misdeeds are revealed, I will encourage Constance towards Brother Ralf. It has thus far not been too difficult to keep the usual routines and habits.

12th November 1563

The devil is snapping at my heels; his hounds have the scents of my misdeeds. He knows that I am beyond his reach so long as I remain master of my realm, so long as I am under the protection of my arrangement with Our Lady. No doubt his agents have slithered into the minds of men, or even the very earth around us, twisting circumstances to break all that is known, to tear all order asunder. I can see no other explanation for this chain of misfortune and tragedy!

I was prepared to handle the situation with Lachlann; I suspected his theft would be taken as a personal offence by those who respected Agnes and William. They cared for our well-being, or at least our stomachs, and in return, Lachlann has disrespected their memories with his selfishness. But I was going to wade into the storm of their bickering, be the rock upon which the waves of their anger would break, and soothe the tides.

Except I was not there, because in my fuss for Constance, for Grace and for Apollonia and for all of these petty, minor details, I did not cast my gaze further afield! I did not see those who struggled, truly struggled with the losses we have sustained!

I was taking a walk about the woods, not too far, so that I could keep within earshot of the chapel when Lachlann was confronted and come upon the crowd. Instead, I was called by a panicked cry from Brother Thomas towards the river, a shout which was also picked up by Sister Kristiana.

And thus it was that I, the former reeve, and the keeper to her brother's rage were drawn away from the confrontation with Lachlann towards a different tragedy.

Perhaps Anthony slipped while foraging. Perhaps it was another mistake, another accident. But I look back and I see how he withdrew from everyone with the loss of Agnes. I see how quiet he became, how distant; so distant that even I, who have watched him for so long, did not notice! I should have anticipated what the loss of a maternal figure would do to him, I should have been ready, but I have worried about the larger, louder figures.

And thus it was that I waded into the shallows, and with the aid of Thomas and Kristiana bundled his swollen, bloated corpse from the purifying waters.

Perhaps he slipped.

Of all the deaths, this is perhaps the hardest since that very first. Of all the deaths, this came about from circumstances I could have anticipated, should have anticipated. This was no errant mistake, or even the consequence of some considered gambit. He has hurled himself into the precipice of my failing.

Such was the darkness that consumed my thoughts as the three of us hauled his corpse back towards the hermitage. I wondered how I would direct my flock, how I could rebuild their unity so I might turn it on Constance. So consumed was I by these plans that I had forgotten why I was in the woods in the first instance.

We returned to find Lachlann strung up as a thief.

It was not just my absence that brought this about. Tensions have been higher with the loss of Agnes and William. And I was knee-deep in waters with Thomas, the even-handed and level-headed, who might have reminded Ladislaus of his sense of justice. I was knee-deep in waters with Kristiana, the measured, the patient, who might have made her brother Mark hold his fury.

We were none of them there, and so it was that their collective disappointment, frustration, and sense of betrayal became a maelstrom beyond my control. I know how the anger of ten men can be greater than the sum of its parts; I use that power over and over, but now it has worked against me.

I cannot punish them. There is no one individual who can be blamed, and at this juncture I do not dare make anything more change. Four deaths? Four deaths that include Agnes, she who has for so long been the gatekeeper of Constance's affections? And Lachlann, killed by his fellows as a thief; they have seen their own darkness now, they know their own darkness! I can lead a man into evil when he does not know what evil means, when he does not know the evil in himself, but they know it, now, they have inflicted it upon another, and they are consumed by grief and regret.

Perhaps that is the key. Perhaps I must condemn their actions only lightly; perhaps I must condemn them for acting so rashly, and without my guidance, but instill in them a sense of righteousness, of rightness. Lachlann turned against them, I shall say; he betrayed and deceived them and he threatened all we have built in these dark times. He was not one of us in his heart, I will say, and while they should not have acted rashly, they were right to act, to tear out the corruption!

Perhaps I shall make them so hardened against what they have done to Lachlann that what they must do to Constance is merely another step down the same road.

I have many months yet. I shall not be undone by the devil's hounds.

23rd November 1563

The Hermitage is changed in a way I have never before seen. Of course, I have never before witnessed the aftermath of death, the aftermath of fury. Through the narrow views of Brother Peter and Sister Apollonia I can drive them to righteous conviction in their actions. Brother Lachlann was a thief and a traitor and he was righteously punished by the community.

That he was strung up by a mob caught up in furious punishment, not measured justice, is a recollection I will let fade to nothing. I must be gentle with them for a time, for they veer so wildly away from darker, more selfish thoughts. They have seen them made manifest, and they fear the sin within themselves.

Where they seek justification, I shall assure them of the righteousness of their actions. Where they seek absolution, in a few months I shall remind them it was Constance who revealed Lachlann's theft. Had it not been for her meddling, I shall imply, they would have never revealed that darkness within themselves. The beasts within themselves, they shall blame on her.

But not yet. For now, they must heal, and I must care for their souls in a way I have not cared to for centuries.

25th December 1563

Christmas is a sombre affair without the fine cooking of Sister Agnes and Brother William, without the happy spirit of Brother Anthony. I have never seen the Hermitage more morose. Brother Peter seems to encourage that they use this time to reflect upon the spirit instead of indulgences of the body, and I am letting him lead this way.

I shall use this time, and the coming of the new year, to draw a line under the recent, dark months. They have mourned for their fellows and for themselves, but now it is time to work.

13th January 1564

Despite all my fears, the inevitability of the Hermitage's weakness does its work marvellously. They seek normalcy and they seek routine, and so do they return to their predictable patterns. There is not one thought they could have that I have not seen them chew over a thousand times.

24th February 1564

Sister Idonea resents Constance in a whole new fashion, denied the protection and indulgence of Apollonia. Ladislaus has been drawn to her, and then sickened by his base urges, as ever. Turning her against Brother Ralf has taken more encouragement than usual, for she is more sombre, more reticent, but my work progresses. He is enraptured by the notion of a kindred spirit, and tonight I will sit with her and plant the seeds of doubt, so she may break his trust.

3rd March 1564

Lambing season is upon us again, and I cannot find my usual petty amusement. I should use this time, manipulate their discomfort more than I have before. It is time, I think, to begin turning Apollonia against Constance, and I shall never have a better opportunity.

4th March 1564

Last night I spoke deeply with Apollonia of Constance's place in the Hermitage, and made sure to sound as fond of her as possible. I was not sure if I would twist her as I have twisted Agnes so many times, but the faintest mention that perhaps Constance should some day take on her mother's role as Head of the Nuns incurred a reaction.

She tells me nothing, of course, but she does not need to. In Constance she sees a threat to her place, she sees a seductress who will take away everything she values - and who enacts her darkest desires. That this time she has taken Constance under her wings, that she will this time be betrayed, merely furthers my goals.

I cannot express my pleasure that in all this chaos, there is one thread of order that is stronger than it has ever been.

13th March 1564

I was not to be undone once again. Often I do not witness Ladislaus striking Ralf; they are quite capable of upsetting one another without my interventions. But considering recent disruptions, I did not dare risk this to chance. Chance has taken every opportunity to tear all order asunder.

I did not need to fret. Brother Ralf is more curt than usual, more prone to bitterness after Lachlann's death, and so he did speak far more harshly of Constance. I suspect that her rejection of his unworldly presumptions about the nature of the world has left him colder than usual.

Ladislaus, likewise, is swifter to jump to anger, but he has also seen the consequences of his wrath. He flew across the yard to strike Ralf about the face, not once, but thrice. Nevertheless, when Mark and Thomas tore him back, he accepted their restraint when no doubt he could have fought harder.

It went, for once, as it should. I find myself greatly pleased.

16th March 1564

I have spoken more with Brother Ralf in the aftermath of the fight than I usually do. I believe I am successfully planting the seeds of the idea that Ladislaus has been driven to act against his brothers by the manipulations of the cruel, treacherous temptress, Constance. It is not difficult to make her the centrepiece of his frustrations; Ralf is such a prodigious coward of physical demonstrations that he will be happy to not nurse a grudge against Ladislaus. He will be happier to see him as a manipulated brute.

14th April 1564

I have but one month until it must happen, and I dare to be optimistic. Apollonia festers on a sense of betrayal. Idonea continues to resent Constance as a disruption to her way of life. Ladislaus's path has been the same as ever, and likewise for Peter, the two driven to maddened distraction by their base urges.

Courses have wavered, chaos has sent its ripples through our path, but order returns. There is a small mercy to the four fresh graves: that is four fewer hearts to turn.

20th April 1564

Brother Thomas is proving a nuisance. He struggles to see Constance as the cause of Lachlann's death, which is disrupting his perspective. If he cannot see her as the rot at the heart of our community, she who brings out the darkness in man, he will waver.

I shall play on the loss of his family to stoke the flames of his resentment.

24th April 1564

After the role he played in Lachlann's death, Mark has become more withdrawn without my notice. The fire of his fury and his judgement are being quenched by guilt. Worst of all, Kristiana is working hard to keep him calm. I must distract her.

26th April 1564

Sometimes the simplest and crudest methods are best. I have encouraged Constance to draw up designs for a new altarpiece. Ours has been a hard year and perhaps fresh beauty will bring fresh hope, or I believe that is what I said. It matters not; she is excitedly working on designs and paintings to replace Kristiana's work, and I have been sure to let Kristiana hear of this.

I suspect this will put an end to her discouragement of Mark's wrath.

29th April 1564

Brother Hob has barely spoken to Constance! With the deaths of Agnes and William to explain a disruption to his comforts and his food, he does not yet see her as a threat. This is a foolish oversight on my part; over and over have I needed to do so little with him that, distracted as I was by more obvious troubles, I have neglected the pebbles in this avalanche.

I have set aside some time over the next few nights to speak with him. Withdrawn and troubled as he has been, it is a fine excuse to see what is on his mind and steer him accordingly. Though time is short.

I should also speak with Fychan, who rarely needs a firm hand in this matter. Would that his leg wound had killed him yet again and saved me this trouble.

7May 8th 1564

I spoke with Our Lady for the first time in months last night. I have not dared, I must confess, so fearful I have been of failure. For so long I have seen us as almost companions, committed to the purging of sin from these dark hearts. Last night, for the first time in maybe a century, I am reminded of her power, and reminded of the delicacy of the cycles.

This morning I have been sure to speak with everyone. The atmosphere is sombre, even more sombre than it should be. On past occasions, by now I have been stood before a gathering storm, everyone's fury or hatred a dark cloud on the horizon. This time the dark clouds are overhead; have been overhead for many a month.

I do not call the storm; I must gather it. I must do my works as I have not done them since the first. Some speak of Constance in dark mutters. For the others, I see the truth in what they do not say, in where they look or do not look.

They have no secrets from me, not any more. I have seen their hearts, their souls, their sins laid bare a hundred times over. I shall not be undone by chaos.

14th 7May 1564

It is right and good that I take pride in my work, as the humble carpenter takes pride in his craft. Through troubled waters I have guided this Hermitage, since that first, fateful slip of Agnes's long months ago. We have entered uncharted land, trodden fresh paths after so long of wandering woods as familiar as our own gardens. And I have led the way.

The pieces are in play; the ritual is prepared, and they sharpen their resentment and hatred like the knives with which they will purge their sin.

I was tempted to pray this morning; pray as I have not in centuries, though I do not know to whom I would speak. There is no greater power guiding my path. There is no grand salvation or deliverance. There is only me; my will, my choices. I will restore order to this chaos, and tomorrow all shall be as it was.

It has never been this different. It must work. It shall work. I shall not be undone by chaos.