

Abbey

by

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Author's Note: Scriptural references in this work are based on the King James Version of the *Holy Bible*.

Pax vobiscum

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Prelude

It was called the Abbey. It didn't need any other name for, in the year 3114 anno Domini, it was the only abbey on Earth. It alone occupied the land between the mountains and the sea, and you could walk the coast for a week or more in either direction before finding other habitations.

The Abbey had begun early in the third millennium after Christ, at a time of intense world overpopulation. Fleeing intolerance and the physical ruin of the planet, the world-wide Christian community had gone through decades of retreat. During Christianity's long consolidation, Christians had reluctantly banded together. The retreat had eventually ended at the Abbey. In that final refuge, Christians had turned and made their final stand. With their backs to the ocean, they had fought for their faith, for their Abbey, and for their lives. While fighting to protect themselves, they had begun to build a defensive wall of stone.

The stones to build the wall had been cut from the nearby mountains by monks, carried upon the backs of monks, and assembled by monks into the wall. During the years of its construction, the wall had come to represent a major schism among the disparate elements of surviving Christianity. The Abbey had grown out of the retreat of Christianity from the world. Many had found in the resulting isolation a purity, a rejection of the world's temptations. Others, however, had clung to the instruction by Christ to carry the Gospel to the world. The debate had at times grown heated, sometimes caused anguish. Yet the wall surrounded over 1000 acres and had taken almost 400 years to complete. By the time that it was done the need for it was passing. Time, pollution, technology, disease, war, all were taking their toll and the region was gradually abandoned. As the surrounding population ebbed, the Abbey was left behind, ignored and largely forgotten. The theological debate had never been resolved as growing isolation had siphoned away its relevance. The monks had completed their wall as a labor of love. As a concession to the debate, the wall had been given a single open gate, lacking any closure. Over the gate stretched an arch, the largest stone in the entire wall. The arch stone's procurement and transportation had cost sweat, tears, and ingenuity. In addition, it had cost the lives of several monks who gained memorial celebrations for their efforts.

Chiseled deeply into the stone of the arch were two inscriptions:

He hath given us His Word; and the world hath hated us. Therefore, we are not of the world, even as He is not of the world.

and

Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.

The inscriptions existed not on the outward facing surface of the stone, but upon that surface which faced inward. They were not a message for those without, but a reminder to those within. The inscriptions were a comment upon the isolation of

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the Abbey, the obligation laid by Christ upon his followers, and the resulting dilemma. Christianity had always been unable to thoroughly define itself, and so it remained.

The wall had stood unmolested and unneeded for over 500 years after its completion. Few men had any desire to disturb the Abbey. Indeed, few men even remembered it. Squirrels chattered from the crest of the wall and birds built nests within its hollows. Here and there, Monterey Pine and Redwood had caused the wall to lean precariously but, throughout its length it still stood, a ponderous monument to faith, perseverance, and indecision.

Although isolated, the Abbey was far from backward in its use of technology. Yet, there were some few necessary things that the Abbey could not produce for itself. The resulting need to deal with the world was a source of doubt to some, a worrisome suggestion of some uncured weakness in their seclusion. To others, it was a lingering reminder of a duty unfulfilled. The schism remained a source of occasional debate, frequent meditation, and much prayer. Probably, no institution but a monastery could have sustained for so long such an esoteric dialog. For almost a thousand years, it had occupied, at least in part, the questing minds of monks during long winter evenings by the fire.

However, the actions even of monks are sometimes determined not entirely by philosophy, but sometimes by necessity. Thus, they had some dealings with the outside world. In addition to the resulting small but regular trade with the world, there were occasionally other reasons for contact. From time to time there would be an applicant who'd heard of the Abbey and who sought peace, refuge, or enlightenment. Of those few who applied, all were accepted. A few remained. There were the occasional few from within the Abbey's population who lost the faith or, perhaps, never developed it. The austere life of the Abbey did not satisfy those lost souls and they were free to seek their future in the outside world. Of those who went into the world, a few returned. Thus, there was the need for a road.

From the gate in the Abbey wall, said those who avowed the second inscription over the gate, this road meandered out into the world. To the gate in the Abbey wall, said those advocates of the first inscription, came a road from out of the world. In either case, the road was there. At its eastern end, in an inland valley, was the Village of Keep, the contact point between the Abbey and the world. From the Village of Keep the road went west across the inland valley and passed through a narrow gap in the coastal range through which, a thousand years earlier, a busy highway had hummed. Down the coastal side of the range, through valleys and tall silent forests, along windy seaside cliffs, past bays unused for centuries, the road wound up again into another long valley. At the end of the road, or perhaps at its beginning, was the gate in the Abbey wall. In all, the road spanned over a hundred rugged miles and almost a thousand equally rugged years. The road had been unpaved

for centuries and wasn't heavily used. In some places it was little more than a path. But it was there, and it was used often enough that for almost a thousand years it had never completely disappeared.

Along this road, one crisp morning in late summer, walked a stranger. He approached the wall amid a flurry of chirping and activity from a resident flock of redwing blackbirds. At the gate, the road ended. The stranger passed through the gate. The centuries of debate had fostered among the people of the Abbey a strange tradition. Within the wall, there were few roads. The monks and all their families had learned to walk around thinning places in the lawn with the result that paths were seldom formed. Only at gates and doorways would one be likely to encounter a path worn into the grass, and such a path diffused within a very few steps into invisibility, symbolic (some said) of the classical dilemma of the monks. Only the sheep and the goats made an exception to this practice. They were largely responsible for such paths as did exist.

Within the confines of the wall, the stranger walked through forest, glade, and pasture. Soon, pasture became farmland and farmland became a wooded park. The stranger approached a small clearing in the woods. In the clearing was a cluster of houses covered by vines. Such a community, thought the stranger, would be invisible from the air. One of his questions was thereby answered. From within a chapel came the strains of ancient majesty. The stranger did not recognize the St. Matthew Passion. His interests lay in other directions.

A monk in a brown frock approached the stranger. "Do you seek that which we offer?"

"What I seek," announced the stranger, "is whoever's in charge of this dump."

"That," replied the monk, "would be the Abbot" He pointed in the direction of the Manse. "I shall conduct you there."

"Please do," stated the stranger dryly.

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Chapter 1

The stranger was taken to the Manse and shown into the Abbot's chambers.

"I," said the Abbot, "am the Abbot. If I am what you seek, then God has guided us both."

"And I," said the stranger, with just a hint of mockery in his voice, "am goddamned tired of walking. Do you know there's a bridge washed out about three miles from here? I had to leave my rover."

"Why didn't you fly?" inquired the Abbot?

"I tried!" snapped the stranger. "I crisscrossed this damned coast for a week, and couldn't find this place. The yokels in that damned little podunk across the mountains," the man waved his arm vaguely in the direction of the ocean —

"You mean the Village of Keep," stated the Abbot.

"What the Hell ever!" snapped the man. "They said the only way was to follow the road. I tried to follow it. Kept losin' it! Some places ya can't even see it from the air! Damned forest must be a thousand feet tall! Had to go back to Podunk —"

"The Village of Keep," corrected the Abbot with a beatific smile, hands clasped before him.

"What the Hell ever, had to buy, I said buy, Goddamned yokels wouldn't rent me a rover, had to buy a rover and follow the road for more than a hundred miles of goddamned hairpin curves, couldn't get over 25 miles per hour, and then the damned bridge was washed out and I had to walk!"

"I shall ponder your dilemma." quoth the Abbot.

"Jezuz! What is this out here! The twentieth century!?! Why don't you put up a beacon, so people can find you?"

"We are the Abbey," quoth the Abbot, hands folded reverently before him, "and we can be found easily enough by those who are sent to us by God."

"Shit," announced the man.

"You will be fed, bathed, entertained, and housed until you are well again," promised the Abbot.

"I ain't sick, uh — well, hell, I guess a little grub wouldn't hurt. Ya got any women here?"

"There is far more here than the Abbey. We have a large village. Even the monks do not all follow the path of celibacy, and have wives."

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“How about daughters?”

“I divine your intentions. I fear that we are unable to accommodate you.”

“Shit!” said the man, obviously disappointed. “Well I don’t see any reason to stay in a dump like this any longer than I have to. If I hurry, I can make it back to the rover before dark, and be back in Podunk — ”

“The Village of Keep.”

“ — before morning.”

“Perhaps, then, you should conduct your business and leave.”

“Right. I’m here to serve a summons.”

“A summons?”

“You heard me.”

“What I’m wondering is why I should be interested in your summons.”

“Because it’s from the Angeles Peedee.”

“We have little concern here with secular authority,” intoned the Abbot. “We answer only to God.”

“Well, you can argue with the Peedee if it blows your skirt up, but here’s the summons.” The stranger handed a crystal to the Abbot.

“What’s in it?” asked the Abbot suspiciously.

“Well, I’m not really supposed to know,” said the man with a bit of a leer, “But the fact is that Denver Collins wants to see you.”

“Who,” asked the Abbot, “is Denver Collins?”

“Gawd almighty, you hicks really are a jerkwater, ain’t ya? Denver Collins ain’t a he, it’s an it. Denver Collins, D.C. Capital of Earth. Ever since the Empire fell. Hunderds ’a years ago. Ya ain’t heard of it yet? What do you jerks do out here besides pick your noses?”

“We work the land, we hunt, we weave cloth, we medita— ”

“O.K., O.K., don’t take everything so damned literally! The point is, you got the summons.” The man brushed his hands together and eased toward the door. “It ain’t my problem now. They’re expecting you within a week. If ya don’t show, the Peedee’ll come after ya. Although I don’t think ya’ll get ’em to come all the way out here. Who the Hell really gives a damn anyway?”

“According to Matthew 10, verses 29 through — ”

“Cut it out, fer Christ sakes! Jezuz! You guys gotta one track mind! Look! Ya got tha summons, the date an’ address is there, ya don’t show they’ll come after ya.”

With that, the stranger walked from the chamber, walked from the Abbey, and followed the road back into the world. It was a long ride back. Before he was halfway to the Village of Keep, he wished that he’d stayed and enjoyed the monks’ hospitality. Maybe, he thought, some of the local snatches might not be as devout as that old geezer thought they were. Every dog has its flea and if there’s one thing I have a nose for, thought the stranger, it’s, uh, fleas. When he got back to Angeles, the first thing that he did was to find a prostitute.

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Chapter 2

A small lemon tree struggled to survive in a sheltered location in one of the small valleys of the Abbey. Brother Thomas was pruning the little tree when Brother Judas came looking for him.

“Hey Judas, I’m over here!”

“Ah, Thomas, there you are. The Abbot wants you in his chambers, right away.”

Brother Thomas handed the saw to Brother Judas, picked up his backpack, and they both headed toward the Manse.

“What’s he want, Judas? Why’d he send you? I’m sure you have more important things to do than fetch me to Abb’s office.”

Brother Judas gave Brother Thomas a troubled look in response to the nickname.

“Actually, Thomas, he wants us both.”

“Whatever for?”

“I can only speculate, Thomas, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it had something to do with the stranger who was here earlier today.”

“Stranger?”

“Yes. An outsider. He was seen approaching the Wall by a novitiate who was doing a wildlife census in that area near the gate.”

“Which one?”

“The field of mustard weed that borders on — ”

“No, Judas, not which field, which novitiate?”

“Oh. John Larson.”

“Ah. He’s a good kid.”

“Right. Anyway, he got ahead of the stranger and warned Lloyd, who was herding in that area. They got the flock out of the way — ”

“Ha ha ha! Judas! Were they really so apprehensive?”

“You know what I mean! Anyway, after Lloyd and the sheep were out of sight, John beat a path to—”

“Why Judas, you’re in unusual form today!”

“Thomas! Must you always hear the frivolous interpretation of everything I say?”

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“Revelation 2, seventeenth verse.”

“Thomas, that’s a frivolous interpretation of — ”

“Sorry, Judas. I forget myself. Perhaps I need a new name.”

They walked in silence for a few minutes. Finally, Brother Judas continued.

“By the time the stranger got to the Manse, Brother Dane was in position to welcome him and show him to the Abbot’s chambers. Everyone else was out of sight.”

“So what’d he want?”

“Again, I can only speculate. I presume we’ll be informed by the Abbot.”

Chapter 3

“Good afternoon, Brother Thomas, Brother Judas.”

“Good afternoon, Abbot.”

“Please be seated. You’ve had lunch? No? Then I’ll get right to the point and keep this short. We had a visitor this morning, a man who came here on a rather unusual errand.”

“Who was he?” asked Brother Thomas.

Brother Judas looked with disapproval at Brother Thomas for the interruption.

“Actually,” answered the Abbot, “he didn’t get around to leaving his name. I’m afraid I used my ‘Pious To The Point Of Retardation’ act on him.”

Brother Thomas laughed heartily. “I’ll bet we don’t see him again!”

“I think not,” agreed the Abbot. “However, we might see some of his colleagues, if we’re not careful.”

“Why’s that?” asked Brother Thomas.

“Several reasons, not the least of which is that he planted a bleep just under the front edge of my desk.”

“A what?” asked Brother Judas, and “No kidding!” exclaimed Brother Thomas simultaneously.

“Why would anybody plant a Bleep on us?” wondered Brother Thomas.

“It’s an electronic transmitter intended as a guidance beacon,” answered the Abbot to Brother Judas, and “To be able to find us more easily the next time,” he answered to Brother Thomas.

“Of course,” responded Brother Thomas, “But who’d want to?”

“The Angeles Peedee.”

“What? All the way up here?” Brother Thomas was incredulous.

“All the way up here, Thomas,” confirmed the Abbot. “That’s why I played dumb. Whatever they wanted, I figured it wouldn’t hurt for them to underestimate us.”

“Damned clever of you,” said Brother Thomas, and Brother Judas actually jumped in surprise.

“So what’d he want?” continued Brother Thomas quietly.

“He delivered this,” said the Abbot holding up the crystal. “Here’s a printout.”

Abbey

Brother Thomas began reading.

“This is a summons to appear at the Directorate of External Affairs on a matter of interstellar consequence!”

“Correct.”

“But we don’t have to do that! They have no authority over us!”

“Matthew 22:21!” interjected Brother Judas, and the Abbot gave him a look of tolerant patience.

Brother Judas looked confused and said, “What’s wrong? In Matthew 22:21, it says — ”

“I’m aware of what it says, Brother Judas. And you are correct. We owe nothing to Caesar. However, we might find in the fifth chapter of Matthew some justification for cooperating beyond that which is necessary.”

“Ah,” said Brother Judas. “You are correct of course.”

“I do believe you’ve helped to set my mind at ease on this matter,” said the Abbot.

Turning to Brother Thomas, the Abbot continued, “Yes Thomas, the secular powers have no authority over us, nor have they had for nearly a thousand years. Nevertheless, we shall answer this summons. If we thereby establish an unfortunate precedent in the minds of the secular authorities, well, then we shall be extra careful to see that we ourselves do not view it as such.”

Brother Thomas handed the printout to Brother Judas and leaned back in his chair, staring at the ceiling. His eyes gradually went out of focus as he pondered. Brother Judas handed the printout back to the Abbot and said, “I don’t get it. What do we have to do with anything interstellar?”

“It’s possible,” admitted the Abbot, “that this time I made a mistake. Had I not antagonized the server of the summons, I might have been able to learn something from him. As penance, I shall meditate at length upon the chapter of Matthew which I mentioned a moment ago. In the meantime, if we are to learn the meaning of this summons, we will have to learn it there.”

“How?” the monks asked simultaneously.

“As I said, we shall answer the summons. I’m sending the two of you,” said the Abbot with a smile, “to D.C. to do it for us.”

“D.C.!” shrieked Brother Judas. “I thought we were going to Angeles!”

“Of course not, Judas,” Brother Thomas assured him. “The Director’s offices are in Denver Collins.”

The monks rose to leave.

“Ah, one more thing,” said the Abbot. “I almost forgot. Send in Brother Dalmas. That damned bridge at Vincente Creek has washed out again. I need him to organize a repair crew.”

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Chapter 4

The monks had walked only about 20 of the more than 100 miles to the Village of Keep when they were intercepted by the Peedee Patplane. It roared overhead and they heard it convert to retros and hover down some short distance ahead of them. They walked around the next bend and there it was astride the road, surrounded by smoldering greenery.

“How’d they find us?” wondered Brother Judas.

Brother Thomas only smiled and continued his leisurely stroll toward where the Peedee officer was emerging from his craft.

“I,” announced the officer, “am looking for — ”

“This?” asked Brother Thomas, holding out the bleep.

“Now where the Hell did you get that? And why are you carryin’ it around! That was supposed to guide me to some damned hovel in the woods!”

“Our headquarters is properly called the Abbey,” corrected Brother Thomas, “and the trip would have been wasted in any case. As you can see, we are not at the Abbey. We are here.”

“And who the hell are you?” demanded the Peedee Officer.

“I’m Tom Slick — ”

Brother Judas gasped —

“— and this is Gertie,” said Brother Thomas, indicating Brother Judas.

“Sputter sputter!” sputtered Brother Judas.

“Well,” gruffed the officer, “I’m on my way to enforce a summons on some hicks that live near the coast. No name. No address. Just my kind of job. That bleep was gonna help me find ’em.”

“No need.” soothed Brother Thomas. “We are those very hicks and, as you can see, we are bent upon compliance with your summons. Indeed, we are on our way to D.C. even now. We expect to be there in no more than six months.”

“Six Mon — ! Jeeezuz Fuuken Aech Keeerist! Six Months! The Goddamned moon could turn to cheese in six months! Why the Hell so bloody long!?”

“It’s the best we can do, esteemed sir, on foot,” reasoned Brother Thomas.

Brother Judas said, “Tom Slick? Gertie? Brother Thomas, are you — ”

“Shush, Gertie!” ordered Brother Thomas.

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Brother Judas backed a step in utter amazement. “He has a mental condition,” explained Brother Thomas, “and I brought him along to carry the packs.”

The annoyed Peedee Officer didn’t notice that Gertie carried only one pack and that Tom Slick carried the other one.

“On foot my grandmother’s great hairy ass and muddy combat boots!” exclaimed the officer. “Six months be damned! I’ll have you there in two hours! Climb in!”

Brother Thomas grasped Brother Judas firmly by the elbow and guided him toward the open hatch of the waiting Patplane.

“Slick?” asked Brother Judas.

“What kind of mental condition? Is he dangerous?” asked the officer.

“Mostly a speech impediment,” explained Tom Slick, “and various unpredictable motor impairments.”

As he entered the hatch, Brother Thomas palmed a small adhesive label from inside the left sleeve of his frock and stuck it to the shiny outer surface of the Patplane. In the confusion caused by Gertie, the Peedee Officer didn’t notice. On the label were the cryptic words, *Thunderbolt Grease Slapper*. The label peeled off due to air friction before they’d gone a hundred miles, but Brother Thomas didn’t mind. The acid in the ink had by then etched the epithet permanently into the surface of the metal. The physical resources of the Abbey were limited but adequate. It’s intellectual resources were considerable. The manufacture of the label had been child’s play.

By the time that the Patplane had reached D.C., Brother Judas had determined to take charge. When the hatch opened, he was waiting and he was the first one out.

“Take me to your Abbot!” he demanded of the first person he saw.

“Take a hike!” replied that savant, and proceeded to plug an electronic umbilicus into a socket near the landing gear.

While Brother Judas prepared to stand on his dignity, Brother Thomas shouldered his backpack and stepped away toward a door labeled Concourse.

“Wait, Thomas!” yelled Brother Judas. He hurried inside the Patplane, retrieved his backpack, and hurried after Brother Thomas.

“Thomas,” he panted, “we really must behave with more decorum, even if we are among non-believers. We are the representatives of the Abbey. We can’t think just of ourselves. We must remember always that the Abbey will be judged by our behavior, by our attitudes. We wouldn’t want — ”

“Here, Brother Judas. Please take charge of this for me,” said Brother Thomas, handing Brother Judas a fat wallet.

“What’s this?” asked Brother Judas. He opened the wallet, looked in, and dropped it like it had burned him.

“Brother Thomas!” trumpeted Brother Judas.

“Yes?” asked Brother Thomas.

“This wallet is full of — ” yelled Brother Judas, “ — money!” whispered Brother Judas.

“Be careful with it, Judas. It’s all the Abbey has and it has to last us for an unknown time.”

“But why do we have,” Brother Judas hesitated, “money?”

“A feast is made for laughter,” answered Brother Thomas, “and wine maketh merry: but money answereth all things.”

“I’m not familiar with that scripture.” stated Brother Judas. “Which Book contains it?”

“Ecclesiastes,” smiled Brother Thomas, “Chapter 10, verse 19.”

“Thomas, I’m not sure that you’re — ”

“Ah. Here we are.” observed Brother Thomas.

“Where?” asked Brother Judas.

“Through here,” directed Brother Thomas, and stepped into a small oval shaped chamber.

“What’s this?” asked Brother Judas, taking a seat.

“Destination?” asked a voice.

Brother Judas jumped up and bumped his head.

“Do you wish to depart the vehicle?” asked the voice, and the door opened.

“No,” stated Brother Thomas. “We wish to go to the office of the Directorate of External Affairs.”

“What?” asked Brother Judas.

“Please be seated,” instructed the voice, “and fasten your bodywebs.”

“What’s a bodyweb?” asked Brother Judas.

“Here,” said Brother Thomas, pressing a bright red stud on the panel in front of Brother Judas. The stud was labeled bodyweb.

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“Thomas, where did you learn of such pagan devices as these?” asked Brother Judas.

“Well, if you must know,” Brother Thomas hesitated.

“Well?”

“I read Arizona Highways.”

“What’s that?”

“An electronic magazine. It’s been continuously published longer than any other magazine in the world. Over a thousand years, according to the company.”

“You mean a publication? From outside the Abbey?”

“Yes.”

“But why, Thomas. You risk your very soul. And how did you ever get your hands on such a thing?”

“I read it for my own education and betterment.”

“But what of the Abbot? Surely he would not approve of such a thing.”

“Actually, the Abbot gave me access to the Abbey dish. That’s how I logged into the net and ‘got my hands on such a thing’, as you put it.”

“Dish? Brother Thomas! I’m quite at my wits end! I had no idea that the Abbey had such a thing. What’s a dish?”

“The dish,” explained Brother Thomas, is how the library gets it’s signals from the net.”

“You mean that thing on the library roof? I thought that was some kind of power source. You know, solar power or something. I never heard of such a thing.”

The monks sat in silence, Brother Thomas staring out the window and Brother Judas staring at his hands in his lap.

The pod stopped.

“Here we are,” said Brother Thomas.

“What?” asked Brother Judas, looking up in confusion. For the first time, he noticed that they were no longer in the concourse.

“What? Where are we?”

“In the lobby of the Directorate of External Affairs, Brother Judas.”

“You mean we’ve been moving?”

“Certainly. We’ve traveled about 5 miles since we entered the pod.”

“Actually, Sir, it was exactly 2.75 miles,” said the voice.

“Amazing.”

“Are you coming with me or do you plan to spend the rest of the day in the pod?”

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Chapter 5

“Names, please?” asked a voice.

“Where do all these voices come from?” asked Brother Judas.

“Hidden speakers, Judas.”

“Names, please?”

“Brother Thomas and Brother Judas.”

There was a pause.

“The Director is expecting you but he is currently in conference. We suggest that you enjoy lunch in the cantina while you wait.”

“How do we get there?” asked Brother Thomas.

“Just step on the slide,” instructed the voice. A section of the floor turned blue.

Brother Thomas stepped onto the blue section of floor. Brother Judas hesitated.

“Do you wish to walk?” asked the voice. “The cantina is on the other side of the complex and 5 levels up. I can provide a guideline if you wish.”

“No!” said Brother Judas. “I’ll ride!” and he stepped onto the blue section of floor. He and Brother Thomas slid away, moving easily through the other people in the lobby. In less than 10 minutes, they were standing at the door of the cantina.

“Please enjoy your lunch,” said the voice. “Order whatever you wish. The Directorate has paid all expenses in advance. I’ll notify you when the Director is ready for your interview.”

The monks found an unoccupied table and sat.

“What would you like?” asked a different voice.

“Uh, what do you have?” asked Brother Judas.

“Anything. Your expenses have been paid in full, in advance. Order whatever you wish.”

“I, uh, I’ll have boiled mutton and corn meal mush.” said Brother Judas.

“Steak well done and Maine lobster,” said Brother Thomas. “A baked potato with sour cream and chives, sautéed mushrooms and baby onions, tossed green salad with vinegar and oil, dinner rolls with real butter and honey, pecan pie a la mode, coffee cream and sugar, and after dinner mints.”

“Thomas, you’re not serious!”

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“God is bountiful, Brother Judas.”

“But — ”

The food began to arrive.

“Eat, drink, and be merry, Brother Judas,” said Brother Thomas as he picked up his utensils. “Ecclesiastes again, Chapter 8, verse 15. I particularly like the Old Testament.”

Chapter 6

The Director of External Affairs, Michael Mortimer, turned out to be a small man with thin grey hair. He spoke softly and moved without any evident wasted motion.

“So you’re from the Abbey,” said the Director. “Thank you for coming.”

“We were curious,” said Brother Thomas “to know what event beyond the earthly orb would require our assistance.”

“Well,” said the Director, “it’s quite a peculiar situation. We received a message by standard subspace beam, from Raddardoryn. We’ve been trying to upgrade our prestige since the Empire fell, especially with Raddardoryn.”

“Why Raddardoryn, in particular?” asked Brother Thomas.

“Well, what with our old alliance with their ancient tyrant, we’ve never been real popular there. They still hold it against us. Not our fault of course. We were new on the scene at the time. Just happened to team up with a tyrant.”

“As I understand the history of the times, we weren’t so benevolent ourselves,” ventured Brother Thomas.

The Director looked annoyed and said, “Well, nobody’s perfect. Besides, you can’t believe everything you see on the holos. Anyway, we got this damned message from Raddardoryn and we’d really like to handle it like we know what we’re doing. We tried our damndest to make sense of it. There are two parts: an introductory note and the message itself. Here’s the note.” The Director handed Brother Thomas a printout. Brother Thomas read:

“The following is a message received from Fitz. Although they mean little to us, references to *lord* and *faith* are, we are told, reminiscent of some facets of a body of belief that seems to be peculiar to your world, at least in our experience. Therefore we send the message to you.”

“We had the devil of a time with the attached message. It looks like a request for help, and that’s why the Raddardorynarie thought it required a response. For some reason, they thought we were the ones to respond. We passed it around internally for several weeks without much luck. We finally got a lucky break when a Fellow of Ancient History at the Harvard Trust showed a copy to a friend who was in the hobby of restoring old computers. This guy happened to have an old computer file that included a scholarly dissertation on ancient belief systems. Included was a bibliography of works on the supernatural. One of documents listed was a King James Bible printed at a place called the Abbey which, by God, still existed. We sent an investigator and you know the rest. Here’s the message, as our prof of ancient history translated it from the Raddardoryn transmission”.

The Director handed the message to Brother Thomas.

Abbey

“Why, lord, have you forsaken us? My seekers go into agrbiz, lest we starve. They transfer containers upon their backs to the fields, lest we run them down. They struggle for their entire lives. We are attacked from within and without by undesirables. We struggle only to survive and do irrigation by the road. Please lord, I bring to your attention my faith, send me some information to bear me through this decision. Show me the plan for the purpose of our suffering. We hope for a fair exchange in the marketplace. Send me an inspector, for I have come to doubt that you will fly before you are dead. The instructions are long.”

“The message is meaningless to us. We’d hoped you might understand it.”

“Mr. Director,” said Brother Thomas sincerely, “the message is also meaningless to me. However, our Abbot has charged us to investigate this matter and bring to any who ask for it the Word of our Lord as revealed in his Inspired Holy Bible. It appears that we must go to Raddardoryn.”

Chapter 7

The monks made the trip to Raddardoryn on a Raddardorynarie tour ship filled with Raddardorynarie on vacation. It was a dreadful experience. The Raddardorynarie don't have a sense of sight as humans know it. They perceive the world entirely through sound. Evolution can be capricious and the Raddardorynarie had evolved both sensitivity and power. Their range of useful sound is enormous, and includes the human audible range. The Raddardorynarie have, located variously about their bodies, tympana that both produce and respond to sound vibrations. They use sound to communicate, to maneuver, to locate things in their environment, to entertain one another, for their version of art, and even for certain manipulative activities. The environment on a Raddardorynarie tour ship can be hellishly and hideously loud, by human standards. The monks spent the trip wearing hearing protection. They never knew how hard the Raddardorynarie tried to be quiet, or how severely the presence of the two Earthmen hampered the revels of the vacationing Raddardorynarie.

In Jandock, the capital city of Raddardoryn, things were even worse. The place was a constant cacophony. It's never easy for sighted and virtually deaf beings to make their way on a world designed for folk who are blind and navigate by sound. Unexpected hazards abound in such places and the monks had many an occasion to appeal to their Maker. After they finally arrived at the ancestral palace of the ambassadorial family, things improved a little. The ambassadorial family had, for thousands of years, dealt with alien species and therefore understood special requirements. At last, the monks were able to relax. After the first restful night since leaving earth, they attended an early morning interview with the Ambassadorarie Terresterarie.

"Most greeting, I bid you in quietness," stated the Ambassadorarie Terresterarie with subdued formality.

"Greetings to you," said Brother Thomas.

"Blessings upon you." said Brother Judas.

"We came," said Brother Thomas, "in response to a request for help."

"Ah, of mostly certainty," stated the Ambassadorarie Terresterarie.

"The problem is," continued Brother Thomas, "that we don't understand the message. We don't know who sent it or what kind of help they need."

"A perplexity most amuse," answered the Ambassadorarie Terresterarie. "I greet most exquisite nobles earthliness, but detest not blessed most facile of commune style yours. Most judicious yet revolve you unto special clerk."

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With that, the Ambassadorarie Terresterarie rose from his sofa and left the room. The monks remained on their sofas, puzzled. After several seconds, a second Raddardorynarie entered the room.

“Well,” he said in perfect D.C. English, “I’ll bet you’re glad that’s over! Courtesy and tradition require the Ambassadorarie Terresterarie to greet alien dignitaries but he isn’t really the linguist for the job. Anyway, I’m Alf, and I’m here to see to your needs.”

“Well then, to business.” said Brother Thomas.

“Yes. The message.”

“Right,” said Brother Judas. “If we can bring the Gospel to lost souls, then we must.”

“Well,” said Alf, “We’re not exactly sure that’s what they want. We’re not even sure who they are.”

“What information do you have?” asked Brother Thomas.

“Well, I’m not sure that we have any.”

“Why not?” asked Brother Judas.

“The problem, you see, is one of timing. Allow me to explain. The document in question was transmitted from Fitz and arrived at a remote receptor station of the Leader of the Multitudes of Raddardoryn.”

“The Leader of What?” asked Brother Thomas.

“The Leader of the Multitudes of Raddardoryn was a cruel dictator who ruled this planet and some associated imperial interests quite some time ago,” explained Alf.

“How long ago?” asked Brother Thomas.

“Quite a long time ago,” commented Alf. “Up until the Great Revolution.”

Brother Thomas began to look uncomfortable, but remained silent.

“The receptor station in question,” Alf continued, “happened at that time to be temporarily in the possession of the revolutionary forces. Certain concepts contained in the message are quite alien, for example the idea of Lord as we now know you understand it. We only figured that out recently. At the time, the word was understood to mean Leader. The people who intercepted the message believed they had intercepted military intelligence from Fitz bound for the Leader of the Multitudes of Raddardoryn, against whom they were in rebellion. They attempted to translate the message. Here is a reproduction of that original translation.”

Alf handed a printout to Brother Thomas, who read:

“Why, lord, have you forsaken us? My seekers go underground like food factories, lest we starve. They transfer cubes upon their backs to build surfaces, lest we run over them. They fight for their entire lives. We are attacked from within and without by undesirables. We struggle only to survive and do thy hydroelectric facility by the road. Please lord, I bring to your attention my faith, send me some information to bear me through this decision. Show me thy plan. Show me the purpose of our suffering. We hope for conversion to a stable economy. Send me a lord, for I have come to doubt even that you will fly before you are dead. The scriptures are longer.”

Alf continued, “This message was intensely exciting to the revolutionaries who were in possession of the receptor station. It seemed to be packed with coded information of the greatest possible importance. They attempted to forward it to their superiors who were hiding under the very nose of the Leader of the Multitudes of Raddardoryn, within his own castle. For security reasons, they sent the message by courier pod rather than subspace transmission. The launching of the pod was observed by forces loyal to the Leader of the Multitudes of Raddardoryn who were in route to retake the captured station. They fired on the pod and damaged it, but failed to destroy it. The pod, unable to sustain operation in subspace, defaulted to normal space and required about 750 years to complete its journey, arriving here only about two of your years ago. We, of course, learned all of this quite recently.”

“You mean this message has been traveling for 750 years?” asked Brother Judas.

“That seems to be the case,” replied Alf. “Actually, about 600 of your years. To continue: After the Leader of the Multitudes of Raddardoryn was defeated by our ancestors, about 750 of our years ago, many protocols developed by the revolutionary forces became standards. Thus, when the pod recently arrived in the Raddardoryn system, its onboard security systems recognized the protocols used by local telemetry stations. Onboard security checks were apparently satisfied, because the pod transmitted its message which entered the standard message queue. The technician who received the message thought he was receiving a normal subspace transmission. He lacked any indication that the message had come from an ancient message pod, rather than a transmitter on Fitz.”

“The message was addressed to a Squadmaster Murrey who, of course, had been dead for six centuries, by your time. However, there happened to be a Squadmaster Murrey in the address register, so he received the message. It was, of course, a complete mystery to him. Strangely, his lifemate had recently completed a survey course in the comparative study of ancient cultures and she speculated that the references to Lord and faith sounded a lot like a peculiar set of beliefs called “Supernatural” that had flourished centuries earlier on a nearby backwater called Earth. Ah, no offense intended of course.”

“We perfectly understand,” assured Brother Thomas.

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“Had it not been for her, there’s no telling what might have become of the message. The circumstances of the message were, of course, most puzzling. We couldn’t even tell where it had originated. Lady Murrey's hunch was the only idea that anybody had, so we sent the message to your Directorate of External Affairs. After that, we pretty much forgot about it until the courier pod, still traveling at sublight velocity, arrived about 18 of your months after its message. When it attempted to rendezvous at the secret base of the long-dead conspirators, it was detected by routine traffic control surveillance equipment. Our historians were ecstatic over its discovery but at first we didn’t recognized it as the source of the earlier message. Eventually somebody figured that out, but before we could notify your Directorate of External Affairs, you arrived and contacted us.

The monks had no comment at first. The turn of events was utterly unexpected.

“But,” said Brother Judas, “we don’t know if anybody even knows now who sent the message.”

“We can, if you wish, send an inquiry to Fitz,” offered Alf.

“Please do,” instructed Brother Thomas.

Brother Judas leaned over and whispered, “Can we afford it?”

“Ah,” commented Alf. “Not to worry. We are as interested in this matter as you, so you needn’t worry about the expense, nor about whispering. I assure you that my tympana can detect any noise you are capable of producing. If you wish secrecy, simply write your comments. We are, you will remember, quite blind to electromagnetic forms of radiation. Differences in what you call color are, with rare exceptions, invisible to us.”

“Uh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to hide anything, I mean, — ”

“Please Brother Judas. I am not offended. I simply explain for your own enlightenment.”

“Yes, then please make the request,” replied Brother Judas.

Chapter 8

Several days later, the monks were called back to the office of the Ambassadorarie Terresterarie. Alf greeted them.

“You heard from Fitz?” ask Brother Thomas.

“That we did,” replied Alf.

“And we know now who wrote the message?” asked Brother Judas.

“I’m afraid not,” replied Alf.

“Why not?” asked Brother Judas.

“I’m afraid,” said Alf, “that the matter has only become a greater puzzle. We have learned that the document in question didn’t originate on Fitz after all. It was, instead, part of a datablock received from Danuele. The datablock had been in storage on Danuele for several decades. This circumstance was misinterpreted when the datablock was received on Fitz. The datablock was thought to be purely archival. The entire datablock, when it arrived on Fitz, was placed in permanent storage where it stayed for about 3 centuries.”

“What!” exclaimed the monks. “You mean it’s even older than we thought?”

“Evidently.”

“But then the message was written almost a thousand years ago!” exclaimed Brother Judas. “How could it be of any relevance at all?”

Brother Thomas began to laugh.

“What the Devil’s so damned funny?” asked Brother Judas.

“Judas! Such language! Where’s your piety?” asked Brother Thomas through his laughter.

“Piety be damned! Here we are thousands of light-years from home chasing after a call for help from somebody who’s probably been dead and forgotten for a millennium!”

“Well,” said Brother Thomas, “Lets hear what Alf has to tell us.”

“Oh sure. Why not? What do we have to lose now?” grumbled Brother Judas.

“Eventually,” resumed Alf, “inquiries concerning another matter led to the reactivation of that particular datablock after it had been archived for about 300 years. A special group was commissioned to review the datablock and act upon any

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information that retained relevance after 300 years of storage. The message represented by the document in question was in the language of Orgis — ”

“Orgis!” exclaimed Brother Judas. “Where the hell is Orgis? I thought the message came from Danuele!”

“Please,” said Alf. “I’m telling you what I was told by my contact on Fitz.”

“Please, do continue,” said Brother Thomas, laying a calming hand on Brother Judas’ arm.

“Thank you.” said Alf. “As I said, the message represented by the document in question was in the language of Orgis, and neither its significance nor its pedigree was entirely clear. However, inquiries to Orgis eventually revealed that the message had originally come from Earth which — ”

“What!” exclaimed the monks together.

“Yes, from Earth, which during the subsequent 300 years had forged a small but powerful empire in its local region of the galaxy. This empire was loosely allied with Raddardoryn, which was at that time governed by the rather brutal regime of which we have already spoken. That regime, as you might know, was headed by a leader whose title translated roughly as Lord of the Hosts of Raddardoryn. The regime of this Leader, or Lord, was at the time involved in suppressing the civil uprising which eventually defeated him and led to our present system. The clerk, perhaps naively, suspected that he was in possession of a coded message possibly sent by underground contacts on Earth. He had no idea why it would be resident in a 300 year-old datablock, but he wanted only to be rid of it. Opinion on Fitz at the time was that the government would successfully suppress the uprising. There seemed no future in antagonizing the authorities. Thus, the message was forwarded to Raddardoryn, with the results already discovered.”

“We wonder just how much of this is a ruse. Perhaps the message never was actually in the datablock. Or maybe it was placed there at a later date, as a diversion. Perhaps the use of the language of Orgis was yet another attempt at deception. Indeed, the message might not have actually come from Earth. Nothing here is clear.”

“So what do we do?” asked Brother Thomas.

“We have already initiated a request to Danuele, but I doubt if we will receive any response.”

“Why not?”

“We are presently at war with Danuele.”

Chapter 9

Danuele wouldn't respond to the inquiry, but it proved possible to book passage from Raddardoryn to Danuele through Fitz, which was acting as a mediator in the dispute. One benefit of the arrangement was that the monks didn't have to ride on a Raddardorynarie vessel. They made the trip on a Fitzziary passenger liner. The Fitzziary are birdlike creatures about the size of an Emu. Their greatest virtue, in the opinion of the monks, was that their language consisted largely of melodious chirping noises. The high point of the trip was an impromptu concert that developed one evening, ship's time. The exuberance of the performance was greatly enhanced by the quantities of milk that had been flowing all evening. Milk, as it turned out, was a highly prized import from Earth. It was instantly euphoric to the Fitzziary and accounted for a large part of Earth's successful balance of trade with Fitz. Earth imposed a strict prohibition on the export of cows, and cow smuggling was a highly esteemed vocation on Fitz, where a bootleg cow could set one up for life. The song performed that evening (ships time) was a Fitzziary rendition of a traditional Earth folk song. The performers, in honor of the human guests, sang the piece in English translation. It told the story of a worthless rooster who cheated on his hen and neglected to protect her eggs which were then stolen by a predatory reptile, an ancestral enemy of the Fitzziary. The deadbeat rooster then spent all his hen's inherited grain on milk. Predictably, once she was destitute, he ran off with a fancy breed of show bird leaving his faithful old house hen heartbroken. She went back to her home aviary from where she launched legal action that resulted in the assignment of a contingent of hawks to pursue the deadbeat rooster. He fled the local aviary of his fancy show bird, for parts unknown. Fitz and Earth have much in common.

Other than that, the trip was long and tedious and would surely not bear further comment were it not for the brightly colored plumage of the Fitzziary, which floated everywhere and got into everything. Before the trip to Danuele was completed, Brother Thomas had a dreadful case of Fitzziary feather allergy. His eyes swelled so that he could hardly see and his sinuses caused him an agony of pain and sneezing.

Upon arrival on Danuele, the monks were herded into an audience with the Danuele ambassador who, they discovered, lived in a tank. Indeed, all Danulee lived in tanks. Neither of the monks ever discovered why, on a planet with a surface that was 80% dry land, the dominant race was aquatic. The subject just never came up.

"Greeting," announced the speaker grill on the side of the tank. "I am honored to make your acquaintance."

"Greedings." said Brother Thomas.

"We understand you are inquiring after the origins of a message sent from here many tides ago."

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“Thads drue.” said Brother Thomas. “Judas, I can’d dalk. How about ibv you andle dis?”

“Certainly, Thomas,” said Brother Judas. Turning to the tank, he explained “My companion is presently suffering from a respiratory problem and has difficulty speaking.”

“Thank the Moon,” said the fish. “I was afraid there was something wrong with my transponder, or perhaps with my language impresser. Please continue.”

“We are vitally interested,” said Brother Judas. “in any information you might have about the message in question.”

“I have little. A translation of the message in question was received from Orgis about 1000 of your years ago. At the time the message was sent from Orgis, the Benefactor of Danuele was attempting to establish a general assistance foundation in this sector of the galaxy. However, due to declining revenue at the time, that effort was discontinued. For various reasons, the translation of this message was placed in a pending category and not examined. The datablock containing this particular message was placed in storage. Several decades later, a group of volunteers on Fitz determined to continue the effort to establish a general assistance foundation. They requested whatever help might be forthcoming from Danuele. They received a little good advice, a lot of hearty good wishes, and the datablock containing this particular message.”

“We understood that the message was originally received on Orgis from Earth,” stated Brother Judas.

“We no longer have information to that effect, although we might have had at some time in the past.”

“Then,” sighed Brother Judas, “I suppose we must go to Orgis and see for ourselves.”

Chapter 10

The journey from Danuele to Orgis was interesting. The entire space ship was filled with water in which the Danuelee swam at leisure, operating the ship in complete immersion. The monks passed the trip in a large floating tank equipped to satisfy the needs of terrestrial creatures. The tank was completely self-contained and unattached, and floated on the currents in the huge ship. It was also completely transparent. Upon arrival at Orgis, Brother Judas swore a solemn oath to ever after think more kindly of the occupants of aquaria.

The monks discovered the bureaucracy of Orgis to be quite as cumbersome as that of Earth. They spent over a month learning their way around. To the great surprise of both of the monks, the Orgisee were indistinguishable from humans. This was true even at the genetic level and had caused centuries of heated speculation among scholars. A large proportion of Orgisee scholars maintained that the people of Earth had descended from a notorious group of malcontents that had vanished from Orgis during a great and legendary conflict, millennia earlier. Scholars on Earth, of course, contended that it was the other way around. They suggested that the early inhabitants of earth had colonized Orgis, maintaining that it had most likely been done by the ancient and near mythical Egyptians. Neither side had made much progress in support of its claim. Neither side of the argument, nor any other group on either Orgis or Earth for that matter, could explain the genetic identity of the two races after what might well have been millennia of genetic drift by both of them. It is yet another imponderable mystery in a universe full of them.

A much more interesting faction of the debate, consisting of members of both races, had arisen during the previous century. These individuals advocated both political and physical union. Naturally, they called themselves Unionists. They insisted that the two species were totally unrelated and that this was merely a remarkable and fortunate example of parallel evolution. Both academic factions ridiculed the Unionists with the argument that if the species were not actually related then there was no basis for a political union. However, for centuries individuals of both races had been proving with great enthusiasm that members of the two races could produce viable offspring. The Unionists had adopted the practice as a political tactic and their numbers were growing rapidly. Although they were regarded as charlatans by the academics, they continued to multiply and showed considerable potential for eventually winning the debate by the practical expedient of out-breeding the academics. Many of them were beginning to occupy the vast depopulated spaces available both on Earth and Orgis. The academics, of course, were determined to continue their debate, come what may.

Eventually, the monks were sufficiently schooled in protocol. After that, they successfully arranged an audience with a member of the Alien Archives and Intelligence Bureau of the Department of External Affairs. In deference to the lack of ac-

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tual diplomatic status of the monks, they had been granted the privilege of conducting the audience in the Low Protocol. Otherwise, they would have required several more months of training and been required to obtain full titles. For Low Protocol, the title *Brother* was sufficient. At last, the day of the audience arrived. They were ushered into the audience chamber. The audience was with a man whose short title was Chief Historian Ambroise.

“Good morning, Chief Historian Ambroise,” intoned Brother Thomas, with a curtsey.

“Good morning, Chief Historian Ambroise,” intoned Brother Judas, with a curtsey.

“Good morning, Brother Thomas,” intoned Chief Historian Ambroise, with a curtsey.

“Good morning, Brother Judas,” intoned Chief Historian Ambroise, with another curtsey.

“We come, Chief Historian Ambroise, upon a matter of great interest to us but of uncertain urgency. We seek information regarding the source and pedigree of a message allegedly transferred from Orgis to Danuele perhaps a thousand years ago. We suspect,” concluded Brother Thomas, “that the message originally arrived upon Orgis from Earth.”

“I,” assured Chief Historian Ambroise, “will initiate an appropriate search. Much of Orgis was destroyed during the Upheavals, which occurred some 800 years ago, yet we retain much prior information. Our Chief Archivist was even then a man of great diligence.”

“When might we expect a report of the results of your search?” asked Brother Judas.

“In view of the burden imposed by matters of greater urgency, and considering the difficulty and expense of the proposed endeavor, I project a completion date approximately six months hence,” advised Chief Historian Ambroise.

“Six months?” shouted Brother Judas, forgetting his coaching.

“Excuse me for a moment, please,” said Brother Thomas, turning to Brother Judas.

“Please, Brother Judas, retain the decorum that is most necessary in the presence of such a personage as Chief Historian Ambroise.”

“Decorum!” shouted Brother Judas. “We’ve been half across the damned galaxy, we’ve eaten God only knows what to the detriment of our bodies if not our souls, we’ve listened to demons that talk with their stomachs, we’ve breathed bird feathers and lived in a fish tank, and now we’ve got to wait six months for — ”

Brother Thomas took Brother Judas firmly by the elbow and escorted him into the anteroom.

“Please wait here,” he said, and left Brother Judas fuming.

Back in the audience chamber, Brother Thomas found Chief Historian Ambroise waiting with calculated poise.

“Please forgive the most unfortunate interruption, Chief Historian Ambroise. Brother Judas is presently suffering from a peculiar form of intellectual psychosis induced, no doubt, by his experiences during our travels.”

“Of course, Brother Thomas. It sounds most unsettling. I hope he recovers.”

“I’m sure he will, with rest. Now, regarding the matter of the requested report. You say several months?”

“At a guess. I, of course, will endeavor to expedite the search. However the matter is, as you say, of uncertain urgency.”

“However,” suggested Brother Thomas, “one never knows what crucial bit of historical data might emerge from such a search.”

“Such as?”

“Suppose, for example, there might be some seemingly trivial item, previously thought unimportant, that might shed light upon the ultimate origins of the human occupation of Earth?”

“Hmm,” pondered Chief Historian Ambroise. “would not the irony be delicious if such a search, conducted at the express request of Earthlings, were to unearth (what delightful puns your language provides) the crucial evidence of original colonization from Orgis?”

“Precisely.” agreed Brother Thomas.

“But why,” asked Chief Historian Ambroise, “would you, an Earthling, suggest to me such an inducement.”

“Because,” said Brother Thomas with a conspiratorial smile, “I very much doubt that such evidence will arise. Therefore, I feel safe in baiting your enthusiasm with it. In either case, my own ends will be accomplished.”

“Ah,” said Chief Historian Ambroise, “I can see that we are two of a kind. You shall have your report at my earliest convenience.”

“And we,” continued Brother Thomas, “with your permission of course, will depart and await the report on Earth.”

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“A lovely plan.”

“My sentiments exactly.”

The monks were able to book passage on the Queen of the Elizabethan Revival, of Brisbane registry, Earth. They headed home that very evening, local time, of course.

Chapter 11

During the trip from Orgis to Earth, Brother Judas was unusually withdrawn. Brother Thomas was concerned but unable to discover the reason. Brother Judas didn't show any visible improvement of disposition either after the arrival at Earth or during the jump from Brisbane to Denver Collins. In the Director's office he remained silent.

"Director Mortimer," said Brother Thomas with a smile, shaking hands.

"Brothers Thomas and Judas," said Director Mortimer. "Welcome home. I trust your journey was both useful and interesting."

"Interesting, yes," said Brother Thomas. "We were hoping you might make it useful."

"How so?"

"We're expecting a report from a Chief Historian on Orgis, a fellow named Ambroise."

"Well, this is a big agency. I don't see everything but I can find out for you. Computer."

"Ready."

"Did we receive a report from Orgis, from a Chief Historian named Ambroise, addressed to Brothers Thomas and Judas of the Abbey?"

"Yes."

"And where is the report now?"

"It was forwarded to the Village of Keep, in the Western Verge."

"Ah. Thank you, computer."

"You're completely welcome, Sir."

"Well, there you have it Brother Thomas. Your report awaits you at your village. Shall I provide transportation for you?"

"Yes, please."

"Certainly."

The Village of Keep, of course, didn't have any terminal facilities for pods. Thus there wasn't any automatic pod service and the monks rode, as before, in a piloted Peedee Patplane. Brother Thomas sat near the rear and occupied himself with contemplation and cloud watching. Brother Judas, in an astonishing change of mood,

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spent the trip chatting with the pilot. Brother Thomas was occasionally startled by the vocabulary that he heard, but the conversation indicated that both men were enjoying the ride.

Upon arrival at the Village of Keep, Brother Judas asked the pilot to wait for them.

“Whatever for?” asked Brother Thomas when they were outside the patplane.

“I have a premonition.” said Brother Judas.

“What is the meaning of this premonition?” asked Brother Thomas.

“I’d rather not say, but I might need that pilot before long.”

“Hmm. Well, lets find the Village Master.”

It turned out that the Village Master was in his office at the Mercantile.

“Good morning, Village Master Caine.”

“Good morning, Brothers.”

“You have a package for us?”

“Indeed I do. All the way from Orgis! I’d no idea you monks were so widely known.”

“There are changes blowing in the wind,” said Brother Judas. The comment drew a curious glance from Brother Thomas.

Village Master Caine handed the crystal to Brother Thomas.

The monks found a table, sat, and inserted the crystal into a reader. They read,

Greetings to the worthy monks Brother Thomas and Brother Judas.

Included herewith is the report you requested.

I regret to discover, Brother Thomas, that no such item of information as you suggested seems to have emerged with this research. However, you have your report in a timely fashion and I have a minor score to settle between the two of us, in a most amiable and friendly competition I assure you. Please convey to Brother Judas my condolences on his recent indisposition and my hopes for his prompt recovery of his wits.

The report follows:

A vessel of unknown (at the time) origin arrived in orbit around Orgis around 1000 of your years ago. A work force aboard the vessel was offered as available for contract labor. No such laborers were needed on Orgis. The owners of the vessel were so informed.

The vessel was observed to depart from orbit, presumably to seek work elsewhere. Some time later, its shuttles were discovered still in orbit around Orgis. Investigations revealed that the shuttles contained over 800 deceased people, presumed to be all or part of the work force of the vessel. The shuttles’ engines and radios had been disabled. The occupants had died from the depletion of their atmosphere after apparently having been abandoned in orbit.

It wasn’t until some time later that the origin of the people was determined to be Earth. In the meantime, the people of Orgis determined to resolve the situation to their own satisfaction. They formed a Commission that was given complete jurisdiction over the matter. The

shuttles were retrieved from orbit, all possible care being taken to preserve the remains of the dead members of the work force and all other material aboard the shuttles. At the time of the retrieval, all such remains were well preserved due to the cold temperature within the shuttles. Holographic records were made of all victims and their possessions. In accordance with Orgis custom at the time, the deceased members of the work force were cremated. The physical items recovered with them were incinerated.

When the origin of the people was eventually determined to be Earth, a delegation was sent there to report on what had occurred. Such authorities as could be contacted on Earth denied any knowledge of the situation, the vessel, or the work force.

The message to which reference has been made was in the possession of a member of the work force. He was the only member of the workforce who was ever identified, even tentatively. When recovered, his body was clothed in an extremely tattered brown garment woven from a heavy material of vegetable fibers. Subsequent research revealed the material to be derived from a native Earth plant called cotton. This minor fact was investigated because that man was the only member of the work force who was clothed in such fabric. All others wore clothes made of a petroleum derivative. In a pocket of the garment was a book titled Holy Bible King James Version. An inscription on the first page indicated that the book was the property of someone named Daniel Trevor. That was presumed to be the name of the man in whose garment the book was found. Of course, that wasn't determined until much later, after Earth had been identified as the source of the dead people and a rudimentary knowledge of the language had been acquired.

The message presently under discussion was handwritten on letterhead stationery of someplace called the Abbey of the Monastic Order of Believers and was folded into the book. When recovered, the original paper was crumpled, folded, torn across the upper right corner, and bore a stain that later was proven by chemical analysis to be human blood. Incidentally, that blood analysis was the first indication of the identical nature of Earthlings and Orgisee.

Following is an exact reproduction of the text of the original document, which is of course written in your language:

“Why, oh Lord, have You forsaken us? My Scholars grub in the ground like farmers, lest we starve. They carry large stones upon their backs to build walls, lest we be overrun. They fight even for their very lives. We are attacked from within by heretics, and from without by fools. We struggle only to survive, and Thy work falls by the way. Please Lord, I beseech You, send me some sign, for my faith will no longer carry me through this time of trial. Show me Thy plan for salvation. Reveal to me that our suffering is for a purpose, that we have hope for eternal redemption. Send me a miracle, oh Lord, for I have come to doubt even that You arose from the dead. The scriptures no longer —”

Our Resident Earth Adviser, after an analysis of prose style and grammar, assures us that the message was never completed and that the original writing of it was probably interrupted in some way. He cannot provide any theory to explain either the presence of Daniel Trevor among the work force or his possession of the book or the message. One might surmise that Daniel Trevor is the author of the message.

Cataloging and examination of all relevant material was primarily done by volunteers and had rather low priority. Members of the original delegation to Earth, who had of necessity learned the basics of the local language, attempted to translate the book and the message, more as an academic exercise than anything else. The substance of the documents wasn't completely understood. However, the clerk who did the translation forwarded the message to the Benefactor of Danuele. That seems to have happened because the message appeared to be a request, albeit an inscrutable one, for some sort of assistance. The Benefactor of Danuele was, at that time, establishing a foundation for commercial assistance to those in need in this sector of the galaxy.

Subsequent expertise in the languages, cultures, and history of Earth reveal that the translation was less than perfect. Following is a translation back into your language of the original somewhat inaccurate translation that was sent to Danuele.

Abbey

“Why, Lord, have you forsaken us? My learners delve in the ground like farmers, lest we starve. They carry blocks upon their backs to build walls, lest we be overrun. They fight for their entire lives. We are attacked from within by parasites, and from without by comedians. We struggle only to survive, and Thy work falls by the road. Please Lord, I petition You, send me some information, for my faith will no longer bear me through this judgment. Show me Thy plan for reconstruction. Reveal to me that our suffering is for a purpose, that we have hope for eternal conversion to cash. Send me a benefactor, oh Lord, for I have come to doubt even that You floated above the dead. The scriptures no longer.”

You, of course, are familiar with the subsequent history of the message. Ironically, it appears that this plea for help, which you have chased across the galaxy and back, originated on your own planet and perhaps even within your own institution.

No further information is available on this subject.

Yours, Chief Historian Ambroise.

“Well, Brother Thomas, who was Daniel Trevor?”

Brother Thomas sighed. “Chief Historian Ambroise was right about the irony. More than he knew.”

“Daniel Trevor was one of us, wasn’t he?”

“Yes. He was. During the early years of the Christian Consolidation, when every faction was fighting another, Brother Daniel was one of the Founders. He helped found the Abbey.”

“He did?”

“Yes. It was a few decades after the Interstellar Discovery. Earth hadn’t yet begun to build its own space fleet but was leasing craft from other races. It was a hectic time and a lot of bad things happened. It appears that one of them has just finished playing itself out.”

“So. Tell me about Daniel Trevor.”

“He was what they called a Catholic back then. It was a version of Christian.”

“You mean there were different kinds?”

“Brother Judas, there were even different kinds of Catholics. Before the Christian Consolidation there were hundreds of different sects. Some of them even fought each other.”

“You mean actually fought? Like, physically?”

“Yes. Anyway, about that time in history, Christianity fell out of fashion and Christians retreated here. I don’t know what became of the other religions.”

“There were others besides Christians?”

“Brother Judas,” Brother Thomas smiled sadly, “What were you doing during all of those history classes at the Abbey?”

“I guess I wasn’t really interested.”

“But you’ve always seemed so pious!”

“I guess I fooled even myself. Anyway, continue. I’m finally interested in our history.”

“O.K. What we have today at the Abbey is only the present result of the Christian Consolidation, but the Abbey was a long time being established. There was doubt among our ancestors that they would survive at all. No one ever knew what happened to Brother Daniel. He was one of several of the Founders who disappeared. It’s never been known for sure but most scholars believe that he disappeared during one of the raids on the Abbey that was made during the early years of its construction. Back then, this coast was heavily populated. No one even knew for sure who conducted the raid or what happened to the people who disappeared. They might have been killed or maybe kidnapped. They might just have run away and never made it back. Nobody knew. It seems that now we know what happened to Brother Daniel, at least.”

“Why?”

“Obviously, he ended up in the hands of Exporters.”

“Who were they?”

“A faction that was engaged in a sort of combination of job-shopping and ethnic purging — they called it ethnic cleansing back then, God only knows why. There wasn’t anything clean about it. Anyway, they shanghaied types they didn’t like and sold them into forced labor on other planets.”

“Sounds dreadful.”

“It was also unprofitable. No group of people, however despicable, can work hard enough to pay the costs of such an operation. The Exporters went broke pretty quickly but fanatics will always try something no matter how stupid it is. It seems pretty certain that Daniel Trevor was shanghaied by local anti-Christians who sold him to an Exporter job-shop.”

“They actually sold people back then?”

“Yes, Judas.”

“You mean, like they were property?”

“That is correct.”

Abbey

“That’s dreadful. But even so, why would something like that happen way out here?”

“As I said, this area was heavily populated back then.”

“You mean other people lived here besides us?”

“Yes, Brother Judas. Millions of them.”

“Brother Thomas, surely you exaggerate!”

“Not at all. This coast was populated from the Arctic to the Antarctic.”

“Amazing.”

“Well, at least now we can tell the story of Brother Daniel. I suppose he’ll even be granted a memorial celebration.”

“Yes, Brother Thomas, the Abbot will approve that.”

“We can give a joint presentation, and bear witness before — ”

“Not me, Brother Thomas. I’m not going back.”

“No?”

“No. I suspected something like this. I didn’t know exactly what it would be, but after all that’s happened it just had to be something like this.”

“O.K., but why not go back to the Abbey?”

“What’s to go back to? How can you believe in anything after this? Would a real God allow such chaos? No! I’ve had it!”

“But Brother Judas — ”

“No! This is the proof of the dilemma. Those quotes over the gate in the Abbey wall. Go into the world and don’t go into the world. Christianity has always been screwed up and it always will be.”

“No, Brother Judas,” said Brother Thomas with a smile. “This is the answer to the dilemma, for this shows the way to obey both injunctions. True, we are not of this world, yet we will we go into all the worlds and we will preach the gospel to every creature.”

“Crap!”

“Not into this world, Brother Judas, and not to every man! We’ll go into every world and preach to every creature!” Brother Thomas’ eyes were aglow.

“Brother Thomas, you’re an idiot. We’ve all been idiots. We’ve spent a thousand years rotting in that damned little valley while all of history has passed us by.”

“No Brother Judas! Remember what Christ told us! He said, ‘And this gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.’ Think of it, Brother Judas! I’ll admit that we might not have spent our time as wisely as we could have, but we have preserved the gospel. Don’t you see the meaning of this message? We’re the ones who need the help to start us doing our job again! Daniel Trevor’s message was sent for us!”

“Utter nonsense!”

“Don’t you wonder, Brother Judas, why that message was sent here?”

“Lady Murrey sent it from Raddardoryn.”

“But why? I mean, why to Earth?”

“Alf told us it was because she’d studied ancient cultures and the message had the words *Lord* and *faith*.”

“Nonsense, Brother Judas. Those words don’t even make sense to the Raddardoryn-arie. Why didn’t she pick the word *fly* and send the message to the Fitzziary?”

“Because they’re flightless!”

“That isn’t my point. She might have picked any words and sent the message anywhere! She didn’t! She sent it to us!”

“So what. Maybe it was just random.”

“No Brother Judas. This is the miracle that Brother Daniel prayed for. This is an example of Divine guidance by the very Hand of God.”

“Bullshit, Brother Thomas! Pure bullshit!”

“Please Brother Judas. The message was sent in the only way that could possibly allow it to arrive just when we need it and just when we’re able to do something about it. Here and now. Don’t you see the miracle that Brother Daniel asked for has been granted to his followers? We need the help and only we can provide it!”

“Brother Thomas, you’re an idiot. You could read some profound significance in the clouds of a clear sky.”

“That may or may not be true, Brother Judas, but Brother Daniel, one of us, sent a plea for help, for us, when we didn’t even know that we needed the help. That plea has brought help to us when we need it. We’ve waited, Brother Judas, and preserved the gospel of Jesus Christ. And now the time is right. We can go out into

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the galaxy and preach that gospel to every creature. And then the millennium of God shall begin!”

“Bah. I may not be much of a historian, but I do know that fanatics have been predicting the End for ages. I’m leaving.”

“You may go, Brother Judas, to whatever you see as your fate — ”

“I will.”

“— but whatever you do, it will be God’s will. That, you cannot escape.”

“There is no God.”

“There is, Brother Judas, and if ever anything proved that His ways are mysterious, this has proven it.”

“This has proven nothing.”

Afterword

At that, the monks parted. Brother Judas rode on the Patplane to Denver Collins. He took a well used path into the glittering and Godless world of men.

Brother Thomas walked another path, out of the Village of Keep. He trod upon the little used road that leads to the Abbey, out of this world of men and on to all of the Godless worlds beyond.

And this gospel of the Kingdom of God shall be preached in all the worlds of God's Universe, for a witness unto all nations and creatures; and then shall come the end of the Ages of Men and the beginning of the Eternity of God.

— *Matthew 24:14,*

*Holy Bible, Version of St. Thomas the Abbot
Published at the Abbey, Earth, 3170 A.D.*

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