



# The Peaches of St. Ambrose

Some  
fruit is better left  
unpicked.

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## The Peaches of Saint Ambrose

e-story edition

v.1.5 (second pass edits)

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“There have been goings on at the monastery of Saint Ambrose which I need you to investigate.”

This had been the first words His Holiness Pope Mark III spoke to Brother Barnabas after he'd entered the Pontiff's private chamber and kissed his ring.

Around him attendants were removing his mitre, pallium and chasuble as the Pope stood with his arms stretched out wide. They moved swiftly and efficiently around the Pontiff, soundless but for the sigh and swish of the stiff cloth. One attendant already held the Pastoral Staff. His Holiness must have handed it over just after walking off the balcony. Outside the sound of the departing crowd leaving Saint Francis Square could be heard through the thick curtains.

Still kneeling, the curious priest asked bluntly, “What kind of goings on do you wish me to look into?”

The Prelate and the two guards stiffened at the directness of his question, but the pontiff chose to ignore the rudeness. “I have heard several rumors, but do not wish to direct you more at this point.”

“I see,” said Barnabas though in fact he did not. This was not an uncommon direction from the Pope. He was a sharp man who often placed his faith in the powers of the office of Holy Investigation managed by the brothers of the Order of Skeptikoi. Barnabas did not think such faith was always well placed, but what

did he know? He did not believe in things like other men, even Popes. He had no faith.

The Pope turned to the Prelate. "Leave us," he said.

The Prelate's eyebrows raised a trifle, but otherwise showed no outward surprise. "Come," the Prelate said to the two guards who watched over His Holiness both day and night. The guards glanced at the Pope, and then at Barnabas. Then they followed the Prelate out the side door. The attendants, the priest noticed, had already left.

"There is one more thing," the Pope said after the others had left the room. Barnabas waited patiently on his knees for him to continue. "Saint Ambrose is Benedictine. Their Abbott Primate is Father Lucius. His support for your investigation is not required, but nevertheless I wish you to obtain it. First. Do you understand?" He gave a meaningful look at Barnabas, who nodded his head. His Holiness knew from past experience that Barnabas was adept at many things, but political sensitivity was not one of them.

"I will obtain Father Lucius' permission before I start my investigation," he mumbled. This was not quite true. Like all members of the Order of Skeptikoi, his first step would be to go to the Church library, and begin his preliminary research. The Church library was one of the few places that held records going back to before the founding of New Rome. Some of the records were over 800 years old, predating the fiery apocalypse, and printed on paper so thin you could see through to the print on the other side. Only when his research was concluded would Barnabas start his "official" investigation. But because the Holy Father had asked, he would see make sure to obtain the proper permission before he left.

The Pope approached him again, and placed one hand on Barnabas' head while the other made the claw of Papal blessing. "Then go with God," he intoned, "and may his blessings and angels precede you."

Because they were in the Pope's private office, the Holy Father did not wear the ornate mitre, the gold and white arched hat of his office. Instead he wore the skullcap worn by all ordained officers of the church. In his case the skullcap was the purest of whites, with gold thread worked into the stitching. Only one man in all of Christendom wore the white skullcap. It was as much a sign of his office as the ring of Saint Peter, or the great staff called the Papal Cross. Barnabas himself wore the brown skullcap of a Franciscan monk with small crossed swords woven with black thread on its back.

Without a word the Holy Father took the white skullcap off his head, and held it out for Brother Barnabas.

Brother Barnabas felt a lump in his throat as he automatically knelt again to receive the gift. The skullcap was a Papal privilege, a special entitlement granted to Order of Skeptikoi for an investigation. Such a privilege was only given about once a century, each shrouded in secrecy and myth. There was a reason for this. The privilege implied there was a matter of doctrine involved, not just that of knowledge. Whatever was happening at Saint Ambrose had the potential to effect not just the monastery, or even the order of Saint Benedict, but the Church itself. The entire Church. Even to a Brother who was used to meeting with the Pope and Bishops, it was a level of responsibility beyond his wildest dreams.

For the first time in his many years, Brother Barnabas was afraid. Wordlessly he genuflected to the Pope, then to the crucifix upon the wall. This was to show he had understood the level of responsibility the papal privilege implied. Then without saying a word, he left in quite haste.

On his way out he heard the Prelate ask, "But where is your skullcap, father?"

"Oh," came the muffled response as the guard slowly closed the door to the back entrance of the Pope's private chambers. "I must have set it down somewhere. Fetch me another from the drawer, will you?"

All the way to the library, acid seemed to burn in Barnabas' stomach, and he could feel the thrilling weight of the white skullcap in his pocket like a rock.

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Many months later, Brother Barnabas arrived at the gate to the monastery of Saint Ambrose dirty and tired. It was toward the end of a hot, dry summer, and the thick chalky dust from the trail filled every crease of his traveling habit, sticking to his sweat coating every bit of his exposed skin in thin white layer, until even the deepest browns appeared a light grey. His donkey was so covered in dust that the individual course black hairs on its spotty main were speckled in little tan clumps like a sprinkling of dew that had somehow turned to dust.

He peered at the acolyte guarding the gate under his deep hood and wondered why such an important post was left to a boy fit only for the stables.

Then looking past the gate he saw his answer. The rest of the small monastery were standing around a grave in the nearby cemetery. They were dressed more formally than a late Tuesday afternoon required. From the distance he caught several black skullcaps on the bowed heads, and even the tall flat white mitre of the Abbot.

The boy offered Barnabas some kind of challenge, but he ignored the words. He reached into a small pouch hanging from his belt and carefully pulled from within a thin silver coin which he tossed to the boy without word. The boy may have looked shabby, but caught the coin deftly in one hand.

“What is this?” the boy said looking at the coin. On one side was stamped the head of a monk, hair cleanly tonsured. The other side bore the clear imprint of His Holiness Mark III.

“Run and fetch the Prior,” Brother Barnabas said ignoring the question. “Do you know which one he is?”

The boy nodded silently glancing back at the coin.

“Good,” the priest continued. “Show that to him, and be quick about it. If you can get him to come soon, you can keep the coin.”

A huge grin of delight crossed the boy’s face, then suddenly turned to a wary squint as his eyes flicked to the gate and back at the dirty priest.

“Don’t worry lad,” Brother Barnabas said with some warmth, “I’ll wait here until he arrives.”

As the boy ran off, Brother Barnabas crossed his hands patiently and waited. His donkey occasionally flicked an ear, but otherwise stood like a statue with its head lowered and its eyes on the ground.

The boy approached the other brothers quickly, but chose to wait until they lifted their heads in unison before disturbing them from their prayer. He didn’t approach the Prior, but handed the coin to a short thick man with the brown trimmed black skullcap of a Subprior. Even from the distance Brother Barnabas could see the Subprior’s hands were large and heavy. The boy whispered something into the man’s ear, and pointed back at Brother Barnabas. The man looked at the coin, then scowled towards the gate. He then tapped a tall thin man next to him, handing him the coin. The thin man looked at the coin, then back at the gate. As he turned, Brother Barnabas caught the brown skullcap of a Prior on his head.

Before long the two men were striding stiff armed towards the gate, the boy following along behind like a boat caught in their wake.

It was a short man who spoke first, the one with big hands. "What is the meaning of this?" he demanded holding out the coin.

Brother Barnabas sat calmly on his donkey ignoring the subprior.

"Where did you get this coin?" the man demanded. "Why did you bring it here?"

Brother Barnabas smiled slightly but did not move. The subprior pushed back the sleeves on his habit while his eyes flashed in anger, but the hand of the Prior laid gently on the larger man's shoulder stopped him cold.

"Calmly, Brother Phillip," the Prior said. "This is not an acolyte that you can beat into submission."

Then the Prior turned towards Brother Barnabas. A faint flush had come to the thin man's cheeks, but his voice sounded calm and firm. "State your business, Brother."

"I was sent here as the coin clearly suggests," Brother Barnabas said calmly as he slowly lifted the hood of his habit, and pulled it back. The move exposed the brown skullcap on his head for the first time.

The Subprior had been speaking, "we get coins like this from every damned pilgrim who comes this..." but another touch from the Prior stopped him.

The eyes of the Prior flashed at his skullcap, then back at Brother Barnabas. He swallowed slowly, and then in a calmer tone said, "Well then, Brother. May I ask on whose authority have you come?"

"You may ask," Brother Barnabas replied, "but I will not answer."

A look of anger crossed the Prior's face, only to pass as Brother Barnabas held up his hand.

"Peace Brother," Barnabas said soothingly, "I do not mean to offend. I am only following orders. Perhaps if you allow me to show you the seal on my warrant..." he said as he indicated the dusty saddle bag behind him.

The Prior nodded his head, his eyes guarded but also curious.

"Very well," Brother Barnabas said as he dismounted from the donkey, allowing himself to drop slowly to the ground with his back to the gate. Turning your back to a Prior was usually considered rude, but also it also exposed the

crossed swords of a Skeptikoi stitched in black thread on the back of his brown skullcap. Brother Barnabas heard a hiss and the word "Faithless," whispered from the Prior's lips in a tone suggesting both surprise and fear. He smiled to himself as he rummaged around in his saddlebag, but was careful to make his face neutral when he finally turned around and handed the Prior his warrant.

The paper was a single sheet of folded parchment, and was unremarkable except for the red wax seal on one side which bore the symbol of the Abbott Primate of the Benedictine order. Benedictine monasteries were as a rule self-governed with each Abbot holding complete sway within their walls, but even Benedictines believed in some kind of authority. The seal of the Abbot Primate, and the letter by its owner within, had cost Brother Barnabas an extra two months of travel, but seeing its effect on the Prior made him glad he had put in the effort.

The Prior handed him back his warrant, bowing low to Brother Barnabas as he did so. The Subprior, as Barnabas noted, did the same with only slight prodding.

"Is that sufficient authority Brother?" Barnabas asked kindly.

"Ye, yes. Brother," the Prior stammered.

"Good," said Brother Barnabas, as steel suddenly slipped into his tone. "I need a place to stay, *with* the acolytes, nothing fancy; my donkey taken to the stables; and some time to clean off the worst of the dust. I'll also need someone to show me around the place while I'm here. I believe that boy will do," he said as he pointed to the boy still standing behind them. "Do you suppose," he added in a tone that made it clear it was not really a question, "that the Abbot could see me alone tonight, after vespers?"

The Prior simply nodded, a look of shock still on his face.

"You have that? Good." Then without another word Barnabas started off towards the Oratory the boy running to catch up.

"B-b-b-Brother?" the Prior managed to stammer out.

"Yes Brother Prior," Barnabas stopped and said in return.

"Uh," the Prior said, not sure how to proceed. "Uh, where are you going now?"

"To your chapel," Barnabas said by way of a reply. "I always like to start my investigations there."

“But, but what about Abbot Silius?” the Prior said.

“Oh, I’m sure he won’t mind,” Barnabas said with a smile. “But if it makes you feel better, you can tell him where I’m going.”

The boy at his side smiled at this, but only when his back was turned to the Prior.

“Oh, there’s one more thing,” Barnabas said before turning to go. “That coin I showed you.”

“Yes,” said the Prior.

“It belongs to the boy.”

“I see,” said the Prior who turned to look at the Subprior. Looking downcast, the subprior reached into his robes and produced the coin. He dropped it into the upraised hand of the now-smiling boy with obvious anger.

As Barnabas walked away the boy followed to one side. Barnabas placed a hand on the boy’s shoulder and calmly asked, “Do you think that one will try and beat the coin out of you once I’m gone?”

The boy looked thoughtfully for a moment, then answered, “Probably.”

“Hum,” said the priest. “Then do you think it will be worth it?”

“Definitely,” the boy replied quickly with another smile.

“Excellent,” said Brother Barnabas. Now show me the entrance to your chapel, and run along and take care of my donkey. Water her well, but only give her a little bit of oats. Wait until you’ve rubbed her down before you feed her properly. You got that?”

The boy nodded.

“One more thing. What’s your name, boy?”

“Artemus, Father.”

“Artemus, huh?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Good. My name is Barnabas. You can call me that or Brother. Got it?”

“But I’m not ordained, Father. I don’t even...”

“It wasn’t a request, Artemus.”

“Yes... Brother.”

“Good. Now go and take care of Hyacinth, and then come and find me in the chapel. There’s some things I need to ask a boy who is quick on his feet.”

“Yes, Brother,” the boy said, and still clutching his coin, he sprinted down to the gate to start cleaning the donkey.

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Abbot Silius stood behind his modest desk in his private chambers. Two young boys, children from the laity by the looks of them, were helping him remove his miter and scapular. He stood with his arms held out wide, while the boys struggled with the extra folds of the large cloth obviously made for a much heavier man. It was just after Vespers and the late afternoon sunlight coming in from the high window slanted lazily across the room, capturing the creases in the older man’s face, and creating a shadow on the back wall which looked like a parody of Christ on the Cross. Brother Barnabas stood with his hands together and waited patiently as Silius directed the boys in the proper way to store the expensive clothing. With the exception of a small gold crucifix upon the west wall, the scapular was the only thing of value in the spartan chamber. The boys, their hands grimy from hard work in the fields, held the cloth as if it were poisonous, yet they followed the soft commands of the Abbot without a word as they went about the unfamiliar task. In the Holy City, the use of two young men in an Abbot’s private chambers would hold a different meaning, but out here it simply meant everyone else of consequence was too busy to do the task.

The Abbot had changed into a plain brown habit which was well worn and patched in several places. With the exception of a simple crucifix sewed upon his left breast, it was identical to the habits worn by Benedictines throughout Christendom. He sent the boys out with a kind word, and sat down heavily in his chair. He indicated another chair off to one side for Brother Barnabas, and then resting his elbows on his desk, he steepled his hands together and looked back at the younger priest.

Silius had piercing grey eyes, hollow cheeks, and thin lips which he pressed together as he measured the man before him. Iron-colored hair spilled out from under the purple skullcap on his head, which was so stained with age that it was

almost white in spots. His hands were thin and callused with age spots and thick veins covering their backs.

“I am trying,” the Abbot said, the first words he directed towards to the younger priest, “to figure out why a Skeptokoi would be sent to my monastery, and for the life of me I cannot.”

Brother Barnabas sat perfectly still, poised calmly on the end of his seat with his hands crossed as if he were in the Abbot’s private chambers merely to discuss the weather. It was an attitude he had learned after many hard investigations, and it always served him well.

The Abbot raised an eyebrow and then crossed his fingers together until his hands were held together under his chin. “Why are you here,” he asked. He spoke softly, but the words were a command not a question.

“I counted 14 errors in just the Gospel of John,” Barnabas replied.

The Abbot looked surprised. “What?”

Barnabas continued calmly. “In your chapel, reading from your bible there. Most of the errors were simple copy errors, but two of them were errors of fact, bordering upon mistakes of doctrine, and one was so severe it almost certainly counts as heresy.”

“Heresy? What...”

“John 14:6, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life’, but it was written, ‘I am the way and the truth, and the *light*’. Substituting the word light for life was one of the errors in doctrine brought on by the Loganians, and you know how that ended...”

The Abbot blanched. The once small sect from Logan had grown in size until it threatened the very church. Only a long and bloody war had stopped their expansion. That war was now almost 150 years in the past, but its effects could still be felt.

“Now look here,” the Abbot said recovering somewhat. “That bible in the chapel is an old one. Left over from the bad times.”

“Never the less,” Barnabas interrupted, “it contains many errors.”

“Of course it does,” the Abbot said, anger creeping into his voice. “The thing is ancient. Why it even predates Vatican III. Of course there are some errors in it.”

“Then why is it out in the open if it can lead your brothers to stray?”

The Abbot’s eye went wide. “Because...” He started to say, then he paused, gathering his thoughts. “It is there as a reminder of our past,” he said deliberately, separating each word from the other as if speaking to a child. “It was the first bible for this monastery, painstakingly put together by the brothers in the dark years after the apocalypse. It was a labor of love. A source of light, in an otherwise dark time. Some brothers even died so we could have *that* bible. That bible is not there to be read from, it is there to be cherished. It is our reminder that when hard times come, the Lord expects us to shoulder our burdens; to lean into the yoke.”

The Abbot stopped. Looking down he rubbed a palm across his face as if washing off a stain. When he looked up again he was calm, with only the briefest of red to his cheeks to mark the passing anger, and a hard glint to his eyes.

“Why are you here?” There was nothing congenial in his tone.

“I cannot tell you,” Brother Barnabas said. Seeing anger flash on the Abbot’s face he continued, “Wait. Before you get upset, your Grace, please understand. It is not because I do not *wish* to tell you. I cannot tell you because I do not know. I cannot speak of that which I do not know.”

The Abbot looked offended, but then his eyes turned hard again. “Then on whose authority are you investigating my Abbotry? Can you tell me *that*?”

“Ah,” Brother Barnabas said as he pulled two letters from his robe. “That is something I can tell you.” As he spoke he set the letters down, one atop the other, on the Abbot’s desk. Both were addressed to the Abbot at St. Ambrose Monastery. One bore the seal of Lucius, the Abbott Primate of the Benedictine order, the other bore the seal of His Holiness Mark the III, successor to Saint Peter the Apostle, and Bishop of Francisco, New Rome.

Brother Barnabas waited patiently while the Abbot opened and read both letters carefully. He spoke again quietly, but only after the Abbot had gone over each letter twice. “Your Grace,” he asked?

The Abbot looked up. “What is it?”

“Do you mind if I start my investigation?”

The Abbot waived his hand absentmindedly. “Yes, yes. Go on,” he said.

Brother Barnabas got up and was almost to the door when the Abbot spoke.

“But these missives,” he said indicating the two letters, “they don’t say a thing about why you are here.”

“No,” the priest said coldly. “They never do.”

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“Do you know the time of your birth?”

Brother Barnabas sat with three others at the Abbot’s table; Brother Nicolaus, Prior Justus, and the Abbot himself. The older Abbot ate his meal in silence without meeting his eye, as if he consumed his food on a loftier plain than the others. The Prior, seated directly across from the Abbot, kept looking suspiciously at Barnabas out of the corner of his eye, but was otherwise silent. It was the pale skinned, narrow faced Nicolaus seated directly across from him who asked the question.

“Which do you mean by *time*, Brother?” Barnabas replied. “The era, the year, the season, the date, the hour, the minute, or the second?”

The Prior couldn’t help himself. “You know all of these?”

“Yes, Brother.”

“Down to the second?”

“Yes, Brother. Down to the second, or as near as I could calculate.”

The prior mulled this last part over as he chewed on a fatty piece of meat.

“Just the year, Brother. That will suffice,” Nicolaus said with a ghost of a smile.

“In that case,” Barnabas said, “I was born in the year 832 of the apocalypse, which is also the year 811 of the New Pope and Bishop of Francisco, the fifth year in the reign of Pope Mark II, 17 years before the reign of Pope Mark III, or the year 2858 by the old Anno Domini calendar. Take your pick.”

The Prior looked aghast. “You were born *all* of those years?”

“Certainly, Prior. Each and every one,” Barnabas said.

“But how can that be...” the prior began, but Brother Nicolaus interrupted.

“They are all the same year, Brother Prior, not separate years as it sounds.

Isn't that right, Brother Barnabas?"

"Yes, Brother," Barnabas said. "You are correct."

"The same year? But how can that be?" demanded the Prior. "The numbers were all different. How can 811 be the same as 17?"

"It is but the nature of counting, Brother," Barnabas said. "For instance, is not the day the 12th of August?"

The Prior nodded after a second.

"So today, is day number 12 of August. It that not so?"

The Prior looked him in the eye, "Yes. Go on."

"Yet this day is also the 225th day since the beginning of the year, is it not?"

"I don't know," said the Prior. "I'd have to check with Brother Halgaious, the chief planter."

"I think its close enough for now," said Brother Nicolaus.

"Then is follows," continued Barnabas, "that today is both day 12 by one way of counting, and day 225 by another."

The Prior stared into space for a moment, his lips moving. Finally he shrugged his shoulders, "If you say so," he said.

"So if a *day* can be numbered by two different ways, both by the month, which is 12, and the year, which is 225, then could not a *year* be numbered by two different ways as well?"

The Prior stared at Brother Barnabas, his eyes hard.

"Why yes," said Nicolaus. "I never thought of it that way before, but I see what you mean."

"So do I," said the Prior, his eyes still boring into Brother Barnabas. "So do I."

"Then," Brother Nicolaus waiving one hand while he thought, "that means this is your thirty-second summer?"

Barnabas turned back to the nervous looking priest. "Exactly," he said. "Very good. This is my thirty-second summer."

"Then may I ask," Brother Nicolaus said, "back in your youth, do you remember any especially profound times of trouble or excitement?"

Barnabas looked thoughtful for a moment. "Yes. Back in... my 16th summer.

There was a girl I was fond of. Gisette, was her name. She was a lovely girl.”

“What happened?”

“She was the daughter of another farmer, a man of great influence. When he discovered my interest in his daughter he had a word with the local priest. When the Church’s tax came that year, my father’s share was tripled. The crops had been poor, so my father was forced to borrow from her father to pay the debt.”

Both the Prior and Nicolaus looked away in embarrassment, but Barnabas continued to smile as if he did not notice their discomfort.

“I see,” said Nicolaus, looking down into his food, “I see. Tell me, have you ever thought you saw visions as if through the eyes of another man, or wished to be called by another name?”

“Visions? No. Nothing like that.”

“One last question,” Nicolaus said carefully. “Have you had any unusual dreams lately?”

“Dreams?” Barnabas said. “I don’t usually remember mine.”

“Usually?” asked Nicolaus.

“Yes, but since you mention it, the one I had last night seemed to differ. You see I dreamed I was opening a package. It was full of peach slices that were somehow preserved within ice, though I could not tell you how. I took a slice and when I ate it, I immediately recalled my grandfather was the one who had preserved the peaches. I could see his hands perfectly, cutting the slices and putting them in the ice.” He paused for a moment as if pulling himself back from a deep memory. “But it was all nonsense.”

The room had gone completely quiet. “Nonsense?” Nicolaus asked with a shaky voice, his eyes squinting at Barnabas. “What makes you say that?”

“The numbers didn’t add up,” Barnabas said as if it was perfectly obvious. “They weren’t right.”

“Numbers? Which numbers?”

“In the dream,” he said emphatically, oblivious to the silence around him. “I specifically remembered that the peach was preserved by my grandfather last year. I don’t know why, but I could taste it. I knew it was from last summer.”

“And...”

“My grandfather’s been dead some 20 years now. I knew that as soon as I woke up.” The others stared at him in confusion. “Don’t you see?” he said with exasperation. “In the dream I remembered him preserving them last year.”

“The peaches?”

“Yes.”

“From last year.”

“Yes! Which was impossible because he was dead then, and had been for 19 years. Do you see what I mean? Nonsense.”

Barnabas looked around. The rest of the brothers were stone silent. Most were looking into their food bowls, but a few openly stared at him. The Prior looked at him as if he were a dangerous insect. Even the Abbot had turned to cast a surprised glance at him. But the eyes of Brother Nicolaus were different. They were bright, aflame. His sallow skin glistening with sweat.

“What?” said Barnabas looking around. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” said the Abbot, a bit too quickly. “It’s nothing.” Furious whispering could be heard around the room.

“Nothing?” said Brother Nicolaus in disbelief. “Don’t you see? It’s a sign. From the prophecy. He’s the one. The duodecimus.”

“What are you talking about,” Barnabas demanded. “What sign? What prophecy?”

“Is nothing,” the Abbott said speaking to Barnabas, but staring directly at Brother Nicolaus. Then he looked at Barnabas and added, “Some of our younger brothers get a bit carried away, you see, and perceive marvelous signs and wonders with every turn of a leaf or braying of a mule. Surely you’ve noticed this before, Brother Barnabas? Brothers whose yearning for miracles and mystical signs exceed their better judgment?”

“Yes, your Grace,” said Barnabas, eyeing the Abbot carefully, “I have.”

“Good. Then it’s settled,” the Abbot said as he looked around the room.

At his glance, the rest of the brothers went back to their food.

“Now where were we?” the Abbot said.

The Prior filled the gap smoothly. “We were discussing why the good brother has been sent to us.” Nicolaus looked surprised if not offended, but the Abbot

kept a straight face.

“Yes,” the Abbot said, steeping his fingers and raising an eyebrow. “Why don’t you inform the brothers as to why you are here; the reason for your investigation?”

Brother Barnabas looked around. Every eye in the room was upon him. He felt a cold shiver run down his spine. He hated speaking in public, and was not well suited for it. But the situation offered him no surprise. Almost every investigation went through a stage where the local leadership sought to blame the messenger. It was one of the tricks the Skestikoi were taught, as it usually meant the investigation was on the right path.

Holding this thought tightly in his head, Barnabas took a sip of thin beer to clear his throat, and spoke to those at the table before him. “I have no idea why I am here, or what I am to investigate.”

Stunned silence filled the room. The Prior’s face turned slightly pale while Brother Nicolaus looked confused. Only the Abbot seemed unsurprised. A corner of his mouth turned up in a smile.

“I’m sorry,” the Prior said, “Did you say you have *no idea* what you are investigating?”

“Yes, Brother Prior.”

“You don’t know why you are here?” Brother Nicolas asked in shock.

“That is correct.”

“No one told you... anything?” the Prior spoke again in disbelief.

“No, Brother. Not a thing. I know this may sound somewhat foolish to those who are not familiar to our methods, but I can assure you this is the way of the Skestikoi. We enter an investigation knowing nothing, seeing everything. Just as a donkey will make a path through a field he travels often, until that path develops into a deep rut, thus does a man’s mind tend to follow in the same thoughts over and over until he becomes accustomed to that one path, and he cannot see any other. The Skestikoi have noticed this, and attempt to train its brothers in discovering the true path; the path without a path.”

“The path without a path?” the Prior interrupted.

“Just so,” said Brother Barnabas. He paused while taking another sip of beer. “Suppose I was told by my superior that this monastery was a house of

prostitution.”

“But we have no women here,” interrupted the Abbot in an astonished voice.

“Very good, your Grace. Exactly. But had I been told that, then what do you suppose I would be doing right now?”

There were stunned looks around the tables, but no one spoke. Then from the back of the room the young voice of Artemus spoke up. “Why he’d be looking up under every habit to see if some of them is wearing skirts.”

Laughter filled the room at the boy’s response. The Prior turned towards the boy, a look of outrage on his face, but Barnabas spoke before the man could respond. “Quite right, young Artemus. That is exactly what I would be doing. And a fine bit of foolishness that would be, wouldn’t it?”

Barnabas spoke as if the idea was a joke. The brothers started murmuring to each other, some of them with sheepish smiles.

“As you can see, brothers,” Barnabas continued, “Sometimes knowing something in advance can be a hindrance, not a help. We Skeptikoi prefer to know nothing going in. In fact it is our motto: Nihil primo, first know nothing.”

“So you don’t have any reason why you were sent?” Nicolaus asked.

“Reasons? Oh I have plenty of reasons. One may say too many reasons.” The room chuckled at this. “The problem is, I don’t know which reason is the proper one. That is my problem. It is not a lack of reasons that keeps me here, but a lack of evidence to support them. Any of them.”

“But you were sent here,” Nicolaus asked, “right Brother?”

“Yes.”

Nicolaus turned to the Abbot, speaking nervously. “Don’t you see, Your Grace. Its the peaches.”

“The what?” Barnabas asked.

“Well, I don’t...” started the Abbot, but the Prior interrupted him with obvious anger.

“What are you suggesting, Brother Nicolaus?”

Unfazed, Nicolaus continued, “Didn’t Abbot Sponza write to New Rome about the peaches every week?”

“Abbot Sponza?” Brother Barnabas asked.

“The previous Abbot,” The Prior whispered.

Abbot Silius looked unsure, “Uh yes. I believe he did.”

“And did he not claim in his letters,” Nicolaus continued, “week after week that the peaches were a miracle?”

The Abbot looked thoughtful. “I suppose he did.”

“Well, what if Brother Barnabas was sent here to investigate his claims? To see if they constitute a miracle? Wouldn’t the church send a Skeptikoi if they wanted to test for divinity?”

“I suppose...” said the Abbot.

“Divinity?” asked Brother Barnabas confused. “In a peach?”

Nicolaus turned to him. “Not in a peach, Brother. At least not a normal peach. The peaches we preserve here are not like any other peach, at least those we have heard of. We travel infrequently. Perhaps you have heard differently?”

Barnabas shook his head. “No, Brother. I have heard nothing of these peaches, or any other, beyond some types being particularly flavorful. Nothing to suggest divinity.” This last part he said almost with disdain.

“I take it,” Barnabas continued, “that these peaches are grown and preserved here? That you do all the work yourselves?”

“Oh yes Brother,” the Abbot said with much less hesitation, his eyes showing a glow. “You see when you eat them, Brother, they have the most miraculous effect. They cause you to...”

“Your Grace!” Brother Barnabas called out. “I pray you forgive the interruption, but please do not tell me more than what I *absolutely* need to know. The less I know, the more accurate I can make my report. I believe that is in *all* of our interests, is it not?”

The Abbot and Brother Nicolaus nodded their heads in agreement, enthusiasm for the venture plain on their faces. The Prior however, looked like he had just bitten into a sour apple.

“So,” Barnabas continued, “I take it I am to eat one of these peaches. The whole peach?”

“Just a slice will do, Brother,” Nicolaus said. “A whole peach is not necessary.”

“Very well then, just a slice. Does the effect happen right away, or sometime later?”

The Prior and Brother Nicolaus looked at each other. “Its not immediate,” the Prior said carefully. “The, um, effect takes time. You’ll know by morning, though. It will be done by then.”

“Done? Very well. Can I have some now. Do I have to preserve them myself?”

Both the Prior and Brother Nicolaus looked alarmed. “Oh no. Not now!” said the Prior. “You have to cleanse your body first for the blessing. The movement of the Holy Spirit requires proof of your faith. You must first confess your sins and receive the host, then you must pray to St. Ambrose for sufficient faith,”—as he said this, all at the table crossed themselves—“for the miracle requires faith to work. And finally, you must fast for at least three days as a proof of your faith. No less.”

“Cleanse my body?” Brother Barnabas said.

“Yes, with three days of fasting,” said the Prior

“Fast to ensure I have enough faith?”

“Yes,” he said with a smile. Brother Nicolaus and the Abbott nodded their heads in agreement.

“No,” Brother Barnabas said.

“I’m sorry,” said the Prior.

“No,” repeated Brother Barnabas more forcefully. “I am a Skeptikoi. We do not believe like you do. We do not have faith. We know, or we do not know. But we *never* believe.”

Everyone was perfectly still. “Forgive me Brother Barnabas,” said the Prior in the echoing silence that followed. “Perhaps I misunder...”

“No. You did not misunderstand, Prior. You assumed. Faith is like that. You believe, and so it must be true. We Skeptikoi are not like this. We do not practice a faith. We know, or we do not know. Nothing else.”

“But the peaches...”

“Bring me a slice. I will eat one tonight, and we will talk about it in the morning.”

“But, Brother,” the Prior said making pains to remain polite, “I don’t believe

you can just come in here and make such demands.”

“You are mistaken,” said Brother Barnabas in a low voice. He turned towards the Abbot. “Your Grace. Correct me if I am wrong, but do I have the authority to make such demands?”

The Abbot looked down into his bowl. He took a deep breath, and held it for a moment. Then let his cheeks puff out from the pressure, and exhaled quickly. “He has the authority,” he said softly.

The room fell still. Nicolaus looked at Brother Barnabas as if he was Judas himself, but then he got up quietly, and left the room. No one else made a sound or so much as moved. Soon the brother emerged with a golden tray. Upon it was a single slice of peach. It was brown, and glistened from its juices. The part of the slice near the pit that was normally red and ragged, was shorn smooth, and almost white. Brother Barnabas took up a fork, and without so much as a prayer, took the slice, and shoved it whole into his mouth. The texture was remarkably firm, and the flavor similar to a normal ripened peach with a subtle taste of honey. Only by the color would Brother Barnabas have know the slice wasn’t prepared today.

The priest looked around the room. All eyes were upon him. He turned his head from side to side, and squinted his eyes. In all ways he seemed to perceive the world as he did just moments before. “Artemus,” he called out. Not waiting for the boy to answer he added, “Note the time.”

The boy called out, “I have no watch, Brother.”

Brother Barnabas looked around the room. “Does anyone have a watch?” His glance fell upon blank faces. He turned to the Abbot. “Your Grace? Is there a watch somewhere in the monastery?”

“Here?” answered the Prior. “A watch? This is not the city, Brother. We don’t own such wealth.”

“Can anyone here read time?” Brother Barnabas said out loud ignoring the Prior. “On a watch?”

More blank stares. Brother Nicolaus looked like he was going to speak, but a glance from the Prior quieted him.

“Very well,” he said. “Artemus, run to my room. You’ll find my watch in my saddle bag. Bring it to me as quickly as you can.”

“Right,” the boy said.

“But why in the world...” spoke the Abbot quietly towards the Prior.”

“To see how long the effect takes to act,” Brother Barnabas answered for him.

“This is important?” the Abbot responded, ignoring his rudeness.

“Its best not to assume,” Barnabas said, “when one can know instead.”

“Oh,” said the Abbot sounding confused. “I see.”

It was plain by the look of confusion on his face that he didn't.

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That night Brother Barnabas dreamed of his sixteenth summer.

He dreamed of a sky the deep shade of blue that you only see on long long days full of hope and life. He dreamed of the air filled with the rich earthy aroma of cut alfalfa, the dusty dry smell of tall growing corn, and the sweet sharp smell of ripening grapes. The dreams came to his mind sharply, etched into his memory with hard emotion.

He remembered the joy that he felt every time he snuck in a few moments that summer to study Descartes or Poincare; the frustration at learning the difference between the ordered purity of the math that he loved, and the human centered chaos called accounting that people paid him to do; and the nervous weightlessness he felt every time he talked to the sweet Gissette with her amber hair, and her bright red lips. But most of all, he remembered the wonderful day that she kissed him on the cheek, and how all along the road home the air seemed so magical, the glowing twilight so pure. He swore he could count the number of leaves on each tree just by glancing at them, the numbers popping into his head as if he could suddenly understand God's own Calculus.

All these things and more played before his sleeping eyes, so that when he awoke it was as if to another world; a cruel, harsh, and bitter world only half as alight as his dreams.

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Thin dawn light cast a warm glow through the small stained glass windows along the east wall of the small chapel as Brother Barnabas entered the room. His cloak making shushing noises as it brushed the well swept floor. The busy brays and calls of a working barn came through the windows on the opposite side. Already many of the brothers were up, and getting ready for prayers at Prime.

Like most chapels, this one had a main altar, with smaller sub-altars to either side for the sisters of life and death, Mary and Muerte. As Barnabas entered the room, he noticed two brothers on their knees at the sub-altar dedicated to Mary. They were heatedly discussing something in harsh whispers, and so engrossed in their conversation that they did not hear Barnabas until he was almost upon them. It was only when he got close that he recognized the brothers in the dim light as the Prior and Brother Nicolaus. At the sound of his footsteps they slowly rose to their feet.

“Good morning Brother Prior; Brother Nicolaus,” Barnabas said. “I hope I’m not interrupting?”

The Prior looked somewhat surprised, but Nicolaus’ face flashed from a frown to unmasked hostility. “Why are you up? What are you doing here?” he spat out in a flat tone.

“In a chapel, Brother? In the morning?” Barnabas observed unperturbed. “You do observe Prime here, do you not?”

“Don’t act the fool, Brother,” Brother Nicolaus said. “You know what I mean. You should be in bed right now...”

“Pray be calm, Brother Nicolaus,” the Prior interrupted placing a gentle hand on the Nicolaus’ arm. “Perhaps the peach did not work for the Sceptikoi. Pity he did not fast for three days like we suggested.” From his smug tone, it was obvious that pity was the last thing the Prior felt for the investigating priest.

“I can assure you, Brother Prior,” Barnabas said calmly, “that the peach worked perfectly.”

“It did?” the Prior replied in surprise.

“He’s lying,” Brother Nicolaus said. “There’s no way he could...”

“...Could be what, Brother?” Barnabas said with genuine interest. “Be awake in time for prayer? At Prime? Surely there’s not a sleeping agent in the peaches

as well, is there?”

“What you should be,” growled Brother Nicolaus, “is showing the proper respect for a miracle from the hand of God.”

“Proper respect?” Barnabas said with genuine surprise. He replayed the conversation in his mind, and it suddenly occurred to him that he had misunderstood Brother Nicolaus’ first comment. “Ah,” he said. “I think I understand now. You think I should still be in bed, correct? Or perhaps on my knees, marveling at the effect of the peach. Is that right?”

Brother Nicolaus looked like he was about to speak, his eyes flashing, but nodded his head instead.

The Prior spoke for him. “Everyone else who has eaten a peach has been carried away by the ecstasy of the Lord. Many are not able to move or speak for days after their first taste, such is the power of the Holy Spirit.”

“Everyone, Brother Prior?” Barnabas asked.

“Yes Brother,” the Prior said with certainty. “Everyone.”

“Hum,” the Skestikoi said. “On their first taste?”

The Prior and Brother Nicolaus exchanged a quick look, then glanced away. Brother Nicolaus was the first to recover. “Surely,” he said changing the subject, “even *you* see that the peach is a miracle; a manifestation of the Holy Spirit. Do you not?”

“The effects of the peach are marvelous, Brother. That much I will concede. Whether they are a manifestation of the Holy Spirit, or some other force, I cannot say. *That* is something that can only be determined by the Holy Father. So while I did find the experience exhilarating, it still falls far short of the ecstasy I feel for the wondrous sacrifice of our Lord Jesus, or the beautiful and elegant marvels of his Father’s creation.”

Brother Nicolaus looked like he was about to speak when the morning bell sounded the hour of Prime.

The Prior made a swift pushing gesture with his hands towards Brother Nicolaus. Then he turned to Barnabas. “Perhaps,” he suggested, “we should continue this discussion at some other time?”

“An excellent idea, Brother Prior,” Barnabas replied. “Perhaps after our evening meal?”

While he was speaking, Barnabas noticed Brother Nicolaus placing a book gently onto a small lectern centered under the statue of the Madonna. Nicolaus must have been holding it the whole time, but Barnabas had not noticed it until now.

“Yes,” the Prior said. “The evening meal would be fine. Shall we find our way to the main chapel?” he said with a sweep of his arm towards the door. Brother Nicolaus set off for the door at a fast pace, and the Prior all but pushed Barnabas to follow. Barnabas made a quick glance over his shoulder and managed to note the title on the cover of the book which Nicolaus had been holding. In large ornate letters it read, “The Book of the Dead”.

As they walked down the hallway to the main chapel Barnabas thought to himself. In all of his studies, he had never heard of such a book.

About an hour before Sext Brother Barnabas asked Artemus to give him a tour of the entire monastery. The boy cheerfully agreed which is how the middle aged priest found himself struggling in a steep path in the foothills on the north side of the grounds. The trail cut back and forth rising rapidly up a barren hillside, and then turned back south to look over the valley. The vantage point was perfect, the high spot giving an excellent view of everything below.

St. Ambrose’s sat in a low valley which was shaped like a kidney bean. A river cut through one side of the valley marking the inner curve of the bean, while barren hills marked its boundaries on the outer edge. Their height also secluded the verdant valley from the rest of the world. Opposite the river in the middle of its bend was a small village. Everything else, between the river and the hills was part of the monastery. The whole valley enclosed some 300 or more acres. It was as beautiful as a bright flower blossoming in the middle of a dark desert. The harsh afternoon sun seemed to make it sparkle and shine.

“Were you born over there?” Barnabas asked, pointing to the village. It was the first thing he said after catching his breath from the hike.

“Yes,” said the boy. “How’d you know?”

“It was a reasonable guess,” said the priest, “based upon everything I’ve seen so far.”

“Oh,” said the boy.

Neither spoke for a while watching the valley below. Several hawks circled in their air to their right, looking for food.

“The river,” Barnabas spoke, “What is it’s name?”

“The Salinas, Brother,” the boy replied.

“Does it flow year round?” Barnabas asked.

“Yes,” the boy said, “but not nearly so great in the winter.”

“But it does flows year round. Interesting. Do you know its source?”

“Its source? I’m sorry, Brother...”

“Do you know where the water comes from?”

The boy looked thoughtful for a moment, then turned to look at the priest. “Is it true,” he said. “What you said about the Skeptikoi?”

“What about the Skeptikoi?”

“That you either know something, or you don’t?”

Brother Barnabas raised an eyebrow. “Yes,” he said. “It's true.”

“Oh,” the boy said thoughtfully. “In that case, I have heard there is a dam further up the river. Behind the dam sits a lake named for Saint Anthony.”

“You’ve heard?”

“Yes, I’ve heard. It’s what I have been told, but I have not seen it for myself, so I cannot truly say if it exists or not.”

Brother Barnabas remained silent looking back down at the valley, thinking. After a moment he replied, “That was well said, Artemus.”

The boy smiled.

“What else can you tell me about this possible dam?”

“Every season a group of brothers leave to visit the dam. They are gone for several days, sometimes a week. Every time they return, the water flow has changed.”

“Every time?” the priest asked.

“Every time I have noticed,” the boy amended after a moment.

“Good,” said the priest. “You catch on quickly.”

After the short hike back to the monastery, Brother Barnabas and Artemus walked down to the canning shed which was in the lower part of the valley near the river. Smoke poured up to the sky as several brothers worked quietly and efficiently cooking and canning the various fruits of the valley's rich harvest. The work was carefully monitored by the watchful eye of the burly subprior. Barnabas stopped to talk to each of the brothers working there, asking them to show him how their jobs were done, and even going so far as to work with each brother until he had a rough idea of the work they did. By the end of the afternoon Barnabas found his hands were caked with sticky fruit residue, and so asked Artemus to point him towards the nearest restroom.

"Rest room?" the boy replied, not understanding the question.

"Sure," said the priest. "Like the sign says over there," he said while pointing to the words over the nearest door. Barnabas had tried the door first, only to find the room within contained a complex drip still and several large jars filled with fruit and a dark liquid. Not a place to wash his hands.

"Sign?" the boy said.

The priest looked surprised. "Yes, like those words there."

"Is that what that says?" the boy said. "Rest room?"

Brother Barnabas looked at the boy for a moment frowning. "Tell me," he said. "Do you not know how to read?"

The boy looked down at his toes, one foot sliding back and forth scraping the ground. "No."

"Look at me boy," Barnabas said. Artemus slowly looked up into his eyes.

"There is no shame in not knowing something boy, only in not learning. Remember that. Now tell me, does anyone else from the village know how to read?"

Artemus shook his head.

"Hum. How about the monastery? Do most of the brothers read here?"

Artemus looked thoughtful for a moment. "I don't know Brother. But the only ones I've ever seen reading were the Abbot, the Prior, and Brother Nicolaus."

"Only them?"

"So far as I know, Brother. I think some of the Undecim might be able to, but I've not seen them do so myself."

“The Undecim?” Brother Barnabas asked.

“Yah. You know, the ones at the middle table.”

“The middle table...” Brother Barnabas suddenly remembered the strange third table from last night. Most monasteries have two dining tables, one for the brothers, and one for the Abbot. St. Ambrose had added a third table in between the Abbot’s table at the brother’s table. “Oh so that’s who they were,” he said. “They are the Undecim?”

“Yes Brother.”

“Hum,” said Brother Barnabas as he scratched his chin in thought. “If they’re called the Undecim, how come there were only ten of them seated at the table last night?”

“Ten?”

“Yes. The name Undecim means eleven in Latin.”

“It does?”

“Yes.”

There was a pause for a moment. “Oh,” the boy said. “Brother Joseph died last week.”

“And he was one of the Undecim?”

“Yes.”

“Hum,” said the priest. “That’s curious. What else can you tell me about the Undecim?”

“Well,” the boy said. “It must be a great group, because they do everything together. Prayers, eating, study, everything. Also they don’t have to work in the canning shed like everyone else.”

“They don’t?” This surprised the priest.

“No,” said the boy.

“What do they do then?”

The boy gave an elaborate shrug of his shoulders. “They have their own room in the Dormitory basement, but I’ve never been there. I’m not allowed.”

“You’re not allowed?”

“No one is. It's for the Undecim only. It says so over their door. At least I

think it says so. I don't know for sure."

"Well," said Brother Barnabas, "why don't you show me where I can wash my hands, and then lets go over there for a look. What do you say to that?"

Artemus smiled. "Really? We can go in there?"

"Really," the priest said.

"Let's go then," the boy said with unmasked enthusiasm.

When they arrived at the north end of the dormitory, Artemus pointed out the sign over the door on the northern most end. It read Apostolorum Revixerint. Barnabas worked it out for a moment and said, "Near as I can tell, it says 'the Apostles who live again'."

"It does? But what does that mean?"

"I don't know exactly, Artemus. We'll have to go find out, won't we?"

Entering the door, they found a large room mostly empty with chairs neatly hanging from pegs along one wall, and eleven small covered shelves on the opposite wall. Ten of the shelves held personal objects; small statues, rosaries, and such. The eleventh shelf lay empty. Brother Barnabas also noticed a twelfth shelf which was separate from the others. It too was empty, but also immaculately clean; completely free of both dust and dirt. None of the rest of the shelves were nearly as clean.

Save for themselves, there was no one else in the room.

A door at the back of the room was partially opened, and revealed a set of stairs going down. Brother Barnabas looked at his watch. It was just after noon, when meant the brothers were probably at Sext. "Come on," he said to the boy, and the two quietly walked down the stairs.

The basement below was large, maybe half the length of the dormitory. Row after row of wooden racks were arrayed against one side. They stuck out into the room with one end against the wall. Their length was about 3 feet short of the width of the room, leaving a hallway of a sort between the other end and the opposite wall. The outward facing end of each rack was neatly labeled with a small tab of paper, one to each side. It was very much like a library, except the book shelves had been replaced by thin wooden slats. Many of these racks held small glass jars, which were of uniform size, but looked to be hand blown.

Each jar was sealed with a tight wax plug, and labeled on the top in ink. A quick glance at a few jars told Brother Barnabas this was the source of the mysterious peaches. Each jar was labeled with a year, starting with the current year, and going backwards with each shelf.

Artemus had a look of wonder on his face and he gently touched each shelf. Barnabas glanced down the racks, and did a quick mental calculation.

“Wow,” said the boy. “That’s a lot of jars.”

“How many, do you think?” Brother Barnabas said.

The boy looked around for a moment, thinking. Then he suddenly slumped like a balloon that had lost its air.

“What is it?” the priest ask.

“Nothing,” the boy mumbled.

“Tell me,” Brother Barnabas demanded. The boy remained silent. Barnabas rested a hand gently on the shoulder. “Do not be afraid,” he said. “I will not punish you for wrong answers.”

The boy looked up. “I don’t know the words for it, Brother.”

“The words?”

“But in numbers the answer is one, zero, two, four, zero.”

Barnabas gave the boy a hard look. “Where did you get that number?” he asked sternly.

The boy stepped back cringing, as if expecting to be beat. “Is that wrong?” he whispered. “I wasn’t sure if each shelf held exactly ten jars across, and four deep, so I had to guess. Is that why you’re mad?”

Brother Barnabas realized he was scowling, and turned his expression more neutral. “I’m not mad,” he said truthfully, “just surprised. That’s all.”

“Surprised? Is that good?”

“It is when you’re correct?”

“I am?”

“Yes. But you still didn’t answer my question. Where did you get that number?”

Artemus shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. I could see it,” he said

frowning while he thought. "It just seemed right."

"I see," Barnabas said turning back to the shelves. After a moment he added, "If each shelf only had five jars across, and four deep, but there were twice as many shelves, how many jars would there be then?"

The boy looked thoughtful for a moment, then frowned again. "It's the same number," he said after a moment's reflection.

"It is indeed," the priest said. "I have another problem for you; there's something wrong in this room. I'm wondering if you see it."

Artemus looked around. "Wrong? Here? What should I be looking for?"

"Come over here then," Barnabas said, "and look at this," he said pointing to a shelf.

"It's empty," Artemus said.

"Exactly," the older priest said. "It's empty."

"I don't understand."

The priest got down closer to the shelf and pointed again. "If this shelf is empty then why are there dust rings on it from where the jars used to be?"

"Hum. I don't know," said the boy. "Maybe they ate them?"

"All at once? That would be a lot of interesting dreams. Maybe the same dream over and over. I don't know, but it doesn't sound right to me. Everybody would be talking about it wouldn't they, yet you didn't know about the peaches until last night. Right?"

"Hum," the boy said. "Then what else did they do with them?"

"What else indeed?" said the priest. "Notice anything else?"

"They stop right at the year 811?"

"Correct again," said the priest. "Does that strike you as strange? They bottle no peaches for hundreds of years, and then suddenly in 811 they do 320 jars?"

The boy looked quizzical. "Not really. It makes sense... uh I mean it doesn't make sense, when you say it that way."

"If you want the truth, son, look to the numbers first. Always remember that."

“Yes Brother,” the boy said. Slowly a hint of a smile grew on his face. “I like that.”

The priest didn't hear him. He was busy glancing around the room and counting to himself. He didn't know why, but somehow the numbers didn't add up, and Barnabas knew that when the numbers didn't add up someone was lying.

They searched the remainder of the room. Past the shelves the room opened up into an area for canning the peaches. Several specific stations had been built for processing the fruit. Their long counters were worn with age, but well built. Each station was marked with a small relief carved into the wooden backplash which depicted a scene from the bible with tiny humans surrounded by trees and mountains. Peach trees were prominent in every carving. Each station was meticulously clean. Even the reliefs appeared to have been recently dusted.

Beyond the canning area, was a door that led to a small storage room. Glass jars and wax plugs were stacked neatly to one side. In the middle of the room lay a low bed, little more of a pallet, with a soft feather mattress on top that judging by the dirt stains had seen many years of use. A small table sat to one side which was marked by years of accumulated wax drippings. No doubt the residue from candles. At the foot of the bed another relief was carved into the footboard. There was only one small window in this room, and in the dim light it was difficult to see the carving, but it looked like it depicted the story of Lazarus rising from the grave. Christ stood in the center, his arms outstretched to either side, the sun radiating behind his head, and his face raised in supplication. Lazarus stood to his right with his arms over his head and looking like he was about to jump up into the air in exhalation. The background proved to be a crowd comprised of many faces, each in religious ecstasy. The faces smoothly blended into a peach tree on either side. The tiny fruits on the tree's branches were carved with more care than the face of Jesus.

On the opposite side of the footboard was another relief. This one depicted Jesus as he received his forty lashes. There were no crowds or peach trees on this side. The wounds on Jesus' back were especially deep.

The final discovery came when they were just about to leave. Barnabas noticed that a smooth path had been compacted into the dirt from years of use. The path lead from the canning area past the shelves, and back to the far wall under the stairway. There it abruptly stopped at a shelf running along the entire back wall. Barnabas could find no sign of a doorway past the self, but he

did notice that the shelf itself was free of dust. Barnabas gave a low whistle, and led Artemus back up the stairs, and out into the late afternoon sun.

They had just left the doorway of the dormitory, its high second story casting a timid shadow on the hot dusty ground, when an older man with wild grey hair and a dirty threadbare habit ran up to Barnabas, and clung to his clothes.

“Thank God you are here Duodecimus,” he said with his eyes large and face ecstatic. “It brings me such joy to see you. I have waited for this day all my lives.”

“You have?” said Barnabas in surprise at the man’s forward behavior.

“Yes. When you find your name in the list, then our number will be complete, and the prophecy will be fulfilled.”

“It will? What prophecy?” Barnabas asked. He noticed that the man smelled like he hadn’t bathed in years. Looking down he saw thin white scars scattered all over the backs of the man’s hands and forearms. They looked like the scars from a whipping. He clung to Barnabas’ habit like a man clinging to the rigging of a ship tossed about in a storm.

“The one spoken by the Sponsa long ago, and resting here in this very place.”

“The Sponsa?” Barnabas said.

“Yes, the Mortiferam Sponsa,” the old man said. “The Lady. The one in white. Read the book, search for your name, then all will be made clear.” And then with shout he jumped up into the air, and skipped off around the building, his long grey hair flying behind him with every step.

Barnabas stood rooted to the spot by the man’s sudden arrival and departure. After a long pause Artemus started to laugh. As if the boy’s laugh broke a spell, Barnabas finally turned and look at the boy. The priest’s face showed equal parts surprise and curiosity.

“Who in the world was that?” he asked.

“Oh him?” the boy said with an easy smile. “That was Brother Thadius, or ol’ Thad as we like to call him.”

“Thadius?”

“Yes. He’s the oldest member of the Undecim, and mad as a rabid dog.”

“I gathered that,” Barnabas said as he brushed off the front of his robe.

“He’s harmless; just a little crazy. They say he’s older than St. Ambrose. That he was here before they built the monastery—even back before the apocalypse. But I don’t believe it.”

Barnabas glanced around in thought, and then looked back at the boy. “Why not?” he asked.

“No one’s that old,” he said. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“Good. Who is they?”

“The people in the village,” he said pointing out across the river to the small town on the opposite bank. “They say he does things, knows things. Things that only someone old could know.”

“Like what?”

“You see that field over there?” the boy said, pointing to a large rectangle of tall corn. “Well, a while back that used to be oranges. Only they died so we had to pull them out. One day we were digging up some broken cement that was part of the irrigation canal when Brother Thadius came running up saying something about a ring. ‘Did you get the ring, did you get the ring?’ he kept shouting. ‘What ring?’ Mr. Thomas asked. Thad looked around for a moment as if he was trying to figure something out. Then he said, ‘Oh. Never mind. You haven’t got there yet.’ Then he grabbed my shovel, and walked over to a part of the canal that wasn’t touched yet. He dug down on one side, and when he got deep enough, pried up the cement. Then he dug under the canal about a foot or so. He stopped there, set down the shovel, and started searching the hole with his bare hands. A minute later he plucked out a ring, neat as you please. He brushed it off, and said, ‘I haven’t seen this thing in years.’ Then he tried to put it on, but it didn’t fit. It was obviously too small, which seemed to make him mad. Then he dropped the ring in his pocket, handed me my shovel, and walked away.”

Barnabas looked thoughtful. “That sounds pretty unusual.”

“That’s nothing,” the boy said, “Later that night Mr. Thomas told me the irrigation canal was two hundred years old, if a day.”

“Two hundred years old? How could he be sure.”

“There was a date on it. In the concrete. Showed me himself on the account that I like numbers and all.”

“A date? What did it say?”

“It was the numbers six, two, and five.”

“Six hundred and twenty-five?” Barnabas said in surprise.

“Is that how you say it?”

“Yes,” said the priest. “That’s a long time ago. Are you sure?”

“Saw it myself,” the boy said with some self-importance. “I never forget a number.”

“Well that’s quite a story,” Barnabas said. He looked up at the sun, and then down at the boy. “It's getting hot. Why don’t we quit for the day, and start up again tomorrow. You think you can find me before Prime?”

“They don’t open the gate that early,” the boy said.

“Okay, then come and get me after the prayer. Okay?”

“Okay,” said the boy. He started to walk away then stopped. Turning around he asked, “Brother Barnabas?”

“Yes Artemus,” the priest said.

“What was that word Brother Thadius used? Sponso?”

“No. Not sponso. Sponsa. Mortiferam Sponsa.”

“What’s that?”

“Its in the old tongue. It means the bride. The deadly bride. Sometimes the bride of death.”

“Hum,” the boy said, looking thoughtful. “What’s that?”

“Not what. Who,” said the priest. “She is the Madonna’s sister, the saint of death.”

“Santa Muerte?”

“The very one.”

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“So, tell me again about your charism,” Barnabas said after the dishes were swept away. Barnabas had noted that the boy Artemus was serving their table tonight, but did not make any eye contact with him over the meal. Now he,

Abbot Silias, Prior Justus, and Brother Nicolaus were sitting around the Abbot's table letting their meal digest. The food had been plain, but healthy, with a rich helping of vegetables and rice, and very little meat. The brothers of St. Ambrose were not vegetarians like some other orders, but were still careful about how much meat they ate.

As Barnabas had foreseen, the food had a mellowing effect upon the men before him, which he intended to use to his own ends. He would allow nothing to get in the way of an investigation. Nothing short of sin. Saving his pointed questions until after the men were "fat and happy" as he liked to say was certainly not a sin. He knew, he had researched the topic thoroughly in seminary. It was simply good technique.

The men before him looked to each other, and by some unspoken signal, the Prior was elected to answer.

"The charism, or "gift", of St. Ambrose," he answered in a tone that showed great familiarity with the topic, "is what we call the reatonelement of God. This doctrine of reatonelement is based upon three clear principles. They are stated in our catechism as:

"What is the source of the atonement of our sins?

"It is found solely through the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ.

"Who is it that benefits from this atonement?

"All who suffer though sin.

"How many times can a man seek atonement for his sins?

"As many times as called by God, so that by their suffering mankind might be drawn closer to Him."

Brother Barnabas pretended to think while taking a sip of beer. In truth, he was well familiar with the topic. He had researched everything he could find on St. Ambrose well before leaving New Rome. He pondered the inside of his mug a bit more before he asked the Prior a question. "As you can imagine, the first two questions of your catechism are familiar to me. It is the last one which leaves me a bit confused."

The other men at the table nodded their heads. This was familiar territory to them.

Each order of the Holy Church had a charism, a statement of purpose; a

reason for being what they are. Most of these, like that of the Skeptikoi fell well within the doctrines of the Holy Church. Others sometimes strayed closer to the edge of doctrine. Rarely, an order's charism fell beyond its bounds. When that happened, a Skeptikoi was summoned, and sent to investigate. On particularly sensitive investigations, the Skeptikoi was sometimes given the white skullcap from the Pope himself. Barnabas thought of the skullcap he kept under his robes tightly fastened to his body and frowned. He pulled out a small piece of paper from his pocket on which he had written down a few initial questions.

"Well, my first question," he said while the men seated with him tracked the paper with their eyes, "is what is the foundation for this last part of your catechism?"

The Prior cleared his throat, his eyes still resting on the piece of paper as if he was trying to read the questions written there. Barnabas had intentionally written the questions in a small tight hand, knowing it would only distract the men even more. Then as if he suddenly remembered where he was, the Prior's eyes snapped up. "Let me start by asking you a question," he said. "Are you familiar with the Church's doctrine concerning the first and second resurrections?"

"I believe so," Barnabas replied. "You mean the teachings of Pius the twenty-third who stated that the first resurrection came just prior to the apocalypse, when all the host of Rome and the believers elsewhere were spirited away before the first bombs fell, and that the second resurrection will be marked by the second coming of our Lord Jesus when He returns to this Earth in all His glory?"

The Prior raised an eyebrow. "Yes he said. That is the doctrine. Since you are aware of this, perhaps you may know that Saint Ambrose himself wrote of these two separate resurrections some twenty-five hundred years ago."

"I was not aware of this, Brother Prior," Barnabas said. "What did he write?"

"Well his prophesy is rather uncanny, considering its age. He said, 'Our Savior has appointed two kinds of resurrection in the Apocalypse. "Blessed is he that hath part in the first resurrection," for such come to grace without the judgment. As for those who do not come to the first, but are reserved unto the second resurrection, these shall be disciplined until their appointed times, between the first and the second resurrection.'

"We believe, as St. Ambrose indicates, and taught by the Church, we are now

between the first and the second resurrections. Therefore the tribulations we are experiencing in this life are a sign of God's discipline as we wait for His return. Thus we are all born of this second resurrection.

"Are you with me so far?"

"That we suffer in this life at the hand of God for our sins and those of others," Barnabas said, "has been established in the Church by both doctrine and scripture for many years. Surely you know this, Brother Prior?"

The Prior nodded, and looked like he was about to speak, but Barnabas cut him off. "The issue is not whether man can seek atonement for his sins, and the sins of others, Brother Prior, but whether he can do so more than once. It is the 'as many times,' part of your catechism which concerns me."

The Prior gave a weak smile revealing dirty grey teeth between his thin lips. "Since we know from the bible," he responded, "that Jesus conquered death..."

"Romans 6:9," Barnabas interrupted.

"Yes," the Prior said with another weak smile. "Uh, we know death is not an obstacle for him. Because of this we know that God's mercy is likewise not limited by death. Even Martin Luther said, 'God forbid that I should limit the time of acquiring faith to the present life. In the depth of the Divine mercy there may be opportunity to win it in the future.'"

"He said that?" Barnabas said, his surprise unfeigned. "Martin Luther?"

"Surprising, isn't it?" the Prior said. "That we'd seek support for our doctrine from of the very lips of a former enemy."

The Abbot and Brother Nicolaus nodded in agreement. It was obvious the order took pride at finding this source. Barnabas thought it spoke well of their reasoning. "Go on, Brother Prior," he said.

The Prior took a sip from his mug then leaned over the table towards Barnabas. Speaking more softly he said, "Not only do we believe that God is *not* limited by death, but we also believe that his salvation is equally *not* limited by death. In other words, we believe we can pray today for our atonement, but that we can pray for the atonement of others in both the past and in the future.

"Does that make sense?"

Barnabas thought for a second, then said, "We know that God is not limited

by death. And I can concede that God's salvation is likewise not limited by death. At least I cannot think of a bible verse that contradicts either."

"Good," the Prior said. "We came to the same conclusion. What we did was take that concept one step further. If we can atone for others in the past and the future, why can we not also pray that others living in the past and the future atone along with us? Can they not also be a part of the atonement of the second resurrection?"

"So this is the 'as many as' part your catechism refers to? The doctrine that souls in the past or the future might also be a part of the second resurrection?"

"Not quite, Brother Barnabas," Brother Nicolaus interrupted. His pale skin took on a waxy glow as he spoke. "There is one more step. We believe that some men are called by God; picked by Him to suffer their lives again and again to atone for the past sins of all.

"Called by God himself?" Barnabas asked.

"Yes, called by God," said Nicolaus.

"Are you sure Brother Nicolaus? That is a pretty big step, and one that sounds like it is dangerously close to reincarnation. Are you sure of this calling? Do you have any biblical support for it?"

"Support, no, Brother Barnabas," Brother Nicolaus said. "At least not from any verses we know of. As you know, the first bible here was old, and perhaps missed some verses when it was reconstructed. But, do we believe in this doctrine? As sure as I am standing here, or the Grace of God is real, yes Brother. We believe it. More than that. We know it to be true."

Brother Nicolaus said this last part with a glowing conviction in his eyes. The same zealotry was also shared by the Prior, judging by the glow mirrored in his eyes. Only the Abbot looked appeared more neutral, and even he was smiling. Barnabas looked around the table, and realized the conversation had somehow stepped over from the boundaries of logic to that of faith. For all practical purposes the investigation was over, at least for this night.

"I see," Barnabas said. Then he faked a large yawn, and turned his attention to the Prior.

"Brother Prior," he said. "Do you suppose you could have one of the boys fetch me a slice of peach? I was thinking it might be nice to revisit a particular year, but then realized it might be better for the investigation if I let Brother

Nicolaus pick a year at random, and then see if the year he picks matches the year I dream.”

Brother Nicolaus looked slightly offended. “Oh the years will match all right. We performed that test hundreds of years ago.”

“You did?” asked Barnabas purposefully keeping his tone light. “For how long, might I ask, have the brothers here been preserving these special peaches?”

Nicolaus cast a furtive look at the other two before replying. “We’re not exactly sure, Brother. The records were poorly kept until recently, and many have been lost.”

“I see,” said Barnabas. “But surely you have the distantly preserved peaches themselves do you not?”

Brother Nicolaus gave a long pause. “Uh, no. The, ah, older peaches are lost to us.”

“Are they?” said Barnabas with feigned concern. “Such a pity. The historical perspective from them would be priceless. Still I suppose even ones thirty years old would fetch a pretty penny on the open market.”

Brother Nicolaus gave a distinct gasp. The Prior’s face held a look of horror, but it was the Abbot who reacted first. “Certainly not!” he interrupted raising to his feet. “We would never profane such a gift of God by selling it. The very idea is repulsive Brother. Shame on you for even suggesting such a thing.”

The room went completely still. Every eye on the Skeptikoi. From the red spots on the Abbot’s cheeks, Barnabas knew he wasn’t just faking his reaction.

Barnabas dropped to his knees at the feet of the Abbot. “Please forgive me, your Grace. I meant no offense.”

The Abbot however was not easily mollified. “You meant no offense, you say, yet you equated the Lord’s work with commerce. You know we are Benedictines, and yet you insult our vow of poverty.”

“Forgive me your Grace for saying so, but even here in this remote location you must have heard that some orders do not venerate the Rule of St. Benedict with the same zeal as your own.”

The Abbot looked down, his anger less evident. “Yes,” he said. “we have heard of such, although it pains me to say so.”

“As it does me, your Grace,” Barnabas said still on his knees. “Seeing other

orders prostitute their faith for material gain is a terrible thing to behold. Still I am the Lord's servant, your Grace, and as such it is my duty to investigate whatever is set before me, not that which I would chose to see."

The Abbot looked down at the kneeling form of Barnabas. "In that we are alike, Brother Barnabas," he said quietly, "we are both men of duty." Then he gave the kneeling brother his hand. Barnabas kissed the Abbot's ring, but did not get up until the Abbot had again seated himself.

"Perhaps, your Grace" Barnabas said to the seated Abbot, "it would be best if I confined myself to my room for the remainder of the evening."

The Abbot looked thoughtful, and then nodded. "That would be a suitable penance," he said, not exactly sure on how much authority he had in these matters. "Perhaps you might pray for the souls of our departed brothers. That their passing might bring us closer to a better understanding of God."

Barnabas bowed. "As your Grace suggests, so it shall be done," he said.

"Good," said the Abbot. "I'll have Brother Nicolaus send you a suitable slice of peach, as soon as I deem you ready," he said. "The year of the peach shall be known only by Brother Nicolaus and myself. In the morning we can discuss if the years do indeed agree. Does that suit your investigation Brother?"

"Thank you, your Grace. Indeed it does. It is better than I deserve."

"Go then, and pray to the past for your forgiveness."

Barnabas bowed to the Abbot one more time, and then held his head low as he quietly left the room. He didn't let the smile show on his face until he got outside the room.

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That night Barnabas dreamed of his twenty-first summer.

He dreamed of his last days in school; of Brother Semperous' careful guidance, and of Brother Granstin's arrogant rants. He dreamed of the way the green landed upon his window sill—reflected light bouncing up from the warm grass below—while he was studying for his final exams; he dreamed of the bright green eyes on the girl Frances who lived down the street and tugged on his heart every time he passed; he dreamed of the creamy tan paper of last the

letter he received from home telling him his father had died, his mother remarried, and his older brother had cut him off from school; finally he dreamed of the day the Skeptikoi took him now penniless into their order, and allowed him to pass through the red painted brotherhood gate and into the mysteries within.

It was the last real dreams of his youth, and his first solid decisions as an adult. It was the summer he went from a carefree youth to a frazzled and worried priest. It was the time when he realized his station in life, and growing poverty left him no choice but to end his dreams of marriage, and take a different vow.

His last dream was of the night he told Frances of his decision, and how she cried onto his shoulder until his shirt was wet with tears.

When he awoke, his eyes were damp with bitter tears shed long ago for a life he no longer cared to remember.

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Artemus found Barnabas in his small room the next morning just after morning prayer at Prime. Already the visiting priest was hard at work writing swiftly and smoothly as he neared the end of his second page. The young boy marveled as much over the expensive vellum as he did the priest's fluency with words. After watching over his shoulder for a few minutes, Artemus was surprised when Barnabas stopped, and turned the paper towards him.

"What do you think?" he said. "Does it look impressive?"

Artemus looked over the paper carefully. "What is it?" he asked.

"A letter. To the Pope."

The boy's eyes got large. "You can write to the Pope?" he said.

"Sure. So can you if you learn to write."

"I can?"

Barnabas actually looked into the boy's eyes for the first time since he had met him. "Yes," he said. "You can. Would you like to learn?"

The boy nodded his head vigorously, as if he didn't trust words alone to

convey the strength of his answer. “Yes. Yes. Yes!” he said.

“Well then,” Barnabas said, “we’ll have to see what we can do about that.” Giving the boy a gentle tousle of his hair, the priest got up from the small desk and picked up a few items from the side of his bed. One of them was a crude map he had sketched out last night.

“Are you ready to get to work, boy?” Barnabas asked.

Artemus pointed towards the letter still sitting on the desk. “But what do we do about this?” he asked.

“Nothing,” said the priest.

“But won’t somebody come and read it?” asked the boy sounding confused.

“That’s precisely the idea,” the priest said.

“Oh,” said the boy. Then he said it again a second time, with more understanding, “Oh.”

“Exactly,” said Barnabas. “Come on. We’ve got a lot of work to do today and not much time.”

With that the priest walked out the door, and down to the end of the dormitory. When he reached the corner he handed Artemus one end of a long string and asked him to hold his end up against the corner.

“What is this?” the boy asked as Barnabas stretched out the string until it reached its length. All along its length, the string was marked with different colors of ink. Barnabas marked on the building where the string ended with a soft piece of lead.

“You’re full of questions this morning,” the priest said distractedly. When he looked up, the boy was staring at him. The priest stared back for a second, then sighed. “Okay, I guess I should tell you if you’re going to help me. This is a measuring tool used to find the lengths of things.”

“Kind of like Brother Halgaious’ rod. The one he uses to measure the ground, and how far apart to put the trees?”

“Something like that. This one is different in that it tells me both large and small measures at the same time. It also tells me fractional measures.”

“Fractional measures?” the boy asked.

Barnabas stopped for a second staring into space. Turning to the boy he said,

“Suppose I gave you two apples, and told you to share them with your family. If there are five people in your family, how much apple would each person get?”

The boy looked at the priest for a moment, then asked, “Do I count myself as one of those five?”

Barnabas raised an eyebrow. “Yes.”

The boy looked thoughtful for a moment, then confused. “That can’t be right,” he said.

“What can’t be right?”

“Well I can see the number four in my mind, but there are only two apples. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“It does make sense. You just haven’t been taught about fractional numbers. Put it this way. What if you took those same apples, and cut each one into ten equal parts. Could you divide them up that way?”

The boy took only a second. “I get the same answer. Four.”

“Exactly. Only this time it is four slices of ten, is it not?”

“Uh, sure,” the boy said then his eyes got big. “Oh, I get it. Cutting up the apple makes the number of slices going to each person bigger. That way the final number is larger than one.”

“Exactly,” said the priest. “By dividing a small number into more pieces, you make that number easier to work with.”

“So is that what we’re doing here, with this measuring string?”

“Yes,” said the priest. “I’m making a map of the buildings here, and I need them to be very accurate. To do this, I need to have very specific measures. Down to the smallest detail.”

“Oh,” said the boy.

Barnabas showed the boy how to read the different colors on the string, and then how to measure a length with it. Before long the boy was not only helping the priest, but making extra suggestions as well. They spent the rest of the morning taking careful measure of the buildings, and jotting down those measures on the priest’s crude map.

During a break in the work, Artemus spoke up while Barnabas sat in the shade doing some quick refinements to his map.

“Can I ask you something, Brother Barnabas?”

Barnabas looked up from his sketch. “You just did,” he said flatly.

The boy looked puzzled for a second, then smiled at the joke. “Not that. It's about something the Prior said.”

“The Prior. What did he say?”

“He called you faithless,” the boy said. “But I know you're a priest, so you have to have faith, at least in God. So how can you be a priest, and still be faithless? That doesn't make sense?”

“Hum,” said Brother Barnabas, setting aside his sketch for a moment. “Being faithless is not the same thing as having no faith. Its more about how we think, than what we believe.”

“For instance, I have seen a great number of hawks over the fields here. When I asked the chief gardener, Brother Halgaious, why this was so he told me it was because the squirrels and gophers are drawn to this area by the monastery's verdant fields. The hawks therefore come here to feed upon them. But when I asked the Abbot the same question he gave me a different answer. He told me the hawks were a manifestation of the Holy Spirit, looking over the monastery, and protecting our souls.

“So my question to you is, which is the truth? Is it either of these explanations, or is it some other explanation we do not yet know?”

“This is the problem with faith. The mind leaps from one thing to the next, filling in the blanks spaces in between with whatever belief comes in handy. This is the nature of belief; it is a filler for things we do not know. It is handy for figuring things out, but it is also our worst danger. For a man, even a man as holy and as respected as his Grace, the Abbot, can hold onto these beliefs, these manifestations of the moment, and cling to them as if they were part of the very gospel themselves.

“It takes a special man, and special training to learn how to *not* believe. To recognize when such faiths have interjected themselves into one's thoughts, and mercilessly prune them like an stunted branch whenever they appear. This is the path of the Skeptikoi; the ones who do not believe. We are taught not to believe anything, we do not know precisely. To have faith in nothing.”

“But that is foolish, Brother,” Artemus replied. “Faith is everywhere. Having no faith would be impossible.”

Barnabas looked at the young man closely. "Hum. You are more correct than you might imagine. Having no faith is an impossible task, but one our Lord has set before us never the less. You have pierced the heart of this in one day. Usually it takes an acolyte several years to find this important flaw."

Barnabas looked back at his paper, and drew a few more lines. Then he did some calculations based on the measures, and frowned. Finally he got up and started walking back towards the dormitory. Artemus was left scrambling to catch up.

The priest started walking along the building, looking carefully at the walls, and the floor. Several times he glanced at his map for reference, and then back at the building. Finally they entered the Abbot's office on the far end. They found the office was empty, the Abbot gone. Quickly Barnabas started searching again along the walls and floor. Artemus pointed to a jar of sliced peaches on the Abbot's desk. Upon seeing it, Barnabas asked the boy to run and look at it. "Tell me," he said, "if there is a number on the stopper different from this one." On his map he had written the number 832.

The boy looked quickly at the jar, and then back at Barnabas. He shook his head. "No," he said. "Its the same."

"I quite thought so," said Barnabas to himself as he went back to searching the walls.

Artemus turned his attention back to the jar. He reached out a hand reverently, almost touching the top, but not quite. "These peaches must be a miracle," he said. "Surely they must be a gift from God. What else could they be? Even a non-believer like you must see this."

Barnabas continued to look around the office. "That may be so," the priest said, "but let me ask you this." He stopped searching to lock eyes with the boy. "What do you suppose would happen if you ate from a peach that was preserved before the year of your birth? What visions would you have then?"

The boy looked startled. "I don't know? I never thought of that."

Barnabas didn't answer. He was staring hard at the back wall. He kept looking at it, turning his head one way, and then another, often glancing down at his map. Finally his eyes got wide, and he smiled. Then he jotted down a few quick measurements on his map, looking at the same space on the wall several times. Finally he said, "Do you see that crucifix on the far wall there?" His hand was pointing to the place he had been staring at.

“Yes,” said the boy.

“Good. Remember it.”

“What for, Brother?” the boy asked, curious.

“Barnabas looked back at the boy as if seeing him for the first time. “Later,” he said brusquely. “I’ll let you know.”

“But...” Artemus started to say, but stopped at a look from the priest. Without a word, the priest turned and left the room, the boy following quickly at his heels.

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The mood over dinner that night was very high. The Abbot and the Prior were all gracious and smiles. Brother Nicolaus was just as glassy-eyed, but even he seemed to feel more at home around the visiting priest. The Abbot called for wine, and everyone had a cup, which certainly improved the general mood of the room.

It was on this note as dinner ended that the Abbot asked Brother Barnabas how long he would remain at the monastery. Barnabas pretended to be thoughtful for a moment, and then casually said, “I think I might be done as early as tomorrow, your Grace.”

The Abbot and the Prior shared a glance, and it proved difficult for them to hide their smiles.

“There is one thing,” Barnabas said, “I would like to do before I leave, with your Grace’s permission.”

The Abbot smiled and waved an open hand for him to continue.

“I really should sample one more piece of peach, just to be sure. Mind you, I’m pretty convinced of its effects, and how the Pope will react to them, but I cannot in good conscience leave my job unfinished, no matter how certain I am of the conclusions.”

“Of course, of course,” the Abbot said kindly. “Please be as thorough as your duty requires. I believe Brother Nicolaus is prepared to fetch you any year you might desire, or would you like for me to pick a year for you instead like last night?”

“Oh thank you, your Grace,” Barnabas said. “Your offer is too kind. However, if it's okay with you I believe I will have my assistant fetch a slice for me this time.”

Brother Nicolaus looked a little surprised at this, but the others were still smiling happily.

“Barnabas leaned back in his chair and called down the room. “Artemus. Artemus.”

Barnabas then turned back to the others at the table. “You do understand,” he said, “that this is just to be absolutely sure the data is as unbiased as possible. For myself I am already satisfied,” he said with a smile, “but when presenting things to the Bishop of New Rome... well you understand.”

The others nodded their heads, assuring their understanding.

Artemus ran up. “Yes, Brother,” the boy said as he stood at Barnabas’ side.

Barnabas turned partially to the boy but spoke as to the whole table. “Do you remember that thing I specifically asked you to remember earlier today?” he said.

The boy looked thoughtful for a moment, and then said, “Yes Brother. I remember.”

“Good. I want you to run over to it, grab it well, and pull on it. Hard. Bring me a peach from the first jar you find. Can you do that?”

Artemus looked nervous. Everyone in the room was staring at him, but he had a glint to his eye, and a smile on his face.

“I don’t know,” said the Prior. “That boy is too young to be trusted with such powerful miracles.”

Barnabas turned to the Prior and smiled, ““Jesus called the children to him and said, Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.””

While the rest of the table was still trying to figure out what was going on, Barnabas gave the boy a slap, and said, “Go on lad.”

Artemus took off like a shot, he was almost to the door when Barnabas called him back.

“One more thing boy,” he yelled over the crowd. Artemus turned at the door,

one foot out. "Make sure you note the year. You got that?"

Artemus smiled, and then ran outside in a flash.

The next few minutes were spent in silence while everyone waited. Artemus returned after a while with a small bowl which he passed to Barnabas quickly. Barnabas looked down in the bowl, holding it close to him. Inside was a slice of peach, but it was dark with age, its edges worn. Everyone in the room seemed anxious to see what the bowl contained. Many started to get up for a better look. Before anyone else could see it, Barnabas raised the bowl to his lips, and downed the slice in one quick motion.

"Delicious," he lied. The peach tasted like wet moldy paper with a hint of honey to it.

Barnabas handed the bowl back to Artemus and asked him to return it. The boy, still winded from his last run, gave another smile, and was off again and out the door.

When Barnabas turned again he noticed the rest of the table was attentive, curious. He grabbed his cup, and stood up.

"I propose a drink. To the glory and power of Almighty God," he said to the room at large.

The brothers raised their cups, gave a cheer, and drained the rest of their wine. Soon the tension in the room was gone, and Barnabas sat down at the Abbot's table with the relative privacy of a happy noisy room. The Abbot and the Prior looked pleased, but Brother Nicolaus had a grey look to his face.

"Something troubling you Brother," Barnabas said quietly to the head of the Eleven.

Nicolaus looked back at him, his face gaunt. "No," he lied. "Not a thing."

"Perhaps we should both go to bed early," Barnabas said, "and get a good night's sleep."

"Perhaps," said Nicolaus. He tried to smile, but his eyes showed nothing but fear.

The brothers at the middle table were still singing when Barnabas walked out into the night.

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That night Barnabas dreamed a very strange dream.

He dreamed he was another man speaking another language. He dreamed he was an old priest living in an old tired church in the midst of a huge city. People were everywhere around him. Light, dark, fat, thin. They whizzed and whirled about in vehicles so delicious and so strange that Barnabas could never quite figure out what they were. He dreamed he had a vision which led him to a strange temple to the skinny one, Santa Muerte. There he was handed a bundle of papers by a woman with dark eyes, and urgency in her voice. "Go, Go!" she cried, tears streaming down her eyes. "The world must know the truth. Someday it must know."

Then he dreamed he was hurtling down a road at night, a strange glow coming out from the front of his wagon, the surface of the road rolling past at an insane rate. The papers from the dark eyed woman were sitting safe on the wide seat next to him. Suddenly there was a bright flash behind him. The whole sky lit up like ten thousand bolts of lightning. Then it did it again, and again. A spark, a flash crossed over the whole sky, and the strange wagon stopped dead, its wonderful glowing eyes gone.

And all the time he could feel only one emotion. "I have to keep going, I have to keep going." It was the urgency of a young man, but in the body of an old one, and he could feel his heart start to give out just as he trudged the last few steps into the valley where the monastery lay.

He awoke with the taste of ashes in his mouth and a certainty that the world was doomed.

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Brother Barnabas lay in the cold dark of the dormitory. He could hear the deep breathing of the sleeping brothers around him as he laid on his bed too despondent to care. His eyes felt full of sand, his body was covered in sweat, and his dinner sat in his stomach like a rock. He could not escape the twisted visions of his dreams. They made his head hurt, his body dizzy. He heard the soft bell for Lauds; it was sometime around 3:00 in the morning. Unable to go back to sleep, he slowly got up, and wandered to the door. He made it two

steps outside the building before he fell to his knees and threw up on the dusty ground.

After vomiting he felt better, like he had expelled a poison from his body. Standing up, Barnabas decided that his already poor condition would not be improved by more sleep. The bright fantastic dreams still reeled in his head as he forced himself to stand upright and walk slowly to the chapel. Had anyone been awake to observe him they would have thought he was drunk by the way he held his head as he weaved back and forth down the halls.

Barnabas found the book he was looking for in the dim moonlight. He sat himself down with it, and carefully placed a candle altar before attempting to light it. In his weakened condition it would be all too easy to set the book or himself on fire trying to light a candle, an irony which caused the priest to smile. He discovered that with the candle up high on the altar, he could sit with his back against it, and still safely read in the dim light.

He opened the book and seeing the first page was struck with a powerful sense of déjà vu. Then he remembered, he had seen this page in his dream. It was sitting on the seat of the strange wagon. A involuntary shiver came over him, as he picked up the book and started to read the thin paper.

Brother Barnabas was still reading when he heard footsteps outside. He quickly doused the candle with damp fingers to minimize the smell, and then ducked down on the back side of the altar. He looked for the ancient book and then realized in his haste he had left it atop the altar. He heard footsteps approaching, preceded by the faint light of a small lamp. He was about to reach up for the book when he heard the whispering.

“Are you sure he’s dead?”

“Brother Nicolaus checked. I don’t know how he found them, but the child must have given a slice from our earliest collection. There’s no telling how old it was. Even if we knew which jar he took it from, none of them are properly dated.”

“And the letter?”

“Gone. We searched his rooms, but found nothing. Perhaps by daylight...”

“Under what pretext? We simply cannot be seen going through his effects, no matter what the cost.”

“I agree.”

The two men stopped in front of the altar. Barnabas slowly pulled in his feet a tiny bit more as the shadow from the faint lamp revealed his toes.

“What about the body?”

“There’s no telling where it might be.”

“Do you think it just got up and walked away?”

“Nicolaus tells me that some of the older slices cause sleepwalking and even lunacy. Perhaps that’s what happened.”

“You’re not sure?”

“With a slice that old, we never are.”

“Shouldn’t we be looking for his body?”

“And explain to the other brothers why we were up this late? No. It will look less suspicious if we wait until morning to search for it.”

“Agreed.”

Barnabas heard the sound of their habits shifting as they knelt down in silent prayer. His heart was pounding, which caused his head to hurt even more. To make matters worse, the dizziness from the dreams still remained. The bright flashing lights from the dream kept punctuating his vision, making it difficult to focus, and leaving purple after-images behind. If he tried to get up now, after sitting for so long, he was sure to fall over. His only chance of escape lay in not being detected. With the Book of the Dead sitting right above him, he doubted his odds were very good.

With a huge effort of will he forced his sluggish mind to focus on a single task; to work out the odds of his discovery. He struggled with the concepts for a moment until the cool comfort of the numbers flooded his thoughts. The fearful symmetry of probability calmed his turbulent mind and stilled his racing heart. He was still working out the odds when he heard the sound of another brother approaching.

“Your Grace. Brother Prior,” a voice spoke out loud, filling the silent chapel.

“Brother Nicolaus,” replied one of the kneeling men. Now that he was not whispering, Barnabas could tell it was the voice of the Prior.

“Do you have any fresh news?” the Abbot asked.

“None, your Grace. We still do not know where the body is.”

“How about the boy?”

“He is safe in our underground room. Tied to a bed until we decide what to do with him.”

“Very well. And the letter?”

“As yet, there is no sign of it, your Grace, but we continue to look.”

Barnabas smiled as he lay tucked into a tight ball behind the altar. The false letter which he had left out yesterday morning to be read by the Abbot, was at the moment stuck fast against his body, held in place by a belt and the Popes own white skullcap. Short of his death, it was not going to be found.

“I still would like to know how this happened,” said the Abbot.

“There’s always been a danger with the peaches, your Grace,” the Prior said.

“Yes, but how did he find the oldest part of your collection?”

“We’re not sure, your Grace,” Nicolaus replied. “I assure you, we took every precaution...”

“Including hiding most of your collection, and lying to your own spiritual leader?” The Abbot spoke softly, but the acid in his voice was unmistakable.

There was a lengthy pause before the Prior replied. “Our intent was not to deceive, your Grace. You must understand this. The older parts of our collection are a dangerous gift. If they fell into the wrong hands they could undo most of our work here. We have struggled to keep them secret, indeed we have struggled to keep all of the peaches a secret for this very reason.”

“Is this why you lied to me then?”

Brother Nicolaus spoke up in the Prior’s defense. “Forgive us your Grace. When you first started here, we had no idea of which direction you would go, and with your predecessor attempting to gain the attention of New Rome...”

“You could not trust me?” The Abbot replied, sounding wounded. “Even this much?”

“Forgive us your Grace,” said the Prior. “The best kept secret in one that no one knows.”

The room was still for a moment, then the Abbot let out a small sigh. “Much as I hate to admit it, what you say holds some truth,” he said.

“I’m glad you see it that way, your Grace,” the Prior continued. “Some of our

brothers have given their lives that this place might remain a secret. The location of our oldest samples is probably our most precious possession, short of the peaches themselves. And as you now understand, it is also the most dangerous. We have worked for countless generations to keep this secret hidden. We simply could not take the risk that its existence might be revealed—let alone its location—to anyone.”

“Well,” the Abbot said in a much lighter tone, “now that I know about it. What else should I know?”

“Your Grace?”

“I’m in this mess as deep as you are by now Brother Prior. More so in the eyes of New Rome, as you know how they think about the responsibilities of leadership. If my neck is going to be stretched for a crime, shouldn’t I at least know why?”

“Are you sure, your Grace?”

“Yes, I believe I am.”

There was a long pause. Then Brother Nicolaus spoke. “Some of this you know, your Grace, and some of this your keen mind has probably already grasped. You already know about the book, and have read its prophecy within. But that is only half of the mystery. The other half can be found in the back of the book. The List of Names.”

“Names?”

“Yes, your Grace. In short, when one of the Apostolorum Revixerint, the Eleven dies, his name and the date of his death is entered into the List of Names. No other evidence of the Eleven can be left after his passing. This is why we insist on a separate graveyard, and why we bury our number without name or number on their marker.”

“To keep the secret?” the Abbot asked.

“No your Grace. To reveal another. You see whenever a new brother comes to the monastery, the first thing we do is attempt to discover the date of his birth. This is the first test.”

“And this is important? His birth?”

“It is crucial, your Grace, as you shall see. Once we have a rough idea of his birth, we immediately check his date against those in the book. Only a brother

whose birth occurs very near the date of a death may be eligible for the next test. No one else. Which is why, we did not offer you a peach, your Grace. None of the Eleven died near the date of your birth.”

“I see,” said the Abbot.

“If he passes the first test, he is given a slice of peach from a memorable year in his past. This is to make sure he is receptive to the miracle.”

“And some aren’t?” the Abbot asked in surprise.

“Not all are affected by the peaches, your Grace, but most are.”

“I see,” said the Abbot. “Pray continue.”

“That leaves us with the third test. If a brother has passed the first two tests he is given a piece of peach dated two years before his birth.”

“Before his birth, you say? What does that do?”

“Nothing, if he is not one of the Eleven. Well not quite nothing. Eating a peach from before one’s birth often proves fatal. But if he is one of the Eleven his dreams will be of living here at the monastery. He will dream of being one of the Eleven.”

“He’ll dream he’s one of the Eleven?”

“It’s more than a dream, your Grace. He will not only know his past name, the one written down in the List of Names, but will also be able to pick out his own grave. He can point to where his past body lies.”

“But surely he is a new man. His soul brand new from God.”

There was a pause. “We’re not so sure, your Grace. You see every one of the Eleven can tell you about their past lives. Each one of us has been here at least four or five times. Brother Thadius can remember over a dozen lives. We can tell you where we lived, how we died, who our friends were, what we ate. Everything.”

“Everything?”

“Every last detail, your Grace. This is how we know some men are called to live their lives over and over again as a sacrifice for the past. This is how we pass on the secret way to preserve the peaches without ever writing it down. This is the hidden truth to our charism. This is the reatonement.”

“Good, Lord, man. Do you know what you are saying!”

“That we are reincarnated? Yes your Grace, we know. We know it to our bones.”

“And is it true? For all mankind?”

“For some, yes? For all men, we cannot say.”

“And how many of you are there? The ones called by God?”

“Eleven, your Grace. Just as the prophecy says: ‘And of that hidden place there will number Eleven, and they will be a powerful force for the purity and grace of God.’”

“Good Lord. No wonder you believe the prophecy so much.”

“Indeed, your Grace. I dare say you are beginning to understand our position.”

“But what was it you said about Barnabas. You called him something.”

A hint of sadness entered his voice, “The duodecimus, your Grace. The twelfth. The prophecy says, ‘And there will be a twelfth member of the Apostolorum Revixerint. And he will usher in a new beginning. Born before the Apocalypse, yet also born in time past then, he will be wiser than the others in the ways of death and of life, and he will finish our work.’ We knew his birthdate did not match the death of any others, and we hoped... Well. You must understand. Each extra life we carry means we also carry extra pain. As life piles on top of life, the pain... well the atonement is a heavy burden to bear. You’ve seen how it affects Brother Thadius. Most of us Eleven are not nearly as strong. To think that we might carry on this burden to yet another life...”

“Well whatever he was, he’s gone now. Our only hope lies in finding that letter. Everything else leaves us looking suspicious, and we can’t have that. Secret or no secret, I don’t think we can stand up against another investigation. If New Rome doesn’t like what it hears, it won’t send a priest again, you can be sure of that. It will send troops.”

There was an extended silence after this as each man must have been locked in his own thoughts. Dawn was starting to brighten up the room, It was only a matter of time until they discovered him, especially in the state he was in. Barnabas wondered how long they might remain when the question was answered for him.

“Well?” said the Abbot.

“Yes, your Grace?” both men stammered.

“What are you two standing here for? Go and find that letter. Need I remind you, our very lives and the ministry depend upon it. Go!”

“But... but. Your Grace?”

“Leave me. I need to pray, to supplicate before our Lord, on our behalf. I will prostrate myself before God until that letter is found. Do not disturb me unless you have found it. I have spoken.”

The two brothers all but ran out of the room. They stopped long enough to fall on their knees and kiss his ring, and thank the Abbot for his kindness, then they were off.

The room grew silent again. The sounds of the monastery coming to life like it did every morning masked the sound of the Abbot breath. For his part Barnabas made as little noise as possible. Then out of the blue the Abbot spoke.

“How much of that did you hear?”

There was another pause. The Abbot spoke again. “The others are gone Brother Barnabas. You are safe to come out.”

Barnabas slowly raised himself from behind the altar. His arms were weak from sitting still for so long, and from the peach slice.

“What gave me away?” he asked as he slowly stood.

“Your toes, Brother. I saw them in the lantern light, before you pulled your feet back behind the altar. But I would have been suspicious of the book laying out in any case. You are lucky the other two are not as observant.”

“Yes,” Barnabas said. He could think of nothing else to add.

“What will you do?”

“Do, your Grace?”

“Do not patronize me, Skeptikoi,” the Abbot said in sudden anger. “You know what I mean.”

“Forgive me, your Grace. You are correct. But in answer to your question, I don’t know.”

The Abbot’s eyes flashed in anger, but before he could speak, Barnabas continued, “Please your Grace, I do not know what I will do, but I think I have a pretty good idea.”

The Abbot sighed. "I thought as much," he said. His anger now gone. "I'm not an expert on such things, but it didn't sound good even to me, and I know these brothers. I can imagine it must sound much worst to an outsider."

"Yes," Barnabas said. "It does. We Skestikoi are trained to not use our emotions when making a decision, but even then I can tell you there are numerous flaws to the Eleven and their prophecy. Off the top of my head I can think of at least a dozen passages which are contradicted by the bible, and at least four or five instances where the prophecy would be considered heresy."

"As bad as that?" the Abbot said.

"There's more," Barnabas replied. Then he reached under his habit, and unfastened the belt around his waist. Then he pulled out the letter, and the Pope's skullcap. When the Abbot saw the white zucchetto with the gold thread, he fell to his knees, and burst into tears.

The two men spent the rest of the day comforting each other, and in praying fervently to God. By the time darkness came, they had worked out a plan.

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Brother Barnabas led his mule Hyacinth up the ravine by hand. She was loaded down with enough food to last them a week. Fortunately their path would take them along the Salinas River for most of their journey so they didn't have to carry water as well. The next few days were going to be dry and hot until the valley dropped down closer to the coast, and the cooler weather prevailed.

Artemus walked ahead of him, arms swinging, head high. He was leaving the only place he had ever known, and he was smiling.

They crested the ridge, and turned back long enough to look out over the valley. A dark column of thick smoke rose slowly into the air, terminating like a fist of God on the dormitory of St. Ambrose. Barnabas had gone down into the basement in the middle of the night, and rescued the boy from the bed he was tied to. He warned the boy not to wake the brothers on their passing, but he didn't need to. The men lay stretched out on their bellies, their backs ripped and slashed bloody by their scourging, their bodies jerking in the dream state of the peaches. This frightened the boy enough that he clung to Barnabas' hand

with an iron grip. He never made a sound, even when the Skeptikoi splashed alcohol all around the room, and on the peaches as well. They were especially quiet when passing through the secret door that led to the Abbot's office, pouring more alcohol on the older jars of peaches, some of them preserved for over 800 years.

The Abbot himself rose up from his cot, one of the older jars half empty at his bedside. "Tell me," he pleaded in a half-drunken state as Barnabas led the boy out of the room, "I have to know. Are you the one? The Duodecimus?"

Barnabas turned and looked at him. Imagining his face in the dark. "Are you?" he asked.

The Abbot laughed. "I never thought of it that way. Am I?"

"Does it matter?" Barnabas said.

"No. I suppose not," the Abbot said softly. "Our duty is still the same, is it not?"

"Yes, your Grace," Barnabas said. "Duty is still the same."

Those words were the last he spoke with the Abbot before he sealed the door to the basement room of the Apostolorum Revixerint from the outside, and set fire to the alcohol.

"What was the fourth letter again?" Artemus asked.

Barnabas turned with a start. The boy was anxious to leave, and the morning was already starting to turn warm.

"It is Dee," he said. "A vertical line with a big curve to the right, or a vertical line with a small curve to the left, depending upon the case."

"So what is the word then that is an 'A' next to a 'D'?"

"Word?"

"I saw it on the jar. The one I took the peach slice from the other night. The one I gave you."

"Oh," Barnabas said. "That's not a word. It's an abbreviation. A-D. Stands for Anno Domini, or in the old tongue, the year of our Lord."

The boy tried the words out several times, feeling the way they twisted on his tongue. "So what does Anno Domini two zero two six mean?" he asked.

Barnabas looked out towards the larger valley. Several hawks were circling, and he could see they had about a two hour hike before they reached the cool shade of the trees.

“Nothing, boy. It’s just a number.”

They stepped off on into the heat, dust following behind them as they walked.