“We better check on the kid,” said Tenacce. “It’s been twenty-four hours and not a peep.”

“Let me make a plate for him. It’s been even longer since he’s eaten.”

Once Salito had gathered some fruit and yogurt and placed them on a tray, she, Tenacce and McCleary made their way to the second floor. Tenacce knocked on the door to the technology room, as they had come to call it.

“No answer,” he said after an interval that would have allowed even the most agile of people inside only enough time to take a step or two. He opened the door forcefully and nearly collided with Danny Tenacce, who was approaching simultaneously with paper in hand.

“We’ve got something,” he said dispassionately.

“Something. As in you got the answer?” Salito inquired.

“Yes.”

“And that’s all you can say?” replied Salito.

“Praise the Lord,” said Father McCleary.

“He didn’t have anything to do with it,” Danny Tenacce shot back.

McCleary’s silence was tantamount to a request for an explanation.

“Your prayers didn’t work. I didn’t decrypt the message by creating a new algorithm.”

“I didn’t pray for you to find a new algorithm.”

“What did you pray for?”

“I prayed that you would pray and take a guess.”

The declaration startled Danny but he recouped quickly. “I’m not sure how the number got there,” he said. “But that’s not proof that it was divine intervention. All I know is that it worked.”

“Hey, sometimes it’s better to be lucky than good,” said Tenacce. “Is that the message ya got in your hand?”

“This is it,” said Danny, pointing to the paper.

“Well don’t keep us in suspense,” urged Salito

“Read your paper, will ya,” Joe Tenacce implored.

Danny Tenacce stood before them and held the paper at eye level like a schoolboy at show and tell then read the words on the paper to the rest of them out loud.

*The disciple became teacher*

*His words she did preach*

*To the many that listened*

*His words they did reach*

*But the text of the teacher*

*Its words remained sealed*

*Solely to those so appointed*

*At the proper time to be revealed*

*To him reading these words*

*Shall the key be exposed*

*Near the grotto of the disciple*

*Whom He loved does it repose*

*Ten mod six, plus six negs east*

*Twelve mod eight negs due north*

*Will thou find the key inhumed*

*Seven mod four legs under the earth*

“Like the message that was on the superficial layer of the same papyrus, the ciphertext was written in this computer language resembling machine language. As I told Jen earlier, the resulting plaintext was also in this machine language. The machine language had to be translated into Hebrew. The result was an amalgam of non-rhyming words in Hebrew, but when the Hebrew is translated into English, it becomes …”

“Another poem,” interjected Tenacce. “Now maybe you can translate it inta police language?”

Danny Tenacce gestured toward McCleary. “Father?”

“The canonical scriptures say nothing of what happened to Mary Magdalene after the resurrection. But there is a tradition handed down through the Brotherhood of Trigh that I believe to be true. After the ascension of Christ, early Christians were persecuted, Mary Magdalene, among them. She and several of her fellow Christians were set adrift in the Mediterranean Sea in a boat without rudder, sails or oars. Guided by Providence, the boat miraculously landed safely on the southern coast of France, in the port of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer. She and her colleagues preached the gospel to the inhabitants of the region, converting many.”

“Of course there are other theories,” said Danny.

“You mean the one about Jesus and Mary Magdelene being’ married and havin’ kids?” Tenacce jeered.

“And the conspiracy theory about the group that sought to save the world by brainwashing twins?”

Danny nodded hesitantly.

“Let’s get on with the poem,” Salito suggested with scorn.

The muscular priest cleared his throat. “The next two lines—‘but the text of the teacher, it’s words remained sealed’—they refer to what we already know: that the book is enciphered. The next four lines indicate that the book will be revealed only to those chosen to receive it, and only at the proper time. This explains why the messages leading to the key critical for deciphering the book were written in computer machine language, which, with deciphering, leads to plaintext machine language that converts to Hebrew, which translates to English. The messages were created for a specific audience in a specific epoch—you, Dr. Tenacce.

“Mary Magdalene spent the last thirty years of her life in a cave in Sainte Baume, a mountain ridge about thirty miles east of Marseille. A number of misguided tales, some purposely misleading, have circulated over the centuries regarding her activities during this phase of her life. The most popular is that she went to the cave to repent for her sins as a prostitute, that she fasted and prayed, being kept alive by angels. The reality is that a group serving Satan, the precursor for The Knights of Templar, were sent to France to obtain the book and eliminate its author. A group called the Cathars, precursor to The Brotherhood of Trigh, protected her. She retired to the grotto for safety. In the grotto, she transformed the book into its final form. It was subsequently brought back to Israel and hidden there. The key to the encrypted book was concealed somewhere near Mary’s grotto in the south of France, where it was composed. Thus the lines ‘near the grotto of the disciple, whom He loved best does it repose.’

“The phrase ‘disciple whom He loved’ is alluded to six times in the Gospel of John, but nowhere else in scripture. This disciple is never mentioned by name and so the exact identity of this disciple is unknown. Most biblical scholars think it’s John, son of Zebedee and brother of James, one of the twelve and the one believed to have written the Gospel of John. However, there are other theories.

“One takes the stance that it’s Mary Magdalene. I find this farfetched. First, the Gospel of John clearly identifies the disciple whom Jesus loved as being male. Second, Mary Magdalene talks to this disciple, so how could it be her. Supporters of this theory point out that at the time that the gospels were being canonized, around the fourth century AD, women were not considered worthy to take leadership roles in government or religion. Thus, they feel that John’s gospel may have been altered to conform to this custom and that the disciple that Jesus loved may actually have been Mary Magdalene. In my opinion, there is no way that a text which is the epitome of truth and inspired by the Holy Spirit would have been altered for such a triviality. The fact is, I don’t believe the reference to ‘the disciple He loved best’ in our riddle is a reference to the Bible at all. I think a more plausible explanation is that it is a reference to some other source or sources, perhaps by a source written by the Cathars, her early protectors and forerunners of The Brotherhood. Also, there are a multitude of other early Christian writings that were not worthy of inclusion in the Bible but that undoubtedly contain some truths about Jesus and His teachings. Several of these make reference to the fact that Jesus had a special relationship with Mary Magdalene. The most poignant example is the Gospel of Philip which flatly states that ‘Christ loved her more than all the disciples.’ In the end, remember that this poem is not scripture. It’s a riddle to help us find the key to the book.”

“We’re a little touchy about this issue, aren’t we?” Salito remarked.

“A little. It should be made clear that while I recognize that there are entities besides the Bible that are holy or correct, as a priest, I hold the Bible up as the standard to which all things should be compared to determine whether or not they are holy or correct. The distinction is important. To identify Mary Magdalene as the disciple whom Jesus loved referred to in the Bible is simply incorrect. However, Jesus could well have held more than one disciple in particularly high regard without that person being named in scripture. The riddle, I believe, is an example of this.”

Danny Tenacce suddenly regretted having suggested that the priest elucidate the meaning of the enigmatic rhyme. “Of course, the contents of the book should shed some light on the ultimate authority of the Bible,” he said.

“I agree. My apologies for the digression. Back to the poem, then. The last four lines are simply instructions on how to find the key, starting from the grotto at Sainte Baume. Dr. Tenacce, you allowed me to expound on the post ascension history of Mary Magdalene. Why don’t you explain the directions to the key.”

“Why thank you, Father,” said Danny Tenacce, unable to smooth the disdainful edge off the utterance. “The Brotherhood used a variety of techniques to encrypt information about location and directions. The poem illustrates two: modular arithmetic and nonstandard units of distance. I’ve talked to you about modular arithmetic previously.”

“Here we go again,” said Tenacce. “Runnin’ around in more circles. The story o’ this case.”

Danny Tenacce chuckled at his father’s insightful sarcasm. “You’ve got it. Circles is the name of the game where The Brotherhood is concerned. In particular, in this poem, 12 mod 8 means divide 12 by 8 and find the remainder: 4. As you may recall, the remainder, 4, *is* 12 mod 8. Likewise, 10 mod 6 means divide 10 by 6. The remainder is 4 so 10 mod 6 is 4. Then the poem says to add 6. 4 + 6 = 10. These are the coefficients, the numbers by which the units of distance must be multiplied to specify how far to travel in a given direction. Now for the units.

“The specification of the units of distance represents a form of substitution cipher. Each letter of the alphabet is assigned a number: 1 for a, 2 for b, 3 for c, all the way up to 26 for z. The number corresponding to the third letter of the name of the unit is subtracted from the number corresponding to the first. Take the absolute value of the answer, absolute value meaning disregard whether the value of the answer has a positive or negative sign before it; just use the number. For example, 5 - 2 = 3 and 2 - 5 = -3 but the absolute value of both is 3. The number corresponding to the middle letter is subtracted from that absolute value to give a new number we’ll call the exponent. The number 10 is raised to the power specified by the exponent. (You know about exponents. Just to remind you, if the exponent is 3, then that means ‘raise 10 to the third power’ which means  which means multiply 10 together 3 times: 10 x 10 x 10 = 1000. Remember, also, that ). The number you get by raising ten to the exponent is the number of meters that constitutes the unit indicated by the three-letter code. As you might expect by now, The Brotherhood used the unit of length, meters, long before the metric system was ‘invented.’

“The poem mentions two types of units: negs and legs. We’ll determine negs first. **N** is the fourteenth letter of the alphabet. **G** is the seventh. 14 - 7 = 7. The absolute value of 7 is 7. **E** is the fifth letter of the alphabet. To get the exponent, we take the absolute value of the difference of the numbers corresponding to first and last letters, in this case 14 (for **N**) minus 7 (for **G**) equals 7, then subtract 5 (which corresponds to E). Thus, the exponent, in this case, is 7 - 5 = 2. Then we raise 10 to the exponent, in this case, 2. 102 means 10 x 10 = 100. The unit negs, thus, represents 100 meters.

Now we’ll work on legs. **L** corresponds to 12. **G** corresponds to 7. 12 -7 = 5. The absolute value of 5 is 5. The middle letter, again, is **E**, which corresponds to 5. So the exponent, in this case, is 5 - 5 = 0. 100 = 1. Therefore, the unit legs represents meters.

“So to find the location of the key, the poem says to travel 10 x 100 = 1000 meters east and 4 x 100 = 400 meters north. Then dig down 7 divided 4 = remainder 3—dig down 3 meters.”

“Obviously, The Brotherhood—or whoever coached them—were capable of much more sophisticated encryption. They used this type of encryption in cases of emergency, like Isaac Peterson did before his demise, although this would’ve been indecipherable encryption at the time The Brotherhood initially employed it.”

“Except to The Knights.”

Tenacce chuckled. “I love the way these riddles—that are a piece o’ cake ta you—follow all the hard work. Kinda like Mary’s throwin’ ya a cookie.”

“According to some theories—advocated by some scholars—those cookies *are* the encryption.”

Tenacce sneered. “What kinda idiots would believe that?”

“You’d be surprised,” Danny replied.

“Well, it seems our direction is now set,” said McCleary. “Literally.”

“So when do we leave for the cave?” Salito inquired. “The morning?”

“No, tonight. To maximize our chance of proceeding undetected. Although the exact location of the key is unknown to them, The Knights undoubtedly have a notion of its general vicinity and certainly have the area well-patrolled.

“But it’s only the key to the book we’re after here,” said Danny Tenacce.

“I don’t think they know that,” said Joe.

“I’m with you, Joe,” said Salito. “These strikes they been launchin’ seem ta be shots in the dark, just hopin’ they’ll find the book or get us ta lead ‘em to it.”

Danny concurred. “Getting it out of us by any means necessary.”

Tenacce hung his head and shook it in self-reproach. “I shoulda thoughta that before I let you decipher that first message. My simple way o’ thinkin. I thought it was just another case.”

“You were just doing what’s been successful for you for over thirty years.”

“We’re just gonna have to figure out how ta solve this thing and get home in one piece,” said Salito.

“Go home to what? I’m sure Princeton frowns on people disappearing for three weeks without any explanation.”

“Not ta mention our little legal problem. Unless Volotti can solve the case ….”

 McCleary allowed the group a moment to absorb and ponder their reality. When he felt it had been satisfactorily comprehended, he addressed them.

“I’ve prepared our team for this eventuality. They can be mobilized in an hour. Shall we meet in the conference room at ten?”

The fatigue made them reluctant but they all nodded their heads in agreement.