

# Pelagia and the Black Monk

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Extract

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## Prologue

### *The Conclusion of the Case of the White Bulldog:*

*The square on to which the windows of the district court looked out was already almost completely empty by this hour in the early evening. Two mongrels were yelping lazily at each other beside a streetlamp, a boy in a cloth jacket and blacked boots was hopping over a puddle on one leg. But from the far end of the square, where it runs into Malaya Kupecheskaya Street, there came the resounding clopping of hooves over cobblestones, the rumbling of wheels and the jingling of harness. This combined noise approached at a spanking pace, and soon it was possible to make out a lathered pair of piebald greys pulling along a sprung carriage. Standing on the box, waving a whip, was a dusty monk in a black cassock that fluttered behind him in the wind, and his head was uncovered, so that his long locks were tousled and tangled, and then it became clear that the forehead of this terrible coachman was covered in blood and his eyes were bulging out of his very head. The small number of people in the street who saw this sight all froze on the spot.*

*Approaching the court building, the monk pulled back on the reins, halting the dashing horses, jumped to the ground and shouted to Pelagia...*

*She turned back quickly towards the bishop. Mitrofanii had not seen the strange monk or heard his shout, but he immediately sensed that something was wrong. He pushed the journalist aside gently but firmly and ...*

## The Appearance of Basilisk

... several long strides brought him to the side the nun. Glancing out of the window and seeing the lathered horses and the dishevelled monk, he knitted his bushy brows sternly.

“He shouted to me: ‘Mother, disaster! He’s here already? Where’s His Reverence?’ Pelagia told the bishop in a low voice.

At the word “disaster” Mitrofanii nodded in satisfaction, as if he had been expecting nothing less from this interminably long day that seemed determined never to end. He beckoned with his finger to the tattered and dusty messenger (the general manner and loud shouting of this monk who had arrived in such a rush from God only knew where left no doubt that he was precisely a messenger, and one bearing bad tidings) – as if to say: Right, come up here and we’ll take a look at you.

With a rapid bow to the bishop that reached almost down to the ground, the monk dropped the reins and dashed into the court building, elbowing aside the public on its way out after the trial. The appearance of this servant of God, with his head uncovered and his forehead scratched and bleeding, was so unusual that people glanced round at him, some in curiosity, others in alarm. The tumultuous discussion of the recently concluded hearing and its remarkable verdict was suddenly broken off. It looked as though some new remarkable Event was in the offing or had even, perhaps, already taken place.

Such is always the way of things in quiet backwaters like our peaceful town of Zavolzhsk: five or ten years of peace and quiet and drowsy torpor, and then suddenly one hurricane blast following another, bending the very bell towers down to ground.

The ominous herald ran up the white marble staircase. On the upper landing, below the scales held aloft by blind-eyed Justice, he hesitated for a moment, uncertain which way to turn, to the right or the left, but immediately spotted the knot of correspondents from Russia's two capital cities and the two figures in black robes, one large and one small, in the far corner of the recreation room: the Reverend Mitrofanii and beside him the sister in spectacles who had been standing in the window.

The monk's massive boots roused a thunderous echo as he dashed across the floor towards the bishop, howling to him from a distance:

"My lord, he's here! Close by already! Coming after me! Huge and black!"

The journalists from St. Petersburg and Moscow, including some genuine luminaries of this profession, who had come to Zavolzhsk for the sensational trial, stared in bewilderment at this wild-looking figure in a cassock.

"Who's coming? Who's black?" His Grace thundered. "Speak clearly. Who are you? Where from?"

"The humble monk Antipa from Ararat," the agitated fellow said with a hasty bow, reaching up to remove his skull-cap, but it wasn't here, he had lost it somewhere. "Basilisk is coming, who else! He himself, our patron! He has come forth from the hermitage. Your Reverence, order the bells to be rung and the icons to be brought out! St. John's prophecy is being fulfilled! 'For lo, I come soon, and bring vengeance with me, to render unto each according to his deeds!' It is the end!" he howled. "The end of everything!"

The big city types didn't seem concerned, they weren't frightened by the news of the end of the world, they just pricked up their ears and moved a little closer to the monk, but the courthouse cleaner, who had already begun pushing his broom along the corridor, froze on the spot when he

heard this terrible cry, dropping his implement of labour and crossing himself hastily.

The herald of the Apocalypse was too anguished and terrified to say anything else coherent – he began shaking all over and tears began coursing down over his stark white face and his beard.

As always in critical situations, His Grace demonstrated a most efficacious decisiveness. Following the ancient precept according to which the best remedy for hysterics is a good hard slap, Mitrofanii gave the sobbing man two resounding blows to the cheeks with his weighty hand, and the monk immediately stopped shaking and howling. His eyes went blank and he hiccupped. Then, building on his success, the bishop seized the messenger by the collar and dragged him towards the nearest door, which led into the court archives. Pelagia gave a pitiful gasp at the sound of the slaps and then trotted after them.

The archivist was just settling down to enjoy some tea following the conclusion of the court session, but the bishop merely glanced at him with one eyebrow raised, and the court official disappeared in a flash. The three ecclesiastics were left alone in the government office.

The bishop sat the sobbing Antipa down on a chair and thrust the barely begun glass of tea under his nose: Take that, drink it. He waited while the monk took a drink with his teeth rattling against the glass, and wetted his constricted throat, then asked impatiently:

“Well, what has happened over there in Ararat? Tell me.”

The correspondents were left facing a locked door. They stood there for a while, repeating the mysterious words “basilisk” and “Ararat” over and over again, and then gradually began to disperse, still in a state of total perplexity. That was natural enough – they were all strangers, people who knew nothing of our Zavolzhian holy

places and legends. Local people would have understood straight away.

However, since our readers may include some outsiders who have never been to the province of Zavolzhie, or might never even have heard of it, before recounting the conversation that ensued in the archive room we will provide several explanations which, while they might appear excessively lengthy, are nonetheless essential to an understanding of the narrative that follows.

Where would be the most appropriate place to start?

Probably with Ararat. Or rather, New Ararat, a famous monastery located in the far north of our extensive but little-populated province. There, on the forested islands amidst the waters of the Blue Lake, which in its dimensions resembles a sea (that is what the simple folk call it, the “Blue Sea”), from ancient times holy monks have taken refuge from the vanity and malice of the world. There have been times when the monastery fell into decline and neglect, so that only a small handful of anchorites were left living in isolated cells and hermitages across the entire archipelago, but it never became completely extinct, not even during the Time of Troubles.

There was one special reason for this tenacious grasp on life, and it goes by the name of “Basilisk’s Hermitage” – but we shall tell you about that a little further on, for the hermitage has always led an existence almost separate from the actual monastery itself. In the nineteenth century, under the influence of the beneficial conditions of our calm and peaceful times, the monastery has blossomed quite magnificently – initially owing to the fashion for northern holy places that became widespread among well-to-do pilgrims, and in very recent times thanks to the efforts of the present archimandrite, Father Vitalii II, who bears that title

because in the last century the monastery had another father superior with the same name.

This exceptional servant of the church has raised New Ararat to unprecedented heights of prosperity. When he was instructed to take charge of the quiet island monastery, the reverend father rightly decided that fashion is a fickle creature and before she could turn the gaze of her favour to some other, no less venerable monastery, he needed to extract as much benefit as possible from the flow of donations.

He began by replacing the former monastery hotel, which was dilapidated and poorly maintained, with a new one, opening a splendid eating house with dishes for the fasts, and organizing boat rides round the waterways and bays, so that the well-to-do visitors would be in no hurry to depart from those blessed shores, which in their beauty, the freshness of their air and natural serenity are in no wise inferior to the finest Finnish resorts. And then, by the skilful expenditure of the surplus funds accumulated in this manner, he set about gradually establishing a complex and highly profitable local economy, with mechanised farms, an icon-painting factory, a fishing flotilla, smoking sheds and even a small hardware factory that produced the finest bolts and catches in the whole of Russia. He also built a water main, and even a railway from the quayside to the warehouses. Some of the more experienced monks complained that life in New Ararat had become unredemptive, but their voices had a fearful ring and their complaint hardly even filtered through to the outside world at all, being drowned out by the cheerful clatter of the intensive construction work. On the main island of Canaan the father superior erected numerous new buildings and churches, which were most impressive in terms of their size and magnificence although, in the opinion of connoisseurs of architecture, they were not always distinguished by

impeccable elegance.

A few years ago a special government commission, led by the minister of trade and industry himself, the highly intelligent Count Litte, came to investigate the New Ararat “economic miracle” and see whether the experience of such successful development could be adopted for the good of the whole empire.

It transpired that it could not. On returning to the capital, the count reported to the sovereign that Father Vitalii was an adept of a dubious economic theory, which assumed that a country’s true wealth does not lie in its natural resources, but in the industry of its population. It was easy for the archimandrite, he had a population of a special kind: monks who performed all the labour as works of penance, and without any salary. When a worker like that stood by his butter-making machine, say, or his metal-working lathe, he wasn’t thinking about his family or his bottle of vodka – he was getting on with saving his soul. That was why the product was so high-quality and cheaper than competitors could even dream of.

This economic model was definitely of no use to the Russian state, but within the limits of the archipelago entrusted to Father Vitalii’s care it brought forth truly remarkable fruits. Indeed, in some respects the monastery, with all its settlements, farmsteads and utilities, resembled a small state – not a fully sovereign one, but one that was at least completely self-governing and was exclusively accountable to the provincial bishop His Grace Mitrofanii.

Under Father Vitalii the number of monks and lay brothers on the islands grew to one and a half thousand, and the population of the central estate which, in addition to the holy brothers, was also home to a large number of hired workers and their entire households, was large enough to rival a district town, especially if you counted the pilgrims who, despite the father superior’s concerns, continued to

stream in – in fact the volume of the stream increased several times over. And now, when the economy of the monastery was firmly established, the reverend father would have been quite happy to manage without the pilgrims, who only distracted him from his urgent work in administering the New Ararat community (for among their numbers there were important and influential people who required special attention), but there was nothing that he could do on that score. People came on foot and by other means from far away, and then they sailed across the immense Blue Lake on the monastery's steamboat, not in order to take a look at the zealous pastor's industrial achievements, but to bend the knee at the holy places of New Ararat, including the foremost among them, Basilisk's Hermitage.

This latter site was actually absolutely inaccessible to visitors, since it was located on a small forested rock that bore the name of Outskirts Island, located directly opposite Canaan – not, however, facing the inhabited side, but the deserted one. The pilgrims who came to New Ararat were in the habit of going down on their knees at the water's edge and gazing reverently at the little island that was the dwelling-place of holy ascetics who prayed for the whole of mankind.

However, let us now speak at greater length, as promised, about Basilisk's Hermitage and its legendary founder.

A long, long time ago, about six hundred or perhaps even eight hundred years ago (the chronology of the "Life of Saint Basilisk" is somewhat confused) a hermit was wandering through a remote forest. All that we know about him for certain is that he was called Basilisk and was no longer young in years, that he had lived a hard life that had been exceptional for its lack of righteousness at the

beginning, but in his declining years he had seen the light of true repentance and been illuminated by the thirst for Salvation. In expiation of his earlier years lived in transgression of the moral law, the monk had taken a vow to walk round the whole world until he found the place where he could serve the Lord best. Sometimes in some devout monastery or, on the contrary, in the midst of godless pagans, it had seemed to him that this was it, the place where the humble servant of God Basilisk should stay, but soon the elderly monk would be overtaken by doubt – what if someone else who stayed there might serve the Almighty equally well? – and, driven by this thought, which was undoubtedly send down to him from on high, the monk had continued on his way, never finding that which he sought.

But then one day, when he parted the thick branches of a fir grove, he saw blue water before him, extending away from the very edge of the forest towards the grey, lowering sky and merging into it. Basilisk had never seen so much water before, and in his simple-mindedness taking this phenomenon for a great miracle from the Lord, he bent his knee and prayed until darkness fell, and then for a long time in the dark.

And the monk had a vision. A fiery finger clove the sky into two halves, so that one became bright and the other became black, and plunged into the waters, setting them heaving and frothing. And a voice of thunder spoke to Basilisk: “Seek no more. Go to the place that has been shown. It is a place that is close to Me. Serve Me not among men and their vanity, but in the midst of silence, and in a year I shall call you to Myself”.

In his salutary simple-heartedness the monk did not even think to doubt the possibility of fulfilling this strange demand to walk into the middle of the sea, but set off straight away, and though the water bowed and sagged beneath his weight, it held him up, which did not greatly

surprise Basilisk, for he recalled Christ walking on the water in the Gospels. He walked on and on, reciting the “Credo” in Russian for a whole night, and for a whole day, and in the evening he began to feel afraid that he would not find the place that the finger had indicated to him in the middle of this watery wilderness. And then the monk was granted a second miracle in a row, something which does not happen often, even in the lives of the saints.

When darkness fell, he saw a small spark of light in the distance and turned towards it, and a short while later he saw that it was a pine tree blazing on the top of a hill, and the hill rose straight up out of the water, and behind it there was more land, lower and broader (that was the present-day Canaan, the main island of the archipelago).

And Basilisk made his home in a cave under the scorched pine. He lived there for a while in total silence and incessant inward prayer, and a year later the Lord did as he had promised and summoned the repentant sinner to Himself and gave him a place beside His Throne. The hermitage and monastery that subsequently sprang up nearby were named New Ararat in commemoration of the mountain that had remained towering alone above the waters when “the depths stirred and the heavens opened” and had saved the lives of the righteous.

The “Life” omits to mention how Basilisk’s successors came to learn about the Miracle of the Finger if the hermit maintained such a rigorous silence, but let us be indulgent towards ancient tradition. We can also make a concession to the scepticism of a rationalistic age, and accept that the holy founder of the hermitage did not reach the islands by walking miraculously across the water, but on some kind of raft or, say, in a hollowed-out log – let it be so. But here is a fact that is indisputable, attested to by many generations and can even, if you so wish, be confirmed by documentary evidence: none of the ascetics who have settled in the

underground cells of Basilisk's Hermitage have ever waited long for God to summon them to Himself. After six months, a year, or at the most a year and a half, all of the select few thirsting for salvation have achieved their heart's desire and, leaving behind a small heap of dusty bones, have soared aloft from the kingdom of earth to that other, Heavenly Kingdom. And it is not at all a matter of a meagre diet or the severity of the climate. There are, after all, many other hermitages where the hermits have performed even greater feats of asceticism and mortified the flesh more fervently, but God has been less quick to grant them his pardon and take them to Himself.

And so the rumour spread that of all places on earth, Basilisk's Hermitage is the very closest to God, located on the very outskirts of the Kingdom of Heaven – which is the reason for its other name of Outskirts Island. On visiting the archipelago for the first time, some people used to think the island was given that name because of its closeness to Canaan, where all the churches stand and the archimandrite lives. But this little island was not close to the archimandrite, it was close to God.

The hermitage has always been inhabited by three especially distinguished monks, and there has never been any greater honour for the monks of New Ararat than to complete their earthly journey in the caves there, on the bones of the righteous men who have preceded them.

Of course, not all of the brotherhood have always thirsted fervently after a rapid ascent to that Other Kingdom, because even among monks there are many to whom the earthly life appears more attractive than the next one. Nonetheless, there has never been any shortage of volunteers, on the contrary there has always been a long queue of avid applicants, and just as there must be in any queue, there have been quarrels, disputes and serious intrigues, so impatient have certain monks been to cross the

narrow channel that separates Canaan from Outskirts Island as soon as possible.

One of the three ascetics was regarded as senior and given the rank of a father superior. He was the only one whom the hermitage rules permitted to open his mouth and speak – but not to say more than six words, of which five had to come directly from the Holy Writ and only one was allowed to be chosen freely: this latter word usually conveyed the basic sense of what was said. They say that in olden times the father superior was not even permitted this much, but after the monastery on Canaan was revived, the hermits no longer wasted time on gathering meagre food to eat – berries, roots and worms (nothing else that was edible had ever been found on Outskirts Island as long as it had existed), but received everything they needed from the monastery. So now the holy hermits whiled away the time carving cedar-wood rosaries, for which the pilgrims paid the monastery good money – sometimes as much as thirty roubles for a single string.

A boat landed on Outskirts Island once a day, to collect the rosaries and deliver necessities. The head of the hermitage came out to meet the boat and recited a brief quotation that contained a request, usually of a practical nature: to deliver certain food supplies or medicines, or shoes, or a warm blanket. Let us assume that the father superior said: “Unto him he gave *a blanket*” or “Let there be brought *pear-water*”. The beginnings of these utterances are taken from the Book of Genesis, where Isaac addresses his son Esau, and the final word is added to express what is urgently needed. The boatman remembered what had been said and conveyed it word for word to the father steward and the father cellarer, and they tried to penetrate its meaning – sometimes unsuccessfully. Take, for instance, the aforementioned “pear-water”. They say that one day the hermitage’s father superior indicated one of the other monks

with his staff and declared darkly: "All his innards poured forth". The senior monks leafed through the Holy Writ for a long time and eventually found these strange words in "The Acts of the Apostles", in the passage describing the suicide of the contemptible Judas, and were greatly alarmed, thinking that the ascetic must have committed the very worst of mortal sins and laid hands on himself. For three days they tolled the bells, observed the strictest possible fast and offered up prayers to be purged of the pollution of sin, but then it turned out that the venerable monk had simply suffered a bout of diarrhoea and the father superior had been asking for him to be sent some pear liquor.

When the senior hermit told the boatman: "Thou hast released Thy servant", it meant that one of the hermits had been admitted into the presence of the Lord, and then someone would be chosen from the queue to fill the vacancy that had become available. Sometimes the fateful words were not spoken by the father superior, but by one of the other two unspeaking brothers. In that way the monastery learned that the former elder had been summoned to his Bright Dwelling in heaven and from henceforth the hermitage had a new steward.

On one occasion, about a hundred years ago, a bear that had swum from the furthest islands fell on one of the ascetics and began tearing the unfortunate soul's flesh. He began crying out, "Brothers! Brothers!" The other two came running up and drove the beast away with their staffs, but after that they refused to live with the man who had broken the vow of silence and sent him away to the monastery, as a result of which the exile fell into a mournful state and soon died, without ever opening his mouth again, but whether he was admitted into the Radiant Sight of the Lord or is now dwelling among the sinful souls, no one can say.

What else can be said about the hermits? They wore black vestments which took the form of a coarsely woven

sack, belted round with string. The cowl that the ascetics wore was narrow and pulled down over the entire face, with the edges sewn together in a sign of their total isolation from worldly vanity. Two holes were made in this pointed hood for the eyes. If the pilgrims praying on the shore of Canaan happened to see one of the holy ascetics on the little island (which happened extremely rarely and was regarded as an exceptional piece of luck), the sight that met their observant eyes was of a kind of black sack slowly making meandering between the mossy boulders – as if it were not a man at all, but some kind of disembodied shadow.

And now that we have told you everything about New Ararat and the hermitage and Saint Basilisk, it is time to return to the courthouse archive room, where His Grace Mitrofanii has already begun interrogating the New Arbat monk Antipa.

“Something’s not right over in the hermitage, our people have been saying so for a long time.” (These were the words with which Brother Antipa began his incredible story after he had calmed down somewhat, thanks to the slapping and the tea.) “At Transfiguration, when it was nearly night, Agapii the novice went out on to the spit to wash the senior brothers’ underwear. Suddenly he saw something that looked like a kind of shadow on the water near Outskirts Island. Well, what does a shadow mean, you can see all sorts of things when it’s getting dark. Agapii just crossed himself and carried on rinsing out the smalls. But then he thought he heard a quiet sound above the water. He looked up, and Holy Mother of God! There was a black shadow hanging above the waves without seeming to touch them, and he could hear words, but not clearly. All Agapii could make out was: “I curse” and “Basilisk”, but that was more than enough for him. He abandoned the things he’d been

washing, ran back to the brothers' cells as fast as his legs would carry him and started shouting, saying that Basilisk had returned, full of wrath, and he was cursing everyone.

“Agapii’s a foolish boy, he hasn’t been at Ararat for long, so no one believed him, and for the underclothes he’d left behind, that were washed away by the waves, the father assistant healer gave his ears a good pulling. But after that the dark shadow began appearing to some of the other brothers: first to Father Ilarii, a most venerable and restrained senior monk, then to Brother Melchisedek, and after that to Brother Diamid. Every time at night, when there was a moon. Everybody heard different words: some heard a curse, some heard an admonition, and some couldn’t make anything out at all – it depended on which way the wind was blowing – but they all saw the same thing, and they kissed the icon in front of Revered Father Vitalii to swear to it: someone dressed in black vestments down to his heels and a sharp-pointed cowl, like the monks on the island wear, floating above the waves, speaking words and raising his finger threateningly.

“After making enquiries about the miraculous events, the archimandrite scolded the brothers roundly. He said, I know you whisperers, one fool blurts out something and the others are only too happy to ring the bells and spread the news. It’s true what they say, monk’s are worse tittle-tattles than gossip woman. And he rebuked them in all sorts of other ways, and then strictly forbade anyone to go after dark to the side of Canaan where the Lenten Spit stretches out towards Outskirts Island.”

His Grace interrupted the monk’s story at this point:

“Yes, I remember. Father Vitalii wrote to me about the stupid rumours and complained about the monks’ weak-wittedness. In his opinion, it comes from idleness and inactivity, and so he asked my blessing to involve the entire brotherhood up to the rank of hieromonk in work useful to

the community. I gave my blessing.”

Sister Pelagia took advantage of the break the in story to ask quickly:

“Tell me, brother, approximately how many sazhen is it from the place where Basilisk has been seen to Outskirts Island? And does the spit stretch out far into the water? And another thing: where exactly was the shadow floating – right beside the hermitage or some distance away from it?”

Antipa blinked and gaped at this highly inquisitive nun, but he answered the questions:

“From the spit to Outskirts Island would be about fifty sazhen. And as for our patron, before me the others only saw him in the distance, they couldn’t make him out clearly from our shore. But Basilisk came up really close to me, about from here to that picture.”

And he pointed to a photographic portrait of the Governor of Zavolzhie on the opposite wall, which was about fifteen paces away.

“Not just ‘some kind of shadow’, but Saint Basilisk himself?” the bishop roared at the monk in a thunderous voice, and clutched his own beard in his fist, which was the way he expressed his mounting irritation. “Vitalii’s right! You monks are worse than market women!”

Antipa cringed at these terrible words, pulling his head down into his shoulders, and was unable to carry on speaking, so that Pelagia was obliged to come to his assistance. She straightened her steel-rimmed spectacles, tucked away a rebellious lock of ginger hair under her vernicle and said reproachfully:

“Your Grace, you’re always talking about the harmfulness of hasty conclusions. Why not listen to the holy father without interrupting?”

That made Antipa even more frightened, he was certain that such insolence would make the prelate absolutely furious, but Mitrofanii did not grow angry with

the sister and the glint of fury in his eyes faded. He waved his hand at the monk.

“Go on. But mind, no lies now.”

And so the story was continued, although its telling was somewhat burdened by the lengthy excuses that the terrified Antipa felt obliged to include.

“I’ll tell you why I disobeyed the archimandrite’s order. It’s my calling to work as a herbalist and treat the brothers who think it a sin to visit a secular doctor. And you know the way it is with us monastery herbalists – every herb has to be gathered on the day of a special saint. Lenten Spit, opposite the hermitage, has an area where more herbs grow than anywhere else on the whole of Canaan. Hard-wort, good for overindulgence in wine grows there under the patronage of Saint Vonifatii; and there’s flock-weed, good for lascivious passion, under the patronage of holy Saint Fomaida; and pouch-weed, good for protecting against evil enchantment, under the patronage of Saint Kiprian, and many other healing plants. Because of the prohibition I’d already failed to gather joint-weed or gem-weed, which have to be pulled with the night dew still on them. And on holy Saint Eufimia’s day – she guards against the shaking sickness – the late whisper-wort flowers, and it can only be gathered on a single night in the whole year. How could I miss it? And so I disobeyed.

“As soon as all the brothers had gone off to sleep I crept out into the yard and past the fence and across the open field to the Farewell Chapel, where the hermits are locked up before they’re put in the hermitage – the Lenten Spit is close by there. At first I was afraid and I kept crossing myself and looking around, but then it passed and I felt braver. Late whisper-wort is hard to find, it takes practise and a lot of effort. It was dark, of course, but I had an oil lamp with me. I covered one side of it with a rag so that no one would see it. I was crawling along on my hands

and knees, pulling off the flowers, and I'd forgotten completely about the archimandrite and Saint Basilisk. I reached the very edge of the bank of earth, after that there was nothing but water and a few rocks sticking up. I was just going to turn back. Suddenly I heard it, out of the darkness ..."

The monk turned pale at the terrible memory, his breath came faster and his teeth started chattering, and Pelagia poured him some boiled water from the samovar.

"Thank you, little sister ... Suddenly this voice came out of the darkness, quiet but penetrating, and I could hear every word clearly: 'Go. Tell everyone.' I turned towards the lake, and I was so terrified that I dropped the lamp and my bag for collecting herbs. I saw a vague, thin figure just above the surface of the water, as if someone was standing on a rock. Only there weren't any rocks there. Suddenly ... suddenly there was an unearthly glow, bright, a lot brighter than the glow from the gas lamps that shine in our streets in New Ararat. And then he appeared before me perfectly clearly. A black monk in a cassock, with light pouring out from behind his back, standing right there on the water – the small waves were splashing under his feet. 'Go,' he said. 'Tell them. It shall be cursed.' He spoke and pointed to Outskirts Island with his finger. And then he took a step towards me right across the water – and then another, and another. I screamed and waved my hands in the air, I turned and ran as fast as I could ..."

The monk began sobbing and wiped his nose with his sleeve. Pelagia sighed and patted the poor soul on the head, and at that Antipa went completely to pieces.

"I ran to the father archimandrite, and he only swore crudely me – he didn't believe me," the monk complained. "He locked me in the punishment cell, on bread and water. I was in there for four days, shaking and praying the whole day long, my insides all shrivelled up. When I came out I

was staggering. And there was a new work of penance waiting for me from the father superior: I had to take a boat from Canaan to Ukatai, the most distant of the islands, and live there from then on, at the viper nursery.”

“Why is there a viper nursery?” Mitrofanii asked in amazement.

“The archimandrite’s doctor, Donat Savvich Korovin, thought of it. A man with a cunning mind, His Reverence listens to him. He said the Germans are paying good money for viper venom nowadays, so let’s breed the snakes. We squeeze the venom out of their repulsive jaws and send it off to the land of Germany. Ugh!” said Antipa, spitting angrily and crossing his mouth in order not to be defiled, and then he reached under his cassock with his hand. “Only the most experienced and godly-wise of the senior monks met together in secret and told me not to go to Ukatai but to flee from Ararat without permission and come to Your Grace and tell you everything that I had seen and heard. And they gave me a letter to bring with me. Here it is.”

The bishop took the grey sheet of paper with a frown, set his pince-nez on his nose and began to read. Pelagia peeped over his shoulder without standing on ceremony.

Our most Reverend and Just Lord!

We, the undernamed monks of the New Ararat Communal Monastery, fall at Your Grace’s feet in humility, imploring you in your great wisdom not to turn your archpastoral wrath upon us for our wilfulness and audaciousness. If we have dared to disobey our most reverend archimandrite, then it is not out of obstinacy, but only out of the fear of God and the zeal to serve him. The labour of this earthly life is but a fleeting dream, and men are subject to empty fancies, but everything that Brother Antipa will relate to Your Grace is the absolute truth, for he is a monk

known among us as a truthful and generous-hearted brother who is not inclined to vain dreaming. And also all of us who have signed this letter have seen the same thing as he did, although not as closely.

Father Vitalii has hardened his heart against us and will not listen to us, but meanwhile there is confusion and vacillation among the brothers, and we are also afraid: what can this oppressive sign mean? Why does Saint Basilisk, the protector of this glorious monastery, raise his finger in threat and lay a curse on his own most holy hermitage? And the words “it shall be cursed” – what do they mean? Were they spoken of the hermitage, of the monastery, or perhaps with a wider meaning of which we of little wit are afraid even to think? Only to Your Grace is there granted the possibility of expounding these terrible visions. Therefore we implore you, most just lord, do not order us or Brother Antipa to be punished, but pour forth on this terrible event the light of your wisdom.

Imploring your holy prayers and bowing low before you, we remain your unworthy brothers in prayer and your sinful servants.

Hieromonk Ilarii  
Hieromonk Melchisedek  
Monk Diomid

“Father Ilarii wrote it,” Antipa explained respectfully. “A very learned man, an academic. If he had wanted, he could have been a father superior or someone even higher, but instead of that he works to save his soul with us and dreams of getting to Basilisk’s hermitage, he’s the first in the queue. And now such a bitter disappointment for him...”

“I know Ilarii,” Mitrofanii said with a nod, examining the request. “I remember him. Not stupid, with sincere faith,