

Jesus' teaching has impacted global cultures for centuries. But our understanding of his thinking is based on writings penned more than thirty years after his death. What if we discovered letters written by Jesus of Nazareth?

The Epistles of Jesus

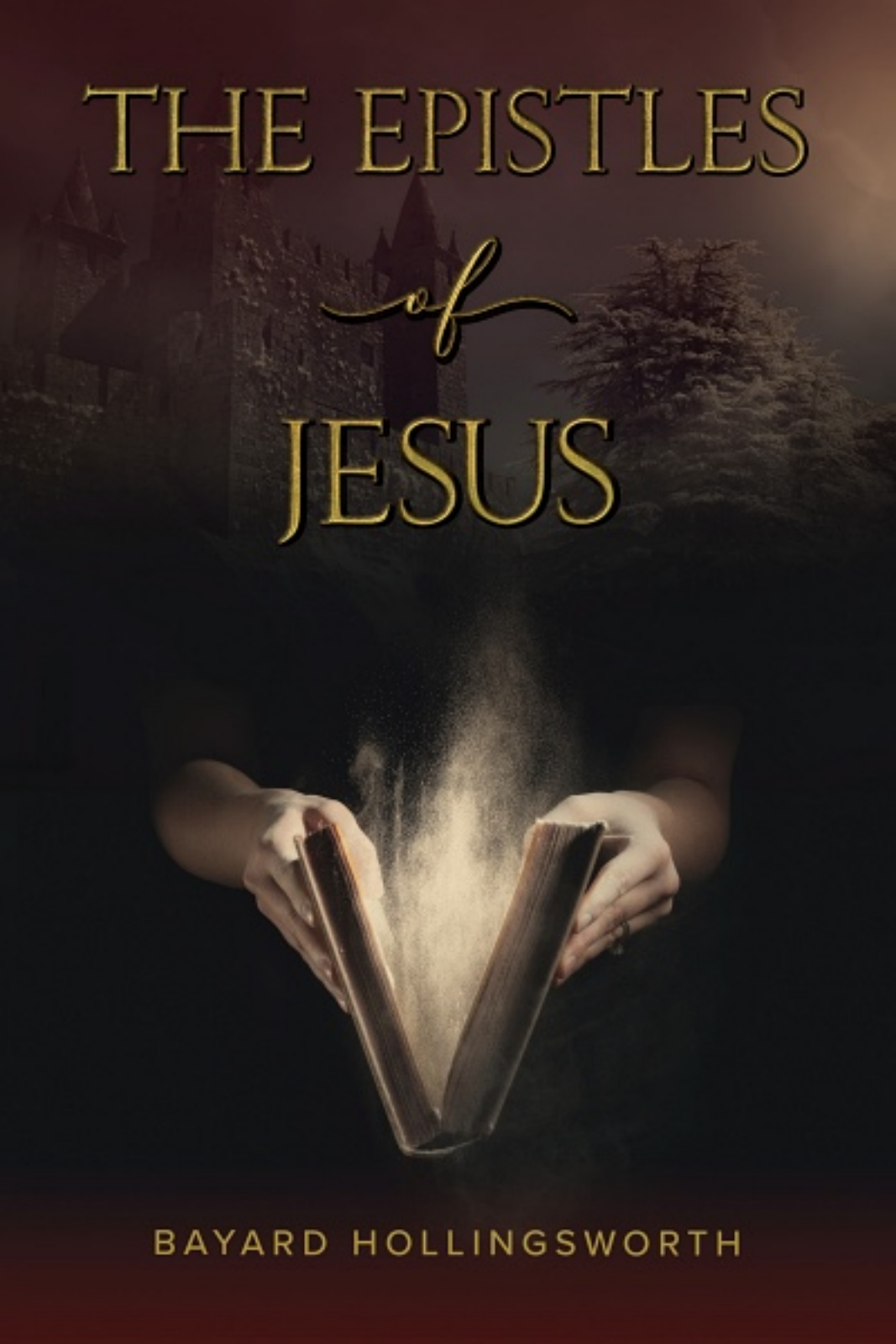
By Bayard Hollingsworth

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THE EPISTLES
of
JESUS

A person's hands are shown holding an open book, from which a bright, ethereal light or dust-like glow emanates, forming a V-shape. The background is dark, featuring a silhouette of a castle with spires and a large tree on the right side.

BAYARD HOLLINGSWORTH

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Prologue – Bezier, France

1209 A.D.

The dim glow of dawn struggled to illuminate the edge of the sodden field where knights commanded by Arnaud Amalric, Abbot of Citeaux in Burgundy, and the official Legate of Pope Innocent III were arrayed along the tree line, virtually invisible in the thick morning mist. The Abbot had come to Bezier to execute his ostensible mission - to eradicate the Albigensian heresy of the Cathars from the Languedoc. The July morning was warm, and the air was freighted with the rich aromas of flowers, crushed grass, manure, damp earth, and woodsmoke. Absent were the usual morning sounds of birds, insects, or even conversation among the mounted force. The only disturbances were the chuffing and nervous stamping of the skillfully restrained warhorses and the sporadic shouting of the foot soldiers nearer the town.

Unlike the disorganized force of mercenaries preceding them, the knights were an impressive and disciplined group. Armored in chain mail and heavy helms, the cadre bristled with long swords and lances, their squires carrying extra weaponry and their families' crests. They had surrounded the city days earlier, their siege engines pummeling the main gate. Today was the day the heretics would meet their fate. Periodically their scouts captured messengers or townspeople attempting to escape. These unfortunate captives were mercilessly interrogated and dispatched. The knights and their coterie awaited the order to attack with anxious enthusiasm. The force's banner, displaying their crucified Lord's cross, hung limply in the still, damp air. No breeze disturbed it.

A forward surge in the line of foot soldiers on the far side of the meadow caught Amalric's eye. He leaned forward in the saddle, his gaze straining to

penetrate the mist. He watched in horror as the mercenaries to the fore broke ranks and began running toward the heavily damaged gate yelling wildly, wielding torches, brandishing such weapons as they possessed. Amalric bellowed his instructions, orders which carried the direct authority of the Pope in Rome. "Stop those men! Anyone who breaks ranks will be executed!"

Four knights whipped their horses and tore away from the line to execute the Abbot's order, their chances of success limited. Amalric watched them depart, suspecting that the priests' promises of salvation and the temptations of the spoils of the coming sack had motivated the routiers to eschew the chain of command and commence the slaughter and pillage. Such enthusiasm was not entirely inappropriate since the Cathars had confronted the Papal Legate with determined defiance. But Amalric had hoped to avoid such an outcome for reasons of his own. He was incensed at what he now witnessed, worried that his critical task was becoming impossible to accomplish. The mercenaries' lack of discipline put his entire mission at risk, the full extent of which only he and Pope Innocent were aware.

One of the four riders recently dispatched returned up the hill, reining his mount around at the last moment, scattering mud and stones as his horse slid to a stop only yards from Amalric. "My Lord Abbot! The priests among the commoners have exhorted them to take the town! We have lost control, and they are attacking the city!"

"Order them to pull back on pain of death, for the love of Jesus Christ!"

"My Lord, I will go, but I fear it's too late! Many inside the walls are already put to the sword!" With that, the messenger yanked the reins and lashed his mount back down the hill, horse and rider already sweating liberally in the early morning humidity from the weight of their armor. Even at this distance, Amalric could hear the shrill cries of the townspeople.

Amalric sent his commanders and sergeants to gain control of the mercenaries. Once inside the walls, his force occupied the main square, but the worst of the killing had already happened. From his saddle, Amalric sweated copiously in the midday heat and surveyed the slaughter. Portions of the town burned vigorously, and bodies were strewn in every direction, indiscriminate killing the rule of the day. The smells of smoke and death infused the air. The Abbot, accompanied by his guard of six mounted knights, turned his attention to several organized rows of dirty, poorly attired men and summoned his senior commander. “Are these the ones who broke ranks this morning to gain loot for themselves?”

“Yes, my Lord Abbot. And the priests who instructed them to take the town are among them. I have ordered them separated from the others. The stolen items are there on the ground in front of each of them. We have a list of names.” The motley collection of looted goods was unimpressive, clearly valueless.

The value of the spoils, though, made not the slightest difference to Amalric. “Execute every one of these men. Place their heads on pikes outside the city walls. Every mercenary and the remaining priests must look at each face. I will not tolerate a further lack of discipline among the routiers,” Amalric ordered.

To make his point, Amalric signaled one of the knights of his escort. The knight’s longsword hissed from its scabbard as he dismounted and strode purposefully to the first man in the line of guilty mercenaries. At his feet lay a tin serving plate, his only reward for participating in the city’s unauthorized sack. Without hesitation, the knight’s sword whistled swiftly and mercilessly toward its target. The man’s head seemed to waiver, his mouth dropping open. The severed head toppled from his torso, landing solidly in the cheap dinner plate, its rounded edge restraining it from rolling away. The headless body collapsed into a heap at the knight’s feet, blood draining liberally over the cobbles. The armored knight casually grounded the tip of his bloodied longsword, awaiting further orders.

Amalric turned away from the carnage as if bored, the horrible deed in no way noteworthy. “Has the town been thoroughly searched for all incriminating documents of these heretics?”

“Yes, my Lord Abbot! And a reward has been offered for all such in the city. We have recovered many parchments and books, but many others were burned as the routiers sacked the larger buildings and houses first.”

“And where pray tell is Raymond Roger Trencavel, if he is not here in this square?”

“We considered it advantageous to keep him separated from the townspeople. The Viscount is in custody nearby, my Lord Abbot. Shall I summon him?”

“No. Take me to him. And well done, Commander,” Amalric replied.

In a small chamber in a heavily guarded warehouse away from the town square, Viscount Raymond Roger Trencavel of Carcassonne stood to his full height to confront the Burgundian Abbot as he entered the hewn stone chamber. The two men were acquainted and viscerally despised each other.

“How are things in the north, Arnaud?” Trencavel asked, his disrespect evident. He deeply resented external elements’ intrusion, particularly those under Italian control, into the Languedoc, where the Trencavel family had long held sway.

“We have no time for conversation, Trencavel,” Amalric snapped. “Guards! Leave us! Close the door!” The guards hastily retreated and slammed the heavy oaken door behind them. Trencavel and Amalric faced each other alone in the cold, gray chamber.

“The town is not yet in ruins, Trencavel. But it will be if you don’t give me what I seek,” Amalric said.

“If you came here for heretics, there remains an ample supply,” Trencavel retorted.

“Heretics we indeed have in abundance. But let us not dissemble, Trencavel. Do not play games with me. I am authorized by Pope Innocent III to lay waste the entire region. Give me what I want, and I will see to it that you and even some of these wretched heretics live if they recant. Your lands and titles are already forfeit, but not yet your life. You, Bezier, and Carcassonne will survive if you simply give me the Epistles of Jesus,” Amalric said.

Trencavel clasped his hands behind his back in a conversational gesture, but his eyes betrayed his seething hatred of Arnaud Amalric. “I thought that might be the real reason you came. The heresy, as you call it, has been here for centuries. I have asked myself, ‘Why would the Pope choose to act against the Cathars after so long?’ The cost in treasure and time, not to mention lives, is irresponsibly high. Lotario is no fool, and now it finally makes sense. He fears the Epistles of Jesus. He fears what their revelation would mean to his family and his alliances.

“I do not know where the Epistles of Jesus are hidden, Arnaud, but they are not in Bezier,” Trencavel continued. “The Council that protects them knew weeks ago of your coming and has long since moved them to another location.

“You are a liar, Arnaud, and a stupid one at that. Even if I knew where the Epistles are hidden and presented them to you on a golden platter, my life is already as forfeit as my titles and estates. But you somehow seem to think you will survive all of this. What you misapprehend is that merely knowing the Epistles exist, letters written by the hand of Jesus Christ, means you will die as well. You won’t survive the year no matter how many women and children you slaughter and cities you burn.

“Do you believe Rome will trust you to keep their most desperate secret? If you find the Epistles and turn them over to the Church, it will be mere minutes before Lotario has separated your head from the rest of you. One more death means nothing to him when he is willing to kill tens of

thousands to obtain the Epistles. We can both live, or we can both die. Your only hope is to join me against Rome.”

Amalric stared unblinking at Viscount Trencavel, who returned a level gaze. For a long moment, there was no sound, no movement. “Guards! Take the prisoner away!” Amalric shouted suddenly. The door opened, admitting three guards who escorted Trencavel from the room. Amalric’s commander and sergeant immediately met him at the door.

“On the authority of Pope Innocent III in Rome, I order you to put every man, woman, and child in Bezier to the sword. Search every house, barn, workshop, and cellar for any documents and bring them to me. Make sure our men know that the fate of these people is God’s judgment for tolerating such a despicable heresy among them. Trust in God that He will sort out the heretics from the faithful. Then burn the town to the ground. Raze the walls. Not a single structure will remain standing. But preserve Trencavel and make him look upon the eradication of Bezier. I will deal with him myself after he has seen the results of his stubbornness.”

Chapter 1 – Fragment 1, Alexandria, Egypt

32 A.D.

Greetings to you, Theophilus,

It was wonderful to see you in the spring. I hope the past months in Alexandria have not proven too uncomfortable. I have met several travelers from Egypt who say it is a hot region. They reinforce what you told me about Alexandria being a great city of learning and describe the Library there as one of the best collections of thought and literature in the world. I hope to visit such a place one day, but I think it unlikely that I shall ever venture so far from Galilee. I trust your work continues to be as fascinating as you described when you visited us.

I enjoyed our evening meal and recall it often with fondness. Our discussions brought me great happiness. I must admit that I was embarrassed that our accommodations were so rustic. Unfortunately, they have only gotten worse. We spend many evenings camped in the hills under the stars. But despite our poor means, these evenings can be inspiring, which keeps us from thinking too much about how hungry we are and the danger we live in. We often hear lions or other animals at night. I think they are as hungry as we are.

While I believe we have important ideas to share, Galilee isn't a great center of learning. We are discussing moving to one of the larger cities, maybe even Jerusalem. Our move to the city could happen in the next weeks or months. The crowds have grown, and the towns and villages have become less hospitable. It would help if the people who seek us were not as desperate as they are, but that is the nature of things.

It has been interesting to watch how my teachings have been interpreted differently by different people. Our audiences are generally poor and not at all learned. Of course, there are exceptions, such as you! When I put forth a topic, I should not be surprised that I later hear numerous versions of it, sometimes almost unrecognizably different. I find this helpful because it motivates me to hone them into greater sharpness, so there is less possibility for misinterpretation. But it is often also annoying since many of the different versions are purposefully invented by people of bad character, trying to divert attention to themselves. They are needy and desperate and mostly just trying to find a semblance of hope and happiness in their lives. Some go about it, though, in challenging ways, ways that could cause us trouble if we fail to stop it...

Chapter 2 - Cartagena, Colombia

2018 A.D.

The trip to Cartagena and the closing lunch had been a great success. Draining their glasses of the remainder of the chardonnay, the luncheon party stood, shook hands, exchanged congratulations, and said their farewells. The client had signed the contract and paid the deposit, and now everyone was wispy from the excellent white wine. The deal would solidify Protocomm's place as the global leader in a new and growing industry – off-planet data management solutions - and solve many problems for Protocomm's first genuinely global client.

The Colombian team departed while Robert Cunningham, CEO of Protocomm, and Rico Cruz, his EVP of Operations, hung back and made small talk, mostly about the attributes of Maria Sanchez, the IT Director of Nueva Gaia Hotel Group. They would reconvene in a few weeks for the implementation kickoff. Alex Georgios, Protocomm's Chief Technology Officer, would then take the baton. For now, Robert's work was done – and done well. He shook Rico's hand and headed toward the men's room.

As Robert turned the corner outside the WC, he almost collided with Maria Sanchez. Maria was an attractive, athletic, hyper-intelligent woman of African descent. She smiled brightly at him, and they chatted amiably for a moment before Robert pled his need for the facility and began to say goodbye. Cutting him off, Maria embraced him and kissed his cheek. Robert could feel her breasts pressing against his chest, her hips resting against his, her lips warm on his face. He rested his hand against the small of her back, rubbing her softly above the cleft in her buttocks.

“Would you like to join me for a drink at the hotel?” Robert suggested.

“That would be great, Robert! Can we say thirty minutes? I have a few calls to return.”

As Robert waited for her at the hotel bar, a text arrived from his wife. “Hi, Honey! I hope you’re having a good time in Colombia!” He texted her back. “Hi, Margie! It’s been a good trip with lots of work, but I’ll be home tomorrow night! I love you!” When Maria arrived, they lasted less than 20 minutes at the bar, laughing as they departed.

* * * * *

Shortly after their departure, Rico Cruz wandered into the bar, shaking the bartender’s hand, his new friend, with a damp grip.

“Rye Manhattan?” the bartender asked.

“Make it a double after the week I’ve had.”

“Your boss gonna’ join?”

“I rang his room. No answer.”

“That’s a shocker.”

“What do you mean?”

“He just left with a gorgeous black lady. He didn’t even leave a tip,” the bartender said with a frown.

After half an hour spent in an animated conversation, Rico signed the check and left a large tip in cash. He also made sure to chat for a moment with the concierge. Careful in his manipulations, Rico thought it could be useful to have a witness that he was alone in the hotel lobby bar and had then unhurriedly conversed with the concierge. The hotel staff already knew he was a good tipper and took special care of Mr. Cruz.

In his room, Rico entered a Czech URL in the search engine of a specially encrypted cellular device with a Serbian phone number. He then input a

unique code to access a secure server available to a limited number of people. Through the site's capabilities, he accessed the minicameras inhabiting the light fixtures in Robert's room and began uploading a video of the afternoon's activities. The afternoon sunlight was dramatic, enhancing Maria's attributes and her lively performance. Robert's unexpected longevity provided ample and varied footage. The light from the window enabled a clear view of cocaine lines, organized on the glass desktop in the foreground. Maria spoke fluent, indecent English, the sound quality perfect. The look on Robert's face as he finished a line was compelling, his identity unmistakable.

The cell phone would not leave Cartagena. As instructed, he would clean it carefully and discard it in a trash bin on the street after he had removed the SIM card and smashed it into small bits. Those who required the footage would be pleased, and the thought of his considerable fee brought a broad smile to his face.

* * * * *

Before sunset, Robert awoke, his mouth bone-dry. He sat up in bed too quickly, swooned from the effect of the wine, cocaine, and strenuous sex, and took a deep breath to settle himself. Robert was both sad and grateful that Maria had slipped away while he slept. He loved international, cosmopolitan women. They so readily embraced his version of adulthood. He smiled as he considered the many opportunities to repeat the afternoon's activities in the coming months.

"Hello, Robert," an unexpected male voice said.

The voice shocked Robert into full alertness. He flung the bedclothes off and leaped out of bed, searching for the source of the greeting, his vision spinning. A well dressed, dark-eyed man with close-cropped, graying hair sat calmly on the couch of his large suite, smiling knowingly at him. "Who the fuck are you? How did you get in here?" Robert shouted in near panic.

“I hope that we can have a reasonable conversation, Robert, so please do get hold of yourself. My name is Yevgeny Lyakhovsky. I manage a security service involved with information systems. Your company’s work is brilliant, and we have developed something of an interest in it. You and I will have an interesting future together, either short-lived or long-lived, but interesting nonetheless.”

Robert made a less than agile lunge towards the door, almost losing his balance in the process. His visitor moved not a muscle but spoke with fluid, solid confidence.

“Please don’t do that. I would much prefer that we have a long and productive relationship. If you open that door, our relationship will be very short indeed,” Lyakhovsky said quietly, looking upon Robert’s nakedness with mild distaste. “Please get your robe and make use of the WC. Then we can chat. I realize this unscheduled meeting is rather a shock for you, and I am not an uncivilized man.”

“Oh, and while you are in the WC, you may wish to view the video content on this device,” he said, handing Robert a cellphone he had retrieved from his coat pocket. “There are only five minutes of it right now due to the editing process, but I assure you we have more than an hour and are working energetically on the rest of it.”

Robert snatched the phone from Lyakhovsky’s hand and headed quickly to the bathroom. The door slid silently closed but did little to cover the sound of Robert’s retching. When he emerged, his complexion had taken on a pale gray hue.

“Not to be indelicate, but I have a busy schedule this evening. We must get straight to the point. I believe this footage would be interesting to the shareholders of Protocomm, not to mention Mrs. Cunningham and your children,” Lyakhovsky said blithely.

“What do you want?” Robert whispered.

“Nothing that would ever be attributable to you. I have a great deal of respect for you and have no wish to destroy your life. I merely wish for you to follow an instruction or two during your time at Protocomm. You won’t have to steal anything, share any sensitive documents, nothing as inelegant as that. That said, when you receive my request, you will need to execute it - to the letter - very quickly. I find negotiations tiresome and inefficient. I am much more comfortable with instructions. No hesitation and no deviations.”

“And if I don’t? You’ll publish the video?”

Laughing softly, Lyakhovsky responded, “That is one avenue available to us. But I prefer to think of the video as merely a way to obtain your undivided attention. I am sure you are aware of the uncertainties of life. The Americans have a saying, “Bad things happen to good people.” I could not agree more. Wouldn’t it be tragic if one of your family were to encounter an unfortunate accident in the future? Of course, I can’t say when or even if it would happen, but life can bring us our tragedies, can it not? It would be a thoughtful moment for you, standing by the gravesite of your little girl, holding your wife’s hand, knowing you could well have played a role in helping your beloved avoid such a vile fate, no?”

Robert whirled around to grab Lyakhovsky – and found himself staring down the barrel of a large black pistol. He was used to this reaction at this point in the discussion and remained at an advisable distance. His hand was steady, his eyes emotionless. “Now that’s not a reasonable way to respond to such a generous offer. Many of my colleagues would be much more unpleasant. Think about it, Robert. You’ll still be able to make millions from your Protocomm stock. And I have no interest in money. None whatsoever. I may also be able to help you in important ways. You must simply understand that I will ask a favor or two of you in the future and that you will provide them with alacrity. Can we sit and discuss this calmly, or must we take this in an undesirable direction?”

Choking down his fear and the deep sense of violation, Robert grudgingly admitted to himself that Lyakhovsky could kill him and enjoy a cup of coffee in ten minutes without a sliver of hesitation or a second thought on the matter. He sat down, shaking as if the temperature had suddenly dropped. Still holding the silenced handgun pointed steadily at his chest, Lyakhovsky tossed a card containing a series of numbers onto the table nearest Robert. “Memorize this number. Don’t share it with anyone. If you ever receive a call from it, answer it immediately. I expect to rarely contact you as I have no wish to make your life more challenging than it already is. But when this number shows on your phone, I expect you to answer it.

“On the other hand, you can call me anytime you like. Leave me a message, and I will respond in short order. I can be helpful to Protocomm, and in doing so, make you an extraordinarily rich man, particularly if you need impediments to your success to resolve themselves. I think you will be surprised the doors I can open for you, the problems I can manage. But when I ask you to do something, Robert, you will do it. Do I make myself clear?”

Chapter 3 – Jerusalem, Israel

33 A.D.

The afternoon was clear, dry, and hot. Yeshua wavered in and out of his reality. The moments when he was closest to unconsciousness were pure relief. He despised his lucid moments and fought against them, seeking the respite of oblivion, though his body instinctively returned him to periods of awareness. With them came the fire in his shoulders and elbows, the joints long since separated. Crucifixion was designed to bring death slowly, to separate joints, fray and tear ligaments, tendons, and muscle, to impose maximum agony. The people of Jerusalem were encouraged to witness the event to remind them of the Romans' power to inflict suffering on their authority's challengers.

Blinding pain washed over him in stabs and waves when muscle and sinew had stretched to their limits and began to tear and disconnect. He believed he could hear the final pop as a tendon gave way to the inescapable force of gravity. He was now deeply submerged in an abyss of agony. Only the faintest rays of light made it into the dark realm of his existence as he approached eternity.

Augmenting his misery was his extreme dehydration and exhaustion. The heat mercilessly sapped the moisture from his body. The wounds in his wrists and feet had long since ceased to trouble him in any meaningful way, comparatively speaking. His shoulders and arms were a boiling torment, overwhelming all other sensations. He struggled for breath as the sweat ran into his eyes, and blood from head wounds dried and caked there, almost blinding him. The sun baked the flayed skin on his back where the Roman soldiers had whipped him to keep him moving, the wooden beam he carried acting as an anchor. They had forced someone to help him, but it made no

difference. His misery was complete, and he would welcome his death, like the Sanhedrin, in their partnership with the Romans, had intended.

He looked down, saw his mother through tightly tunneled vision. She remained where she had been all day, maintaining her vigil, kneeling on the ground beneath the cross. The sight of her filled him with love and shattered his brittle heart. She stared up at him, plaintive eyes wet with tears, her face haggard, hair matted with sweat. A Roman soldier stood near her, ready to intervene if she moved to ease his suffering. There was nothing she could do against the strength of such a brute, much less the four others gathered nearby, talking and laughing as if attending a holiday festival. Only now he realized how naïve he had been.

When he tried, he saw her more clearly. He looked for his father, hoping and dreading to see him there. But he was not there as Yeshua knew he would not be. Yosef was a decent man, a steady man, but he was not a brave man. Yeshua hated and respected him for that. Yosef had figured out how to survive, but his son did not want to learn those lessons. Here was the price, his mother on her knees, enduring the torment of seeing her son spiked to a wooden cross.

Miryam had been right, of course. They had known he would come and had readied traps for him. Their spies had been about their dark work longer than he thought, informing them all along. The Sanhedrin's agents had cataloged every blasphemous or seditious utterance - particularly talk of the Messiah among his followers. He wished now he had been more careful to refute such outrageous and dangerous assertions. But these statements made a man who had been marginalized his entire life feel good about the path he had chosen. He liked hearing it and had ceased his objections.

He phased out of consciousness, then returned sometime later, his instinct forcing him to draw breath into his collapsing lungs. How long since they had pounded the rusty, bloody spikes through his wrists and feet and raised the cross in the sun? Six hours? Eight hours? Was it even the same day? He did not remember waking in the dark. During these periods of semi-

consciousness, his fractured mind boiled with images of his life, vignettes of events dear to him. His boyhood, at home with his father learning his craft, studying with the priests, time spent in the Galilean countryside, teaching whoever would listen, the rare interesting visitor of education and intelligence. There were fragments of conversations with his mother and the one woman he had ever loved - Rebekah. These memories mixed with harsher images of Hadar, Caiaphas, even his father.

Why had he thought it was right to come here? The idea now seemed obscene. Just as Caiaphas had said to him in the basement jail, his optimism and self-centeredness had made him shockingly naïve and childish - and now it would prove fatal. His hope that tolerance and open-mindedness would overcome the entrenched rules and traditions of thousands of years was wrong. It should have been easy to see. His desire to influence men - in part to mend his wounded ego after years of rejection and exclusion - had brought him here.

He knew that many people felt as he did. They had proven it in the swelling, surging crowds in Galilee. They dreamt of a new way forward. But men had much to achieve before they arrived at a place where self-interest and dominant, violent force no longer ruled. His followers were ordinary people. The realpolitik, money, had swept him and his dreamers aside like a pesky fly. He would die here, and his beloved mother would share every moment of his slow death, kneeling for hours watching him rally and wane, here on this cross fashioned by the Romans for political executions.

Chapter 4 – Lugdunum, Roman Gaul

202 A.D.

Irenaeus came straight to the point. “If our Holy Father placed a ‘divine spark’ within each man, as some here tonight might suggest, why should we believe that He sent us his only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, to die for our redemption? What would be the use? Are any of you so depraved in your reasoning to say that you possess such divinity within yourselves?” The stone room was silent. Not one of the powerful bishops dared to even breathe.

“I thought not.” He continued softly, his voice declining to a near whisper. “I know that you cannot believe such irrationalities. You are firm in your belief that redemption and eternal life is a gift from the one true God and then only through our unwavering faith in his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.” He was speaking intently, but very softly, so those around him could barely hear him. Those farthest away leaned toward their leader so they could hear him – and so they were seen to be entranced by his words.

The twelve Bishops had gathered in the chill basement room, traveling from cities as far away as Alexandria, Thessaloniki, and Jerusalem. Most were supporters, even authors, of a nascent but quickly coalescing consensus on the nature of Jesus Christ. Bishop Irenaeus was their leader, a ferocious instigator of this new orthodoxy, and a scourge to those who dared assert that Jesus was less omnipotent, less permanent, less God than the bishop’s vision described. Their time together was coming to an end, some departing as early as the next morning. Much remained unreconciled, and Irenaeus had lost patience with the stubbornness of certain of them. They argued from a place of intellect and reason, not from a foundation of

inspired faith. A consensus was not achievable, and this conference had proven it.

“We must eradicate these despicable teachings and eliminate the writings of these heretics!” he shouted suddenly into the silent sphere he had created, his words reverberating loudly along the stones of the vaulted room. Many jumped involuntarily, startled at the shock of his verbal violence, the room erupting in a cacophony of exclamations of agreement. Some were mesmerized by the power they felt, the influence they could wield. Other eyes flickered, distrusting the direction he was leading them.

“And if these heretics do not wish to hand over their documents when we demand them?” ventured Manlius, the youngest but one of the most senior among those gathered. “What then, Your Grace?”

“Then they must exit our ranks and become useful examples for our work. Christians everywhere will soon understand and embrace the power of the one truth and the futility of standing apart from us. They will cease their bickering and petty intellectual arguments. It is up to us to unite the Church to enable Christianity to survive.”

“Are the local priests who teach such heresy then... to be removed?” This from a slump-shouldered, unimpressive man, Aulus Septimius, barely daring to raise his eyes to meet those of Irenaeus.

“If they will not do what is right, recant the weaknesses in their teaching and guide their community to accept the truth of the leadership of the one Church, then yes, they must leave us. We must end this arguing among ourselves and unite under the guidance of the single, divine message. It is the only way. Divided and scattered as we are, we cannot even protect ourselves!

Irenaeus looked straight at his questioner. “Aulus Septimius, what is coming will require the deepest commitment, the stoutest hearts, the gravest sacrifices, and involve the greatest risks. Tomorrow we will discuss the final steps we will take to build a strong, unified Christian Church, a plan

that will bring us out of the cellars and into the light. One day, God will deliver us the empire itself!” Shocked at this blatant treason, punishable by the same crucifixion that had slain their Lord Jesus, several bishops focused their attention on their hands. One of them, Bishop Gregorius from Egypt, clenched his eyes closed, appalled by what he was hearing. He quickly gained control of himself, but not soon enough.

While the room was under his spell, awash in emotion and silence, Irenaeus and Manlius surveyed the table, absorbing the expression on each Bishop’s face. It would be clear at that moment whom they could trust to unite Christianity across the empire.

In the face of persecution of Christians everywhere, a unification of the faith was defensibly necessary, and therefore God’s will. To Irenaeus, it was his divine purpose. Everyone in the group had lived through persecutions, heard the screams of the tortured, seen the broken bodies of lifeless children, the shredded remains of their Christian brothers and sisters in the coliseums. Yet many still demurred, afraid of attracting attention to themselves or becoming involved in anything that might stimulate a Roman response. Unknown to them, each Bishop was being assessed, sorted, and selected or rejected.

Irenaeus stood to his full height, nodded to Manlius, and the two quickly exited the chamber. Conversation among the Bishops resumed, hesitantly at first, but then alternately passionate, muted, strident, and plaintive. After a time, servants brought wine. Two robed assistants entered the chamber, inviting the Bishops to dine. With gentle guidance, the brothers divided the bishops into two groups. The larger group joined Irenaeus for dinner. The smaller followed Manlius.

Later, at Irenaeus’ table, a brother entered the dining chamber and leaned close to the leader’s ear. In a casual tone, Irenaeus addressed the table, “Several of our Brothers have decided to continue their debates, to bridge their differences, and then rest afterward. Unfortunately, they will not be

joining our meal. Let's hope they make progress, so we don't have more bickering tomorrow."

Seated on the left hand of Irenaeus, Aulus glowed at being treated with such unexpected honor. He was well-read and possessed a prolific talent for languages. He spoke and wrote Greek, Latin, Aramaic, and Hebrew and was a talented scribe with a gift for understandable language and beautiful penmanship. A student of competing theologies, he was readily able to verbalize their comparative strengths and weaknesses. He was a scholar's scholar but gave no outward sign that he was otherwise remotely a leader of men.

Now he was seated beside their Leader at one of the most important conferences in the Church's history. The free-flowing wine made him increasingly curious and suspicious. *Am I here because of the question I asked? Why aren't the other brothers joining us?* He almost panicked, unsure if he had spoken the words aloud. But no one paid him the least bit of attention. Surely Gregorius, his friend of many years, would not leave without saying farewell.

After the meal and several goblets of wine, Aulus decided to visit his friend before his departure. He left the dining room with the excuse of using the facility and knocked quietly at Gregorius' chamber door. There was no response. With gentle timidity, he pushed on the heavy door. It opened slowly, and he entered, holding a large candle in front of him. The room was empty - as if Gregorius had never occupied it.

He sensed more than heard the whisper of a robe behind him. Terror welled up in his chest as he whirled around, almost losing his balance. He was unsure which was more frightening, the dark smear of blood on the door frame of his friend's room or the look in Manlius's eyes. In an instant, the reality of the night became clear. Manlius, the bloody doorframe, and the absence of Gregorius were all pieces of the same puzzle.

Despite the terror coursing loudly through his veins, Aulus kept his eyes locked on Manlius. If he even glanced at the doorframe, Manlius would see and know that what had happened only moments before had been discovered. His remaining lifetime would be measured in seconds.

“Brother Aulus. A fine evening to you. Why have you left the meal?” Manlius said evenly as the two candles’ wavering light bathed their faces in undulating light and dark shades.

Holding his candle away from the bloodstained doorframe, Aulus responded in his quiet, timorous voice. “His Grace said that Gregorius might be departing this evening, so I came to wish him a safe journey. It seems he has already left. I am sorry I missed him.”

“He has indeed departed, more than an hour ago. I saw him leave myself. He said he would try to make it to the inn south of town. Any farther tonight would be risky.”

“Yes. Of course. Gregorius has almost arrived there if it’s been that long since he departed. Ah well. I shall return to the meal and enjoy the banter. A good night to you, Brother Manlius.”

“And to you, Brother Aulus.” Manlius’ politeness only made him seem even more threatening. Aulus’ flickering candle retreated, almost totally submerged in the gloom that deepened with every step. Manlius’ candle reflected in his canine eyes, the eyes of a murderer that revealed everything. Gregorius was dead, killed by Manlius. This is what became of those who clung too tightly to beliefs that ran counter to those of Irenaeus.

Seething with rage over what was likely the death of his friend at the hands of his colleagues, Aulus headed back toward the large hall, his head spinning. He had to get control of himself. He encountered a servant boy in the hallway carrying wine to the festivity there. “Did you see Bishop Gregorius before his departure?” Aulus asked, hopefully.

“No, Your Grace, I did not,” the young African replied, terrified at being addressed by an honored guest. Aulus looked into his young face, seeing a keen resemblance to someone he knew. “But I heard things behind closed doors. There was a fight, and I was afraid, so I left.”

“I think you were wise to do so, lad,” he said despairingly, his brief hopes now dashed. The boy’s appearance spurred an idea. “Do you perhaps know of a man named Atticus? You bear a striking resemblance to someone I know by that name.”

The young servant regarded Aulus. Seeing no evil intent there, he replied. “A great man in my home country had that name. He was my mother’s brother, but he disappeared when our armies fought the Romans. We lost many warriors to the legions - either killed or enslaved. It’s when I came here.”

Aulus felt as though a divine intervention had arisen, heartening him. “Go in peace, young man. Atticus will be pleased to know his nephew lives,” he replied. The boy smiled broadly at the mention of his family.

Aulus returned to the dining room, shaking hands hidden in his robes.

“I apologize for my delay. I stopped in to see Gregorius.”

“Did you manage to say good night to him?” Irenaeus inquired in an offhand fashion.

“Sadly, no. Manlius told me that Gregorius had decided to depart this evening rather than tomorrow morning, so I missed seeing him,” Aulus replied.

“No doubt you will be with him again, and soon, I expect,” Irenaeus said.

“Given the weight of our discussions, we will have much work to do here, so it will be longer than usual before I have time to engage in discussions of theology with Gregorius. Maybe it’s for the better, as he can be very fragmented in his thinking.”

“Yes, he can at that, and we all have much to do! We must be the leaders to protect and grow our beloved church. I am glad you share our enthusiasm, Aulus. Come! Sit again beside me and enjoy the wine. Tomorrow we begin in earnest!”

Because of his diminutive stature and quiet personality, Aulus was often subjected to physical abuse as a child and teenager. These situations had trained him to play the shy scholar, teaching him to hide his moods and true feelings behind a ready mask of servitude. He had become exceptionally perceptive in his attempts to survive. Aulus saw that Irenaeus knew more than he was saying about what had happened this night, and even the glow of the great man’s warm smile and his gracious invitation to return to the table in the place of honor couldn’t loosen the cold grip of fear he felt.

He was now confident that Irenaeus had begun enacting a plan to permanently remove challenges to his singular leadership of a unified church. Those who opposed him would be among the first victims, and he now found himself at the center of the plan. Why? He was a competent scholar and useful in that regard. But his scholarship would not outweigh his well-known friendship with Gregorius. Irenaeus must need something, and he needed to discover what it was before inadvertently giving it to his leader. Failing that, his fate would almost certainly be the same as his dear friend’s.

Irenaeus had saved the best wine for later in the evening, contrary to standard practice. Usually, such wines were available only in limited quantities and were used to initiate an extended evening of drinking and conversation. Aulus made sure he appeared to be getting progressively drunker as the dinner continued. As the evening began to end, he decided the time had come. He raised his glass high, swaying as he stood, and slurring his words, called loudly for a toast. “Brothers!” he shouted with a broad grin on his face. And he promptly collapsed, pitching forward onto the table, dragging his plate to the floor along with him.

The room erupted in laughter as two brothers unsteadily tried to help Aulus to his feet. “He’s too drunk to stand! We will take him to his room where he can sleep it off,” one of them said. They bundled him out the door and down the hallway to his sleeping quarters, where they laid him carelessly on his bed before departing. When he heard the door close, Aulus arose and placed a small, wooden wedge under the door’s edge, jamming it closed.

Chapter 5 - Palo Alto, California

Present Day

The call from Lyakhovsky finally came. It had been over a year since the Russian had let himself into Robert's hotel room in Cartagena. Robert had begun to think he might never hear from him. But the number appeared on his device's screen during an update call with several board members about the status of the system implementation at EmilyClaire Cosmetics – their largest deal yet. Recalling the instruction from Lyakhovsky, he abruptly ended the Board call, pleading a personal matter.

“Hello, Robert. You are to meet an attractive young woman at the bar in a restaurant in Palo Alto called Oak Ridge at exactly 5:45 this afternoon. There will be no question about who your contact is. Her name is Jennifer. There will be a seat next to her at the bar to her right. You will join her and sit in that seat. She will know a lot about you, so it will appear to any observer that you are old friends. You will stay for about an hour. Then she will stand up, say it was great to catch up and hug you. She will place a thumb drive in the right inside pocket of your jacket. Do not touch your pocket or remove it until you are in your car and driving on the highway. You will insert it into the USB port on the desktop computer in Alex Georgios's office early tomorrow morning. His password is Lightspeed92458. Enter it, wait thirty seconds, then remove the drive. Tomorrow evening at 6:15, you will meet Jennifer again but at a different restaurant, called Taos in San Jose. When she hugs you upon your arrival, place the drive in her left hand. There will be no free chair next to her this time, so you will not linger. Have one drink and depart. As I previously told you, exactitude and precision are required.”

“What does the jump drive have on it?”

“It will introduce a computer virus called Mastodon into the systems of your client EmilyClaire. It will be damaging, but recovery will be possible. If we wished, we could destroy their software systems, but this won’t happen. However, the EmilyClaire executive team will be angry and demand the termination of Alex Georgios. You will meet that demand and terminate him.”

“Why, for God’s sake?!” Robert replied angrily.

“Troublesome questions are not helpful, Robert. Exactitude and precision in executing my instructions are extremely helpful. Next Monday, you will receive an inquiry from a large company in Indonesia interested in purchasing the Protocomm system. That revenue will more than offset any losses that may result from the EmilyClaire situation. However, since you know in advance, you can spend the rest of the day developing a response plan that will prevent the virus from causing irreparable damage at EmilyClaire. You will appear decisive, expert, even brilliant. But you will not overdo it. Managing this situation well, together with the new business opportunity, will make you even more valuable. But you must terminate Alex Georgios. Using an infected drive on a Protocomm computer and introducing a malicious virus into a client’s systems is cause for immediate termination, am I correct?”

“You are correct.”

“Good day to you, sir.” Lyakhovsky hung up.

Robert was horrified. Alex was one of his closest business associates and had helped build the company from a startup. Alex had invented many of the technologies in the Protocomm system himself. Robert relied heavily on him. Without Alex, Robert did not know how he could continue. Could Chang, Alex’s second in command, do the job? Possibly. Chang would have to do it. There would be some gaps in product development. But yes, Chang could do it. Robert began to regret his long hours of late dining and

drinking with customers and not focusing on their systems' technical details. Alex had ably handled all of that.

Robert considered clearing his calendar, but everyone would then suspect a major problem had arisen – before one occurred. Instead, he could only rearrange a few time appointments to provide some thinking time. Robert longed to see Maria again, but their time together had decreased once the Nueva Gaia implementation had concluded, and he feared she would soon lose interest.

His wife was getting tiresome and matronly, as some mothers do, and Margie's increasing moralizing had become decidedly uncomfortable. Cultural mores in Silicon Valley had finally arrived when an executive could have a beautiful, black-skinned wife without much downside, especially one as smart and attractive as Maria. Maria was eleven years younger, athletic, and while he hoped it was more than that, she at least feigned enjoyment in the time they spent together. In two years, his youngest would be ten. The Russians controlled him because of his affair with Maria. What if he simply married her and dismissed himself for rehab? It happened every day. If he could just get his youngest to ten years old without a nasty, public divorce, he felt it was possible. He had read a lot about the effects of divorce on young children. While he no longer felt the slightest hint of passion or love for Margie, he did not want to ruin her or his children, either. He had never brought the subject up to Maria and wondered if she would agree. She would. He was sure of it.

Robert shook himself out of his reverie. He had to be on time to meet Jennifer at Oak Ridge. He began to jot down some action items for the pending disaster at EmilyClaire so he could sell their mature, organized response to the crisis. With luck, they could make this a selling point for future customers, including their response to Alex's lack of discipline with the thumb drive. Lyakhovsky was dangerous, and he could not put his family at risk. He would have to find a way to make it up to Alex someday.

Robert arrived at the restaurant precisely at 5:45 and entered the bar, where he found Jennifer seated as described. Robert took the seat next to her. Jennifer was ravishing. Fit and tanned, she was attired in a slightly provocative, though professional ensemble, a sheer business blouse, shoulder-less, over a darker camisole that outlined her figure.

“Robert, it’s so good to see you! It’s been ages! Tell me what’s been going on with you!” she gushed without a hint of an accent. Her smile and voice were warm, but her piercing blue eyes were ice cold. It occurred to him that Jennifer could well be the agent they sent to harm his family if he failed to perform. He had seen movies about such things, and now it seemed like he was starring in one. Robert kept a smile carved onto his face, the one reserved for tiresome acquaintances that inevitably appeared in public places. He figured Lyakhovsky already knew everything about his life, but he made up fictitious names, ages, and schools for his kids. No reason to make it easy.

“It’s great to see you, too, Jennifer,” was all Robert could think of to say. She began a list of questions to which he provided monosyllabic answers. After a while, he began to relax, becoming more conversational, and consuming the required time. He left precisely at 6:30 with the jump drive in his pocket. It felt like it was giving him a virus. Maybe the Russians could do that, too.

Chapter 6 – Nazareth, Galilee

33 A.D.

The sun rose over the eastern hills of Judaea, dissipating the night's arid chill. Yeshua sat quietly on a bench beside his mother. The delicious fragrance of the olive grove behind his father's workshop summoned fleeting images of his childhood, good times, and challenging ones, but his, nonetheless. He could hear his father's tools clang softly from time to time as he set about his work. He studied his mother's face, carefully committing every line, every nuance to memory. He loved her deeply. He loved her fortitude in the face of decades of surreptitiously malign treatment by the townspeople. He loved her stately manner and her quietly principled approach to life. He loved her fierce determination, her independent mind, and strength of purpose. He wondered how she would respond to his news.

"I am going to Jerusalem, Mother," Yeshua said.

Hearing what she feared most, Miryam sucked in a deep breath and fought back her tears. She felt in her bones that such a decision would undoubtedly end in her son's imprisonment or death. She knew how the Rabbis responded when anyone contravened a rule or threatened the structures that protected their privilege. They would quickly construct an end to this honest, sweet fellow, this troublesome man from the countryside with his message that brought hope to so many. She had seen how the Rabbinate protected its interests for dozens of years.

Miryam took his hand forcefully, desperately. "Yeshua, no! You must not! They will finish you! Either the Rabbis or the Romans will see your teachings' impact and feel forced to act against you. There have already been men in Nazareth asking about you. They came from Jerusalem."

As he had become more well-known in the region, his followers had begun to make increasingly exaggerated claims about him. These claims were less about him and his teachings and more about fantastical things they attributed to him, mostly in hope, error, or self-serving dishonesty. They claimed he had miraculously cured people of illnesses and even raised a man from the dead. Some said he could even be the Messiah. These inventions increased the importance of their association with him.

The crowds swelled to previously unimaginable size and had become a burden. They were not considerate of the communities they occupied as guests. Nor were they monied, organized, or clean. They were periodically violent. As it became known that Yeshua of Nazareth intended to speak in a particular area, shortages of food, water, lodging, and other necessities quickly resulted as town residents hoarded provisions until he had passed. Village leaders began forbidding him to enter their gates, even sending out armed enforcers to disperse gatherings before they coalesced. His travels became more and more remote, and his teaching sessions were more sparsely attended.

“Mother, James and I know there are risks, but there isn’t any other way. We can’t continue to wander around the countryside in isolation, teaching two or five or even twenty at a time. The twelve can’t continue in that way. They have worries of their own – wives, children. They will certainly leave me if I can’t attract groups large enough for their donations to sustain us. And then what would I do? Return to Nazareth? I’ve already had to run once. And what about you and my father and brothers? What if they chased you away too? What would you do?”

“My family would see that didn’t happen.” But even as she said it, Miryam knew her son was right. Her family could only protect her so far. Then they would be forced to stop. Yeshua could not return to Nazareth safely, and she understood he could not cease his teaching. She did not want to admit that even these short visits were unwise, but they were. And it was all because of one night – dozens of years ago - the night he was conceived.

“You mustn’t worry too much, Mother. I have made it safely this far, and I will be careful not to draw too much attention. We won’t be nearly as noticeable in such a large city as we are out here. We can have groups of thirty, forty, or fifty – still not enough to be noticed. We are not so famous as all that”, he said with a nervous, unconvincing smile.

Despite his feigned air of confidence, which she knew was for her benefit, she saw that he was worried as they speculated on what could happen upon his arrival in Jerusalem. She recalled when the leading citizens of Nazareth had convened the council to have Yeshua expelled for beginning to talk widely about a new philosophy. They had railed against her son’s teachings, which made her smile grimly. He had not had any intention of being a teacher, at least not initially. He had merely shared his ideas with students of the Rabbi, who responded enthusiastically. The aggressive response of the town’s conservative leaders had only fueled the fire within him.

A covenant with an unseen God thousands of years old held decreasing meaning to a growing number of people. But the covenant was quite valuable to the priesthood. No matter how hard he tried, he could not keep from criticizing the Rabbinates' self-serving ways.

“Mother, I need to be in a place where the size of our gatherings won’t impose such strains on the towns. I have told the twelve of my decision. Some are eager and enthusiastic, but some are afraid of the chance we would be taking.”

He rose to leave, and Miryam stood to embrace him. His face captured the first orange light of the morning. He took her strong, well-calloused hand into his own and pressed a small roll of papyrus into her grasp. “This is for you. It’s a letter. I love you, Mother. I will say goodbye to father and spare him a painful parting if I can.”

Nodding, convinced now that the worst fate a mother could know would be hers, Miryam said simply, "I will love you forever, my son." He departed silently, leaving her standing alone in the olive grove.

Chapter 7 – Palo Alto, California

Present Day

“I got your message and ran straight up here,” Alex said breathlessly. He resembled many young, successful technology executives. Dressed in jeans, a t-shirt, and a well-worn leather jacket, he was tall, dark-haired, and possessed the lean build of a life-long athlete.

“Have a seat, Alex,” Rico Cruz replied, cutting him off. “What the fuck happened on the EmilyClaire implementation last night after you left? Robert is going bat shit about it.”

“I don’t know yet. We’re still running diagnostics to trace the entry point of the virus. I checked every single item on the final list - especially the latest scans. All the diagnostics were properly run. I saw nothing that needed changing or repeating. We followed our protocol exactly.” Alex had written the protocol himself.

“As usual, we managed system access carefully. No one was allowed access to any non-Protocomm code sources from anywhere outside our servers. You know we have a standard method for marking our devices, and we were tight on everything. I walked through it with Chang in detail right before I left, and he was cool with everything,” Alex said.

“But the Mastodon somehow got in and infected almost every one of their critical systems the instant we went live. And they’re shut down until we can clean them,” Rico responded skeptically.

“Yeah. Maury is pretty pissed.”

“Jesus Christ, Alex! He’s right to be pissed! He called Robert this morning at about 6:00. His board decided EmilyClaire will hold off suing us if three things happen. Number One. They are back up and running in less than twenty-four hours. I don’t know if that’s even possible. Two. Protocomm covers every penny of their cost for this shit show in immediate cash, including lost profitability and all remediation. And three. You are terminated - today. Maury is pissed not because there’s a problem, but because you swore to him before you left last night that there wasn’t one, and there wouldn’t be one. You told them everything was perfect, and within hours of receiving your specific assurances, all hell broke loose. You misled them, and now they are goddamn dead in the water. How do you think he should react? With love and forgiveness?! They are drafting a gross negligence lawsuit as we speak. Insurance may cover this immediate situation for them and us, but if it gets out in the press, we could be fucked. Like close the goddamn doors fucked! Now get the fuck out of here. And don’t go back to your office. Security will box up your shit and have it delivered to you.”

“You can’t be serious!” Alex shouted, now that the weight of what was happening to him began to settle squarely onto his shoulders.

“I’m serious, Alex. I know you and Robert have been partners for a long time, and this is the first fuck up you’ve had, but it’s a goddamned catastrophic doozy. After he got off the phone with Maury, Robert had a Board call. Then he instructed me to terminate you. This morning. Now. You’re fired. Hand over your badge and access card. Pavel will walk you out.” The silent, gray presence of Pavel Grivinko, the head of Protocomm security, materialized from the darkened hallway. Had he been there the entire time? Yes - and likely recording the conversation. Pavel’s resume included “Director of International Security” for a large computer concern in Eastern Europe.

“Leave your computer, phone, and all your passwords. Do nothing. Touch nothing. Call no one. Answer no questions from anyone, particularly the press. And no bullshit, Alex. If we have the first problem with this, I’ll have your ass arrested in fifteen minutes. There will be an internal investigation, and if there’s as much as a stray pussy shot on your laptop, you could be bankrupt - at a minimum.

“You need me to figure this out,” Alex said, the devastating reality sinking in.

“Robert asked me about that. I think he hoped we did. But we don’t. You’re the best we have at system design and linkage of the satellites to client ERP. But Chang is the best at system security. He knows everything you know, and more. With this debacle, he’s in charge now because it’s a security issue. At least for the foreseeable future. If this gets out, we will have a PR nightmare the size of Texas. Robert’s already got a communications firm on the way. Our equity value could be in the shitter, at least in the near term. We’re all way worse off this morning than we were last night, and all because of your bullshit.” Alex could see that Rico was enjoying himself.

“At least let me talk to Robert,” Alex responded.

“No way. He told me – just a minute ago in this email right here - that he wants you out of the building. His words. Want to read them? He’s headed over to EmilyClaire right now to figure out a way to un-fuck this. EmilyClaire is our biggest contract ever, and you were supposed to make it happen. He’s put his life into this company, all his money is in this company, and you may have just fucked it all up. He’s fucking way beyond pissed. He directed me to have Willingham at Anginelli Steiner arrange for you to forfeit all your options and severance. You can put up a fuss about that, but I don’t advise it.”

It all seemed so efficient and final. Alex unclipped his access badge from his belt and laid it and his phone on Rico's desk. The past six years flew by in his mind. His discoveries in graduate school augmenting light-based technologies and his undergraduate days, focusing on systems design and integration. Protocomm was the only company he had ever worked for, beginning in the early days as a struggling startup, and it was all over. He looked Rico straight in his eyes, boring a hole through the back of his head. From out of nowhere, he was betrayed. Without a word, he turned on his heel, followed by the gray man Pavel Grivinko.

When they reached his car, Pavel demanded to examine the glove box, trunk, and other storage spaces in the high end convertible. "You can take the car for now, but you'll have to return it in a week or so. I must search you before you leave. I'm sorry. Alex. The situation sucks, but I have a job to do." Pavel's tone was instructive; it was the one he used on others when there was no negotiating, no beating around the bush. He was a dangerous man, and Alex had no intention of finding out just how dangerous. Wanting the nightmare to end, Alex turned and placed his hands on the roof, ready for the pat-down. Pavel gave him a thorough search, then sorted through the athletic gear in the trunk, paying particular attention to the soccer cleats and shin guards he found there, the travel case in the back seat, and the laptop bag - which he took away with him when he completed the search.

Yesterday he was the Chief Technology Officer of one of the most promising technology companies on the planet. This morning he was being searched by the head of security in the parking deck. As Pavel completed his task, he could only watch in humiliation. His head spun in shock and confusion, his thoughts and emotions running rampant. How had it happened?

Satisfied, Pavel stepped back and allowed Alex to get into the beautiful car. As he pulled onto Interstate 280 heading north to San Francisco, Alex called the only person he thought could offer him real support. He had

always kept an old phone with a private number if something happened to his company phone. His father's phone rang and rang and rang. A recorded greeting answered, "You have reached the voicemail of Kamel Georgios. Please leave me a message, and I will call you back." Beep. Alex hit the red button in frustration.

"Shit!" Alex yelled as he accelerated along the expressway. It was only 9:00 AM, and it was already the worst day of his life. He had quickly concluded that his dismissal was intentional and well planned. He just could not visualize the origin or the reason for it. It made no sense to him. If he looked at the situation cynically, several people had a motive for arranging his failure and termination. But they did not seem capable of conceiving and implementing such a demeaning exercise.

Was Rico behind all this? Possibly. But Rico had the energy of a greasy-haired New Jersey gambler. While he was malign, he was not the sort to cook up complex plots and execute them effectively. But he would surely take the credit for it if it benefitted him. Lee Chang? He seemed a more likely candidate. Distant and standoffish, Chang would be the most likely instigator because his social skills limited his career prospects. But Chang was also good at his job and had not shown any behaviors that indicated disloyalty or ambition beyond anyone else's normal levels on the team. Sure, he wanted to advance himself, but the thought of Chang proactively blowing up a significant client engagement just for a promotion seemed too daring and decisive, not to mention risky.

Feeling the phone's vibration now lying in the passenger seat, Alex placed his hand on it. The pulse had ceased – a ghost rattle of hope, not a real call. A minute later, he felt another buzz and looked at the screen. "Inbound Call From... Dad".

He dropped the phone between the passenger seat and the center console in his hurry to open the call. "Fuck!" he screamed and cut across two lanes of traffic, pulling into the right-hand lane as horn blasts from offended drivers

created a disorienting cacophony. Alex scraped his knuckles, trying to reach the phone but succeeded in grabbing it up and pressing the green button that activated the call. “Missed Call” showed on the phone’s display.

He wanted to sob openly in a bone-deep way. He was a leader, the one with the answers, the one in control. But he felt like a falsely accused child, and he needed a parent to tell him that he was still good. A voicemail notification popped up on the screen. Alex hit “Call Back” without listening to it. The phone rang and rang and rang. A tear ran down Alex’s cheek into his mouth. He licked the salt taste off his lips, trying to control his frustration and anger.

“Hello, Alex?”

“Dad! Protocomm fired me this morning, just now, and walked me out of the building. I don’t know what happened! Rico said I screwed up the EmilyClaire implementation by letting a virus get into their systems. I have no idea how that could have happened. We did everything just like we always do. Robert had Rico fire me, and Rico told me I couldn’t even call Robert. They’re going to cancel all of my options, and they even threatened to arrest me!”

“Alex! Alex! Wait a second! Slow down for a minute. Where are you?” Kamel asked.

“I’m on 280 North heading home, just south of Redwood City. I didn’t know what else to do. They said I could keep the car for a week,” Alex replied.

“OK. I’m in downtown San Francisco doing a guest lecture. I’m sorry if I sound out of breath. I just climbed the stairs to my next lecture, which starts in two minutes. But I’ll be done at ten. Can you meet me for a coffee around ten-fifteen near the university?”

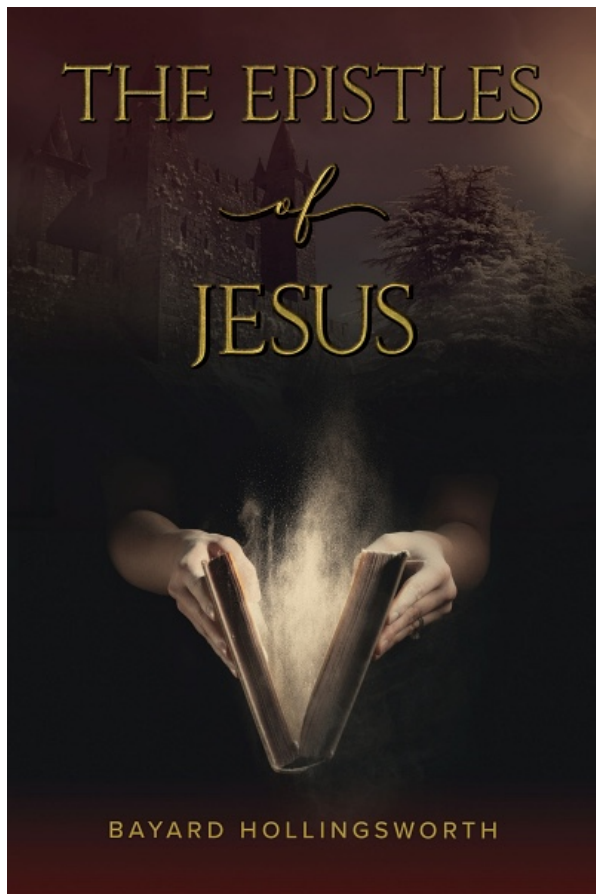
“It’s almost nine now. I’m making good time, but traffic will back up in the city. I think I can make it,” said Alex, awash in relief at hearing his father’s voice. To have him so readily available to talk through things in person was an unexpected boon. “Which coffee place is closer to you? The one on Geary or the one on Fulton?”

“Neither. There’s one just off Stanyan that’s closest. Know it?”

“Yeah, I know it. See you there at ten-fifteen. Thanks, Dad.”

* * * * *

As he started to hit the “End Call” button, Kamel Georgios heard the disembodied voice of this son shout, “Oh Shit!” and the sound of blaring horns, screeching tires, and a nauseating impact. The connection went dead.



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