

- THE INCARNATIONS OF THE AMERICAS

IALTABOATH

WILLIAM HRDINA

“God is dead.”

-Friedrich Nietzsche

“Nietzsche is Dead.”

-God

“The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. Or the one.”

-Spock

Prologue

0167 CE, Egypt

In the total void of a moonless night a dim flickering light danced, held by a man named Valentinus. He crept lightly through the eerily black desert, trying not to leave footprints in the sand. It was a futile gesture, but the thought was there. Valentinus was 60, pretty old for the time, with gray peppered hair and a deeply sun battered face- like a dried up raisin. His eyes shone out from the crags of his face, reflecting the light with an almost catlike illumination. In one hand he held a gold oil lamp, its wick pulled down as low as it would go without going out. In the other hand was a small, heavily polished slab of wood.

It wasn't just a slab though. It was actually a box. Inside was the most powerful thing in the universe. For now it was inert and sleeping. It would remain that way as long as the box wasn't opened. Capturing the boxes contents nearly killed Valentinus and it was his responsibility to ensure that once it was lost, it would never be found again.

The old man's breath was ragged as he reached the top of an especially high dune. Every night for two years he he'd hiked three hours into the desert with his son Seth.

They worked together to build the box's prison night after night, often not returning before the first light of the sunrise shone on their faces. The previous evening they'd finally finished their labors. Tonight they would hide the box and with luck it would remain lost forever in the waterless ocean of sand.

About half way down the backside of the dune Valentinus came to the prison's entrance. He set his lamp on the sand just outside the hole and hunkered down to wait. He looked up into the empty black sky and then down to the box he held on his lap. It seemed to be humming, but not physically. It was as if you could feel the electrical pulsing of the electrons in the wood. It made him feel a little nauseous.

He put the box down and pushed it into the hole with his foot. Valentinus didn't like holding the box, it made him feel dirty. Even after he put the thing down he could still feel the power of it thrumming in his hands. He rubbed them against his chest- but he knew from experience the sensation would take at least an hour to completely recede.

A sudden noise came from his left and Valentinus hunkered down, squinting into the darkness.

"Who's there?" He hissed.

"Relax Dad, it's only me." Came the voice of his son Seth.

Relaxing, Valentinus asked with a grin, "What's the password?"

"Fnord." Seth replied, walking out from the shadows.

Seth was in his early thirties and the spitting image of his father. All you needed to do was add moisture to plump out his features- like adding water to a sponge.

"Were you followed?" Valentinus asked.

“Actually I was. But I lost them.” Seeing the concern on his Father’s face he assured him, “Don’t worry Dad, we’ve come too far for me to screw it up on the last night. You did remember to bring the box didn’t you?” Seth asked, teasing. His Dad would never forget something so important. Besides, he could feel the low grade nausea in his stomach which was a sure sign the box was near.

Valentinus gestured towards the entrance. “I slid it down the hole a ways. I couldn’t stand holding it anymore.”

“I know what you mean.” Seth agreed, he was also familiar with the after-effects of holding the box. “Well, should we get this finished?”

Reluctantly, his father nodded his head in agreement. Seth could see the look on his face. It was hard to believe that their role in the drama was about to be finished.

One by one the men climbed into the narrow shaft that led into the sand dune. The sand was shorn up in a very temporary manner by design, but the fragile nature of its construction made every trip down a rather frightening chore. Valentinus was first with Seth coming behind. Instead of carrying the box the entire way Valentinus continually tossed it a few feet forward in front of him. Each time he grabbed the box its vibrations shot up his arm. It was as if the power within knew it was soon to be interred forever. Of course, it’s very possible the thing did know.

At the bottom of the shaft was a natural bubble in the rock. It made a room that was about 30 feet on a side with a 10 foot ceiling. In the floor was carved an elaborate symbol, boxes and triangles interwoven together. In the center of the carving was the image of a monster- half lion and half snake. Set in the middle of the creature’s head was

a small hole. Seth took a meticulously carved stick from the folds of his robe and slid it into the hole.

There was an audible click from within the stone. Seth placed his palms flat on the carving and strained to rotate the now unlocked panel.

“Come on now push!” demanded his Father, cheering him on.

From its place on the floor the box just sat. It wasn't doing anything- but it still managed to look menacing.

Finally the carving was shifted far enough to reveal the handles that lay underneath. It took both men to lift the lid off of the safe. Within was a hole that was the exact diameter of the box. With a sigh of relief Valentinus took his foot and pushed the wicked thing in line with its burial place.

It slid into place with the quiet snicker of wood on stone.

“We're really going to free aren't we?” Seth asked, smiling at Valentinus with a look of awed wonder on his face.

“We will if we hurry up and get the lid on.” The old man replied, bending over and grabbing his side of the stone panel.

Seth kneeled and grabbed his own side. A big grunt later the lid was replaced in its socket. Seth rotated back the faceplate and removed the key, replacing it in his belt.

He hugged Valentinus who returned his son's embrace fiercely.

Seth said, “OK. Let's get out of here.” He turned towards the exit.

Valentinus looked at his son with sad eyes. “I'm sorry, but I'm not going with you.”

“What do you mean? You're not going to stay here?!”

“I knew I was going to stay here when I faked my death in Rome 2 years ago. When Theodus sent me here he told me that once the monster was put to rest my time on the earth would fade. The same voices that told me about this chamber in the rock told me I would have to stay here. You knew I’ve been living on borrowed time. Even now I can feel my heart slowing down. Do not lament. I am ready to go. The kingdom of the Parent awaits.” Valentinus smiled weakly.

“Now,” Valentinus continued. “I have just one last set of instructions for you.”

The old man bent forward and whispered for about a minute into his son’s ear. When he was finished he nodded conclusively. “May the will of the Parent be done.”

Seth looked at his father for a long minute. He was right; the man seemed to be fading away right in front of his eyes. With a deep sigh Seth hugged his Father, kissed him, and finally returned to the shaft leading to the surface. He was crying as he climbed, but he didn’t look back. He was already thinking about the second temple Valentinus told him to build. The Temple of the Key.

About five minutes after Seth crested the dune leading back towards Thebes, Valentinus pulled the rope strung around the struts holding up the entrance shaft. The only sound was a soft crack and then the sound of sand rushing to fill a void. By the flickering light of his torch Valentinus watched sand pour into the room. After a while the flow slowed and the pour became a trickle. After five minutes the sand stopped moving and the old man was trapped in the ground; buried alive with the most dangerous creature in existence. Still, when he lay back on the ground, his breath slowly grinding to a stop, there was a smile on his face. Humanity was safe. Humanity was free. He said a prayer for his soul and died.

Chapter 1- Present Day

The basketball bounced off of the backboard, hit the rim of the basket, and bounced straight up in to the air. Harold Bonden (Everyone called him Harry) followed the ball's arc with his eyes, his concentration totally focused on the orange rubber orb. He leaned back and launched himself forward. As he rushed towards the basket the rest of the world faded away into a dull background haze.

Harry lived for moments like these. All there was in the world was a basketball and Jesus. Harry loved Jesus. His entire life was based around this fact. Harry lived, breathed, and ate Jesus. He would argue, very seriously, that he even thought about Jesus in his sleep. At the moment he also loved Bump, the peculiar free-throw competition he and his friends played twice a day no matter the weather. If it was snowing they took out their shovels, cleaned the court, and played on.

The basketball court was situated just outside the sliding glass doors that led into the mansion's living room. The court itself was highly maintained; the net was replaced every two weeks like clockwork and the lines re-painted on the ground with the precision of a team of NASA engineers. There wasn't a single crack in the court's cement surface in spite of the cold Virginia winters. Surely some appeared, but they were patched and filled before they ever became more than hairline fractures. The driveway leading to the road on the other side of the house was kept in the same condition.

Harry leapt in the air in pursuit of his own rebound. As he shot into the air his peripheral vision saw Peter Phillips with his arm cocked back to throw one of the two

other basketballs Bump was played with. Peter was a new guy in the house and he apparently wanted to make his mark as a competitor early on. Even as he focused on his own ball he prepared himself for the impact of Peter's.

Tonight Harry Bonden was scheduled for his initiation. He was to enter into the most sacred of covenants. His spiritual war would begin at the stroke of midnight. It seemed like every object, every second of his day was a reflection of his work over the previous few years. All the heartache, the bouts of loneliness, all of it would become worthwhile. Even when Peter's ball hit him in the face and he felt the wicked sting of the rubber cutting the skin on his cheek he was joyous. So intense was Harry's concentration that he still pulled in his rebound and re-shot the ball before crashing back to earth. The landing hurt like hell, but his ball found its way into the basket.

"Praise!" Yelled Eddie Charles, a stout kid of 22 whose hairline was already receding. He punched his fists up into the air. "That's showing him Harry!"

Still lying flat on his back on the ground Harry pumped his own fist into the air. Even Peter was nodding in appreciation of Harry's shot.

"On that note, I suppose we should go get cleaned up." Ray Manzano, the oldest of the group said, looking at Harry. "You gotta get the blood off your face."

"And your shirt." Eddie chimed in.

None of his friends knew about his meeting that evening. It was the only secret he kept from them. They knew everything else. Every dark secret of his soul was bared in front of the Family, even the stuff about his Father. No one held back. They didn't have to. What happened within the spacious walls of Ivanwald stayed there.

“Yeah that was a good one Peter.” Harry smiled sarcastically. “And next time you go in for a rebound Peter my friend, you best be wearing a helmet.”

Everyone laughed. But they all knew what Harry was saying wasn't a joke. The next time they played Harry would get his revenge. With Harry, that was as sure a bet as saying the sun was going to come up the next morning.

Before going back inside the men formed a circle in the middle of the basketball court. Each man put one arm over the shoulder of the man next to him linking everyone together. Once they were established they all prayed. No one said anything out loud. They just put their heads down and prayed, each in their own particular way. Eventually one guy said “Amen.”

If you weren't finished praying you were welcome to remain and as long as you wished. Sometimes, even prayer became a competition with none of the men willing to be the first to admit that his prayers were finished. It didn't happen often, but it wasn't unheard of to spend a full hour praying over an unorganized game of what was essentially a free throw competition.

It was Eddie who said “Amen” after about two minutes, and the group of men, none of them younger than 18, none of them older than 28; walked off the court and through the back door into the mansion known as Ivanwald. They entered a large living room with high ceilings and expensive, but comfortable furniture. There was no television. There was no radio, no stacks of CD's. A lot of the guys had personal stereo systems, but in the main part of the house the only distraction that was allowed was the Bible. There weren't any written rules about this. They weren't necessary. A single unhappy look or negative comment from a Congressman was enough to winnow down

what was acceptable behavior. In spite of the youthful age of the house's inhabitants there was no liquor- overtly or hidden. Nobody hid their pot in an oregano jar. Such things weren't allowed. So they weren't done. Jesus said don't, and that was good enough for them.

Intentionally hurting someone during a spirited game of Bump out on the basketball court? That was allowed. Even encouraged.

Harry walked through the living room and down the hall to the bathroom. He could smell chili cooking, the spicy savory scent wafted up from the kitchen. Mark must be cooking. He was the best cook in the house by a pretty wide margin and was allowed to de-facto rule the kitchen. It was only during Fellowships and the bi-monthly socials that he would reluctantly give up his pots and pans to professional caterers and even then he would buzz around, making sure they weren't doing anything wrong.

He turned on the elegant modern faucet and stood waiting for the water to warm. Once it was comfortable Harry dipped both hands into the water, cupping them to make a small pool in his palms. He looked down and saw his own reflection in the water shimmering up at him, his features distorted and rippling. A drop of blood dripped from his cheek and splashed into the water, diluting itself and disappearing. Harry thought of his own soul being diluted into God. His own power, multiplied with that of many. He let the water fall from his hands and looked at himself in the mirror. He liked the way the cut looked even if he didn't like the way it stung in the open air. The wound made him look tough. Even invincible. It was the flaw that guaranteed his safety, at least in his own mind.

Harry was chosen and he knew it. Still, he was eager to find out what was in store for him at the midnight ceremony. But lying just underneath the eagerness was fear. He didn't know exactly what was going to happen and anything that existed in the realm of the unknown bothered Harry. In his short two decades and change on the earth, he'd more than had his fill of the unknown.

As a child Harry lived as a child under the harsh discipline of his Father; a greatly flawed man who Harry nevertheless believed loved him even if he was always too sick to show it. He held this belief in spite of all available evidence. His Father beat him all of the time. He said it was because he wanted Harry to have the proper respect for his elders and for Jesus. In an abstract kind of way Harry could understand the idea of what his Father was trying to do. But it was highly frustrating the man didn't even attempt to live by the rules he so harshly enforced on Harry. Nevertheless, his Father felt justified in doing whatever he needed to do in order to enforce his will on Harry.

Harry's Father was particularly bad at avoiding excess when it came to drinking alcohol. Every day was the same thing. He would drink, some insignificant thing would set him off, and Harry would endure a beating. Any other description was a charade. There was no greater destructive force in Harry's life than his Father. His death was very liberating. In the years since his Father died Harry was able to convince himself that he was trying, in his own way, to teach him faith. Or so Harry told himself during those long nights where sleep seemed to be around the corner but never was.

Gritting his teeth, Harry dipped his cheek in the water to rinse away the blood. Once the worst of it was gone he took the Bactine out from beneath the sink and unscrewed the cap. Steeling himself for the worst part, he poured the Bactine on a cotton

swab and dabbed it on his cheek. The exquisite sting screamed out from his face and Harry hissed in air involuntarily while in his mind he thought about the power of pain. He and his friends often spoke of the way pain must be used to create strength. He prayed fiercely to Jesus for the courage to overcome the pain, to push it away. Sure enough, after a few seconds the pain receded and Harry looked into the mirror and said the name of Jesus again. Aloud this time.

After briefly considering putting a band-aid on his cheek Harry decided to let well enough alone. He pulled his shirt over his head and did his best to rinse out the blood that was spattered across the front. Once he was satisfied he'd done the best he could on the stain, he threw the shirt into the hamper and jumped into the shower to wash away the sweat from the game. When he was done he grabbed a bowl of what turned out to be Mark's chili from the kitchen and went up to his room to change into some different clothes.

Harry's room wasn't really Harry's room. A more accurate description would be to say Harry lived in a barracks. He had his own bunk- but a total of fourteen guys currently lived together in the same room with Harry. Still, the place could accommodate 20, more if there was some serious need. With just fourteen people in the room there was a little extra space to spread out. Ivanwald held a total of 3 dormers, all of similar size, as well as a suite of rooms reserved for visiting dignitaries. Officials from all around the world stayed at Ivanwald while attending the various fellowship meetings the Family held throughout the year. Actually, the rooms at Ivanwald were mainly reserved for second and third tier dignitaries- the really high-ups stayed in the main house.

It was located a half a mile up the road and commonly went by the name, “The Cedars,” because of a large number of cedar trees on the premises. Over the years the house was host to two American Presidents and untold numbers of people from other countries who held the same rank or higher. The Cedars was the nerve center of The Family. It was the jewel that stood at the center of a largely invisible web that had influence across the entire world. The influence was quiet, seemingly unorganized, but it was there as surely as a draft in an old house.

Whatever special ceremony Harry was supposed to be a part of was scheduled to take place at the Cedars. It would only be the third time in three years of living at Ivanwald that he’d been invited to the house and it was the first time he’d been asked to come alone. The accoutrements at Ivanwald were first rate, but at the Cedars, most things were one of a kind. For instance, there was a huge man-made waterfall built into the front lawn that snaked down into the Potomac River with two 12 foot tall bronze Eagle statues standing guard over the house and its grounds. No fewer than 3 original Picasso’s hung on the wall. Harry looked forward to going there immensely, and when anxiety about the nature of his initiation rose up in his heart he would stomp it down again with the mantra, “I am chosen.”

Chapter 2

The sun was bright, baking overhead. The hot wasn’t just a sensation; it was a physical force like wind or water. Any clouds with the audacity to drift across the sky were evaporated with relentless efficiency. Under the beating sun Professor Elias Spade

wiped the sweat from his eyes way with a very used handkerchief, leaving a smear of grime across his forehead. Elias was a slightly overweight man. Not fat, but not lithe either. He wore the stereotypical uniform of the archeologist- khaki everything with shorts full of pockets and a well scuffed pair of expensive leather hiking boots over thick gray hiking socks. A week old stubble of whiskers covered his face and a pair of glasses perched on his nose like a squirrel on an electric wire.

There is one universal characteristic to the desert: the sand always finds its way into every crease no matter how small. There was a good chance the desert created creases in its spare time just so it would have more places to work its way into unwanted. It was so hot the ground itself seemed alive, dark puddles of mirage pooling and spreading even on the ground immediately in front of Elias. He stared up at the sun and cursed it, but it didn't give him the satisfaction of feeling guilty. The only effect the gesture accomplished was the creation of little white droplets of light which remained in his vision for 30 seconds afterward. The lights danced against the mundane beauty of the uniformly tan earth. The only variation in color was a variation in what shade of tan and an occasional splash of red. The Professor was originally from Boston and he was used to bundling up against cold winters. He wasn't particularly happy baking in a sun that seemed to hover ten or fifteen feet above the ground.

Elias looked out over the valley below. Several people were working in the sun; but it was impossible to tell who was where because everyone looked the same in their big hats and sunglasses. From the elevated height of the sand dune he was standing on Elias couldn't even tell the men from the women. Five minutes earlier Elias was lying on his air mattress with four solar powered fans blowing less-baking air over his happily

sleeping body. Then his walkie-talkie went off like a bomb and he literally jumped off his mattress.

Fumbling, he puzzled over the device for a moment before his knowledge of how to use the thing awoke from its slumber. “What? You have to enunciate.” He said, pushing the call button.

“Professor Spade, I think you’re going to want to get over to the site as quick as you can manage.”

“What is it Janice?” Spade asked, recognizing the voice. Janice was his partner Nina’s assistant and she usually did the talking in any conversation. She would interrupt the Queen of England to describe, in great detail, her vacation to Mount Rushmore.

“Just come here Professor. Nina said to tell you that she promises she wouldn’t wake you up from your nap for no reason.”

“OK. I’m coming. But if you guys got me up because you found a hunk of pottery or something you’re going to have to dig holes outside everyday at noon for the rest of the time we’re here.” He was kidding. But he was serious too.

Nina Adams was working over on the far eastern side of the dig. The whole project they were working on was kind of a winger. They were out in the middle of nowhere, chasing what was more than likely a ghost. A Bedouin found the site, marked it’s location on a map and then went to the University of Cairo with the information. The man’s description of the site was weak and Zahee Hewazz, Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, ultimately decided to shunt the pointless work off to some American University who had money to spare.

Elias Spade got the call. He'd been looking for an opportunity to get to Egypt for over three years and even though the entire project sounded like a waste of time he took it. From what information he'd been able to cull from his colleagues at the University of Cairo the only thing he expected to find was a big ass chunk of rock out in the middle of nowhere. When they arrived, a big chunk of rock in the middle of nowhere was exactly what they'd found.

His eyes scanned across the dunes that would eventually lead to the Nile River. The site was a couple of miles from the west bank so the east side of the site was closest to the river. The ever-changing, yet eternal Nile River flowed by as it had since the time of Adam and paid the archeologist and his team no heed. He paused a moment thinking about the history of the Nile. Few rivers had seen as much. Elias kept his head down and waited for the little dots to take their final bow and go off to bother someone else foolish enough to stare at the sun.

From its leather holster his walkie-talkie crackled into life for the second time that afternoon. With a move made smooth with thousands of repetitions he pulled the device from his hip holster, where he wore the thing like a modern gunfighter, the fastest communicator in the West, even if he was in the East.

“Hey Elias, are you coming down here or are you not interested in what we found?” Nina's voice came through the walkie-talkie sounding as if sand had managed to work its way into the creases in the sound waves, which undulated up and down, mimicking the sand dunes.

He pushed the red Send button and brought the device to his lips. “I was thinking of ways that I could take credit for the find, and trying to figure out where I should bury

your body so that I don't have to share any of the credit." He laughed and released the button.

"Well you better think fast because you don't want to miss what we've got down here. Can you see me?"

He looked up, eyes scanning across the dunes, searching for Nina. He saw her, far off in the distance waving a stick with a red flag tied to it. He waved back making broad sweeping motions with his arms. He spoke again, "I'm coming right now, I'll just be a minute." He slid the walkie-talkie back into its holster. He jogged to his jeep, took a large pair of sunglasses out of his pocket. The shades were as necessary as water in the desert for protection against the light and the sand. Elias got in, started the engine, and roared down the dune toward Nina and whatever surprise she was keeping from him.

When he reached the appointed dune four of his graduate students ran to meet his Jeep. They skittered at him excitedly, everyone trying to tell him what happened all at once. He hushed them urgently. "Stop, wait, one at a time." He pleaded.

Jennifer, a student that worked with Elias since she was an undergraduate stepped forward. Her pretty face was flushed with excitement; she was positively glowing.

"Professor Spade, I think you better take a deep breath. We found something, we have no idea what it means, but it's definitely something." She was obviously excited, the way she was rocking from foot to foot, one would have thought that she had to pee very badly. He thought briefly of whistling and smiled to himself.

"Well somebody tell me something, you're driving me crazy with this cryptic nonsense, now what happened?" Elias looked beseechingly at the group his hands out expectantly.

“We found a cave, or a cavern or something. It appears to be very, very old.”

Jennifer smiled. “Nina already went down, she says the thing is quite enormous.”

The group led him to a two foot hole in the ground. None of Nina’s light filtered up through the pitch darkness. Jennifer knelt down and pointed her finger into the hole. Elias bent down to follow where she was pointing. The smell of air, thick and ancient wafted up from the hole. It was the kind of smell that you would imagine coming from the sub-sub basement in the oldest museum in the world. There was a tunnel that continued diagonally down, and then seemed to go horizontal before disappearing into murky darkness.

“The tunnel angles a couple of times to keep direct sunlight from filtering down that far. According to what Nina has radioed back to us it finally ends in about a ten foot drop-off into a huge chamber that slopes deeper underground.” Jennifer continued.

Other students were already helping Elias into a climbing rig. He took a flashlight helmet and plopped it down onto his head. He grinned goofily at Jennifer. “As soon as I get back, I want to hear the whole story about how you discovered this thing, there is nothing in any of the literature that indicates there were any structures in this area at all, let alone a big huge underground one.” He climbed into the hole, making his way cautiously into the narrow, cramped passageway into the cavern.

Chapter 3

Harry was the first person in his family to go to college. The night he received his acceptance letter in the mail his Father actually went to the fridge and gave him a beer, a

perverse kindness that both touched and sickened Harry depending on his mood. His Father's happiness at Harry's achievement lasted for about fifteen minutes. In no time at all he was being told what a stupid bastard he was.

Because of that acceptance letter Harry could actually pinpoint the moment that he decided once and for all there was a God. He'd prayed everyday of his teenage years for the opportunity to escape his Father's house. To get out before the bad became terrible. He could remember everything about the moment his prayer was answered.

Harry's grades were good, he played intramural basketball and was involved with a Christian Fellowship group that did volunteer work in the community. There was no reason for him not to get into IU, a State University. His counselor at school tried on several occasions to alleviate the boys fear about acceptance, but Harry couldn't be convinced. For every positive thing the counselor said his Father countered with twenty negative things. Doubts, fears, assurances of inadequacy were born into his soul like a brand.

But then the letter came in the mail. On that gorgeous spring day. He remembered standing in the warm sunshine. The light of God warming his skin. He pulled open the mailbox and there it sat. It was the only mail of the day. Sears was hawking its goods somewhere else and even the Electric Company decided to take a single day off from their threatening letters concerning the balance on their account. The envelope was cream colored. The small symbol for the University of Indiana in Bloomington adorned the upper left hand corner.

On TV and in movies, the kids are always looking for the thick envelopes. This is because once upon a time the school just sent everyone it accepted a big sheaf of papers

concerning housing and such. Things were different now though, since so many kids applied to multiple schools the bean counters figured put they could cut back on this particular expense, choosing instead to send materials only to those students who accept registration.

No one bothered to tell Harry about this change in policy. He saw the thin letter and his heart crashed into the pit of his stomach. There was an actual physical sensation of pain in his entire gut. He swallowed hard. A ringing filled his ears.

“Please God no.” He whispered, his throat dry and raspy.

As if detached from his actual body Harry watched as his hand reached into the mailbox and picked up the thin letter. He turned it over twice in his hands. It seemed like a very light thing; a very small and insubstantial thing. Yet, these few slices of paper, they were his entire life. He prayed feverishly in his head, begging God to let the letter say what he was convinced in his heart now it did not say.

Harry put his finger underneath the flap and slid the envelope open. He involuntarily closed his eyes, too afraid to look. Hesitantly he squinted down at the paper, only actually looking with one eye. One word jumped off of the page like a lightning bolt into the synapses of his brain. “Congratulations.” It said. It was the first word of the letter.

The light of the sun was suddenly blinding to Harry. His eyes were instantly full of tears. A wall inside cracked substantially and Harry was completely overwhelmed with relief. His prayers were answered. He was going to be free. Overcome he dropped down onto his knees right on the side of the road. He dipped his head down, resting it on the sun-warmed concrete. He made an oath kneeling there in the street. He resolved to

spend his life in the light of God. He would pursue the safety of this feeling until he was bathed in it again. He would try to do for God what God had done for him. That such thinking was arrogance never even occurred to him. His prayers were answered and the feeling of it made him feel grand. He wanted to answer the prayers of God, even if he didn't know what that meant. He resolved to read the entire Bible. Really read it. Not just as a disparate collection of stories but as a book. He wanted to know the whole story. He wanted to understand what God wanted from him and do his best to provide it.

Harry went to Indiana University. He enrolled in two classes about religion, an English, and a math. He took a light course load his first semester so that he could concentrate a good amount of his energies towards campus ministry. In the weeks since his oath he decided that preaching directly to the student body, telling his story to them and showing them how God saved him, was the best way to fulfill God's wishes for him.

It didn't exactly work out the way he'd planned.

It was a bright sunny Fall afternoon. Harry walked out of his dorm and into the warm air with a smile on his face and God on his lips. After fifteen minutes of switching his wardrobe he'd finally settled on a plain white T-shirt, ironed; and his best pair of jeans. He'd switched back and forth three times between the small brown bible and the big red one. In the end he took the red one. It would, he felt, help to draw people's attention away from him and onto the word of God.

He'd spied his spot the first day he wandered around the campus. It lay directly in the path between the campus's most busy buildings, Ballantine and Woodburn Halls. The land between the buildings was covered with grass and several thick copses of trees. There was even a small creek running just behind where Harry decided to stand with an

arched wooden bridge crossing it. The whole scenery reminded him of the old renaissance paintings with the saints standing in idyllic settings petting squirrels.

Because he knew he was going to be nervous Harry made himself a thermos full of lemonade. He took a swig of it and put it down along with his bag in the grass. For a moment he just stood. He closed his eyes, felt the sun and smelled the wind. He thanked God for the chance to spread his word and when his eyes opened again he started.

“The LORD GOD is in every soul, every one. You are all sinners. I am a sinner. We all must look for redemption. We can find it in the words of the Savior, the words of the Lord.”

And away he went.

Foot traffic was light. A pretty blonde and her fraternity boyfriend walked by and didn't even glance in Harry's direction. It was the same way with scowling guy in all black and the two Asian women who walked past. After that Harry mostly stopped looking up. He backed off from the preaching and just read aloud from the New Testament. The standard stuff. He read the Gospels. Some proverbs. He avoided the Revelations stuff. He had strong feelings about the chapter, but didn't consider it good to discuss in mixed company. Harry read with all the considerable passion and enthusiasm he could muster. Most people ignored him completely.

For twenty minutes he read and not a single person stopped to listen to his words, but it was OK. Harry expected them to ignore him. He would be a fisherman, fishing for souls. If it was time then the chosen would show themselves. If not, they would keep walking.

Harry frequently went into his mind's eye and held long mental conversations with Jesus. Only Harry's Jesus didn't look like the Aryan Hippy you see on religious calendars and church mailings. Harry's Jesus was a battered man who still held his head high. He wore the scars on his head from the crown of thorns like a badge of honor. The place on his side where the spear stuck in was proof that Jesus too was burned in the crucible of human suffering. Harry could only boggle at the strength of any creature, man or God, willing to face extreme physical torture and to say, I will accept this and worse so that others may be free. That was an intoxicating ideal. And a dangerous one. Harry felt that he was burned in a similar crucible. He read the story of Jesus' life and a very tiny part of himself thought his own sufferings made the few hour's of Jesus' pain seem like a paltry bad weekend. Harry'd grown up knowing nothing but irrational fear and pain. This didn't make Harry think he was better than Jesus. But it did convince him his own place in history was destined to be equally important.

Then classes started to let out. The trickle of people became a flood. When the first crest of people came by Harry kept his head down. He increased the volume of his reading from "The scourging and the crowning" section of the Gospel of John, but he kept his eyes locked onto the page.

"Look everyone, it's a fiction reading." Came a voice from one of the passers-by. Many people within hearing distance laughed.

The remark took Harry by surprise. He didn't expect outright hecklers. Sure, he knew going in that he'd get into a few heated discussions; after all, religion was a serious topic and it wasn't uncommon for people to get their hackles up over it. But what happened wasn't discussion.

The first heckler was just the tip of the iceberg. Within five minutes there was a group of people standing and sitting in a ring around him. Two or three people actually took out sandwiches and sodas and began to eating their lunch. They would pick out little things he said and mock him about them. The bigger the crowd got the lower and more venomous the heckling became. The worst thing was there were a few people who knew the scriptures better than he did. They could rattle scripture off like an Alabama Preacher on Sunday, but they didn't believe a word of it, and they told him so.

Their knowledge of the Bible was filled hatred and scorn. They hurled the words at him like bricks. They told him it was good Jesus delivered Harry to college because that way he could learn a thing or two about the nonsensical nature of the Bible. They threw the story of Job at him and the name stuck. His detractors started calling him Brother Job. Two particularly cruel guys took up station on either end of the path that led up to where Harry was trying to preach.

They called out, "Come one, come all, come see the comic philosophy of Brother Job. Your suffering makes God happy so come one come all and suffer."

Eventually the crowd bored with philosophical argument and the discourse slipped down several notches into outright verbal assault.

"Are you a virgin?"

One guy stuck out as the worst. He was clearly a fraternity pledge wearing the required uniform, tan pants and a blue button up shirt. He was the kind of tall handsome guy who tear the wings off flies and ultimately hate themselves because they really like wearing women's panties. He wasn't content to argue with Harry about the Bible.

Although startling, there was at least a shred of an attempt at communication from the people who were arguing about religion. This guy wasn't interested in that.

“Are you a sinning masturbator?” He asked. “Have you popped a cherry yet Brother Job?” He laughed. “Are you,” he paused for comic effect, “a homosexual?”

Shocked, Harry stopped talking. He took a deep breath. Thinking of his lemonade he bent down to his bag. He took out the bottle and immediately the guy tore into him.

“What ya got there Buddy? Drinking a little vodka and lemonade?” The guy Harry immediately labeled “the Creep” asked.

“Hey maybe there's some acid in the lemonade. Is that electric lemonade?” Someone else chimed in.

The comments about the alcohol hit a sore spot in Harry, especially coming from an obnoxious ass like the Creep. Harry's Father drank Vodka. Rage boiled up his neck. He stopped talking entirely. For a moment he very seriously considered punching the Creep in the face. He considered punching everyone in the face. For a long minute it was unclear if Harry was going to snap or not. He focused on the ground, his head down. He forced himself to ignore the Creep. He was there to spread the word of God. To make people understand the suffering of Jesus, it wouldn't do to fight. He breathed through his nose and tried to concentrate on other things, the smell of the grass or the particularly nice shade of blue in the sky.

Instead of throwing a punch Harry gathered his things and walked away. Before he did he had one final thing to say. He cleared his throat, straightened his back and spoke.

“I stand here before you today because I worry about your souls. Satan is a powerful deceiver and you all risk the eternal hell-fires of damnation. You laugh and mock at me because you are afraid for your own souls. You know the lives you lead are empty. You know you cannot find salvation at the mall. You cannot find salvation in a BMW. Salvation comes from the heart and all of your hearts are dead. You are blind, angry fools who whistle while you dig your own graves of Gucci handbags and DVD players. Repent! Accept Jesus. Step off of the path of the secular zombie consumer and into the light of the Lord.”

Harry turned on his heel and walked away from the small crowd that had gathered. They called after him, mocking him, demanding to know why he was leaving, if he no longer cared whether their souls rotted in the medieval concept of Hell. He ignored them and kept walking, not feeling he could keep it together much longer. The urge to run came and went several times in the first fifty feet. The people who gathered to listen stood around for a minute or two to see if the guy was coming back, when he didn't the crowd dispersed.

No one noted the man who followed after Harry carrying a larger satchel that caused him to walk tilted over like a certain famous tower in Pisa.

Chapter 4

“Excuse me.” Came a male voice from behind.

Feeling sure whoever was behind him had followed in order to say some mean or clever thing about him at his own expense Harry briefly considered running for his dorm

which was across Jordan Street, only a hundred yards away. He'd calmed down enough to know that he didn't want to get that upset twice in one afternoon. In the end though, Harry stopped and turned to face whoever was accosting him.

He was surprised to find an adult walking in his direction. He was a rather normal looking fellow with a wild shock of brown hair on his head, glasses on his nose, and a couple days growth of beard loitering on his cheeks and chin. As soon as the man saw he had Harry's attention he held out his hand to shake. Reluctantly, still expecting some kind of trap, Harry shook the man's hand. He had a firm, friendly handshake to go along with a grin so lacking in malice Harry found himself lowering his guard in spite of his trepidation about the man's motives.

"I'm Professor Spade, but you can just call me Elias." The man offered by way of introduction.

A teacher? Harry thought before replying. "Hi. My name is Harold Bonden. You can call me Harry."

"Listen Harry. I wanted to stop you before you made it all the way home and tell you that it wasn't right what happened back there."

"You have a relationship with Jesus too?" Harry asked hopefully.

"No. I'm afraid not." Elias grinned. "But just because I don't share your views doesn't make me feel the need to tear apart your own."

"Well thanks, I guess." Harry smiled his nervous, shy smile.

"This is a secular campus. In the same way a Satanist isn't going to find too many believers in a Synagogue you aren't going to find too many people here that agree with your point of view either. What church are you associated with?"

“I haven’t found one in Bloomington yet. I figure I have four years to find my spiritual home here.”

“Fair enough. You shouldn’t have too much trouble. Ironically, especially considering my last sentence to you, there are churches every twenty feet or so once you get beyond the range of campus. We’re still in south-central Indiana after all. Well, I won’t hold you. I just wanted to let you know I admire the courage of your convictions. I don’t know how you’re set up for friends here, but if you’re feeling homesick or whatever my office is on the fifth floor of Ballantine or you can email me anytime. I’m in the campus directory. Good luck Harry.”

Elias shook the boy’s hand again and Harry thanked him for taking the time to speak to him. The professor left and Harry found himself feeling a lot better.