

## Foreword

To paraphrase my seventh-grade teacher, Sister Mary Donald; while teaching the class to diagram sentences, she once said to us, "Words have an exact meaning. They define principles and are the bridge between us that elevates man above animals. If we abandon principle and conflate contradictions, we become delusional. If we become delusional, civil society will be swept away."

That was over 60 years ago. I didn't make much of it at the time. Society was civil then, and respect for each other generally ruled the day, even among opposites on the political spectrum. I remember those pearls of wisdom because they made such an impression on my young malleable mind. Sister Donald is gone now, and my enormous regret is I was too young and did not possess the intellectual acuity to value her prescience. She didn't know it, but she was describing the world of today exactly.

We constantly watch politicians and other authoritarians bastardize reality and force-feed children philosophical fiction. Truth has now become lies and lies have now become truth. Perversion is now considered acceptable and the norm, while chaste is considered aberrant. History is being rewritten to obscure past achievements and mistakes, to eradicate the lessons our children need to learn if they are to build a viable future.

They must not be allowed to think. If they learn to think, they learn to question. If they question the authoritarian who peddles perversity, his grasp on power becomes a house of cards in a hurricane.

We are on the verge of losing our country. Those of us with a mind see it because reality speaks for itself. Only the delusional close their eyes. We are inundated with propaganda, intimidated, and labeled as guilty of being conspiratorialist when we speak out against the perverse and corrupt.

The enemy refuses to admit conspiracy is defined as more than one. When people collude to betray their brothers and sisters, they conspire and become the harbingers of America's end. Autocrats regulate dissent and political resistance by artful misdirection as they distribute fear and guilt like Halloween candy. Their greatest nemesis is our awareness of the subterfuge when we realize how pitifully weak and puny, they really are. That awareness is our only hope to salvage our heritage.

Integrity has become only a repressed word in the dictionary, no longer Sister Donald's definition. We listen to politicians brazenly boast about their scandalous accomplishments and the lies that now always accompany political debate. If we do not resuscitate those values enshrined by my seventh-grade teacher, America will quietly slide into oblivion and the world will crash.

To resuscitate the values to save our progeny from the holocaust, we must offer them heroes to emulate who exemplify what is good in humanity, instead of the wicked. Iggy Marcus is my attempt to create such a man.

Gerald Ciccarone

*Fate and tomorrow often balance on the razor-edge of a sword grasped by the hand of a lunatic.*

Tiao Chen

## CHAPTER I

### Bālún Tōng

Tiao Chen pushed the sink cabinet door open just enough to see the bathroom door closing. A few seconds before, someone pushed it open to scan the bathroom. It had to be one of the soldiers looking for refugees. The soldiers were leaving now. The screaming stopped when the last gun emptied its ammunition into the crowd. There was a muffled groan and then complete silence. He waited, listening before pushing the cabinet open. He was small for nine and just barely fit by wrapping his body around the pipes. When the shooting began, he shook so badly the cabinet door rattled and banged. "I have to stop shaking or they will hear me and shoot me too," he cried to himself, gasping in horror through a torrent of tears.

He crawled to the bathroom door, whimpering, frightened half to death of what he knew was beyond but didn't want to see. Tiao Chen had no choice. He had to know what had become of his parents and his little sister, Heng Cong. These meetings occurred monthly, sometimes bimonthly, and always in secret. His parents belonged to Bālún Tōng. They were leaders of the movement who were looked unfavorably upon by the government. Both parents had been teachers, no longer employed in the Chinese school system. They were classical Chinese and there was no place for them in the secular world of socialism.

He and his sister were brilliant. His parents had begun cultivating genius into their children since they were old enough to sit still and listen. They learned the Chinese classics, no longer available in the public square. Mao Zedong ensured that, during the purge when he burned the books and murdered 77 million people just because they remembered China's heritage and resisted his dictates.

They had recited poetry and music and read to them from the many books they had secreted under the floorboards in their apartment. The people of Bālún Tōng were the only remaining path to the past. Without them, the culture and beauty, once China's signature, would disappear forever. His parents made him and Heng Cong memorize the classics and relentlessly emphasized the significance of China's history.

"It must not die with our generation," his parents had said to them... "and there is great hope. We are 70 million strong. The murder has stopped. It has been said the American who single-handedly invaded Zongnanhai with his daughter a few years ago was responsible. Rumor has it he forced Fun Chou Dung to kiss general Rishi on the lips after they protested his ultimatum. He told them murdering Chinese citizens would not be tolerated. Several soldiers were witness to the incident." Tiao Chen's father laughed. "I would have given a lot to be a fly on the wall that day."

Tiao Chen, on his knees, shook as he pushed the bathroom door open to view the carnage. It was more than his young mind could handle. The soldiers had used automatic weapons and obviously overdid it. There was blood and body parts everywhere. Evidently, they weren't happy just to murder everyone. They had to dismember them with wildfire. He knew his parents were dead and collapsed in anguish, covering his mouth to hold the vomit back, sobbing hysterically.

He lay there for some minutes with his face buried in his vomit-covered hands until the sobbing subsided. He knew he had to move. He just had no idea where he was going to go or what he was going to do. He would find someone, a friend, or maybe his aunt. They were Bālún Tōng also. Thank Tian they weren't here tonight, he thought. He wrestled with himself for several minutes. He did not want to see, but he had to locate his parents and sister, just one last time. Sixty mangled corpses were covered in blood with body parts and intestines strewn everywhere.

Crying, he tiptoed through the massacre, trying to find his family. He wailed in anguish as he looked at the people, many of whom he had known for years, now without faces. Their identity had been obliterated with machine gun fire. He couldn't stop crying but found it within himself to start rolling over corpses, trying to identify his parents.

His mother's shoes gave them away. He looked momentarily but began vomiting again and collapsed among the bloodied corpses, weeping hysterically. His parents loved him and made it more than evident with the magnificent education they were giving him. This appeared to be the end of the world for Tiao Chen. He wanted to lie there and die with his parents. He would follow them to heaven.

Then, he heard the grunt. He raised his head as his mother's corpse began to move. He heard a small voice whimper. His heart melted as a fresh flood of tears streamed down his cheeks. He crawled over the bodies, his hands covered with sticky brown clotting blood, until he reached his mother's corpse. Crying hysterically, he rolled his mutilated mother off his sister. In her last act of maternal heroism, Lin Shi had pulled his seven-year-old sister tight to her breast and fell on top of Heng Cong to protect her from the monsters. His mother's bullet-ridden corpse somehow protected Heng Cong from the fire. Maybe it was the angle the bullets entered from. She fell on top of Heng Cong and none of the bullets struck her straight on.

Tiao Chen's heart nearly exploded in anguish at that moment. He gazed at the face of the woman who had loved him and brought him into this world. Her face was a frozen seraphic smile. She had died a happy woman thinking her daughter would live. His sister had been knocked semi-conscious, unable to breathe, pinned beneath the weight of her mother. Her eyes fluttered open, then saw her brother, and she smiled. Unaware of what happened and consumed by shock, Heng Cong had not witnessed the carnage and did not comprehend that her mother and father were lying beside her in a pool of blood.

Tiao Chen acted quickly. He knew he had to. He must get his sister out of there and away from the bloodied mess that was once their parents. His sister was younger and not as resilient. He would not allow the image of their mother and father's mutilated corpses to be her last memory of them. He threw his shirt over his sister's head and pulled her toward the rear of the hall, half dragging and half carrying her. They stumbled several times, slipping on blood and falling among the corpses as they scrambled to the exit. His sister looked back and began screaming for her mother.

"No!" He shouted at Heng Cong. "You must not look!" They were almost at the exit. "We're almost there. We must leave immediately!"

Tiao Chen had wanted to die just minutes before and would have remained lying between his parent's lifeless bodies when the cleanup men arrived and found him. Now, Heng Cong was about to save her brother's life by forging the motive to save his sister.

It was none too soon. Thankfully, they were at the rear exit. The cleanup crew, some 30 men in white suits with body bags slung over their shoulders, had just entered the slaughter ground. They were under orders, direct from the top. Clean the mess up and destroy all the evidence, ASAP. Li Shen Rishi wanted no martyrs. Martyrs were bad for authoritarians. They inspired common men with passion, dedication, and the courage to fight. That wasn't all, however. He remembered the day at Zongnanhai when Iggy Marcus's eleven-year-old daughter made a laughingstock out of him and the general secretary, forcing them to kiss each other on the lips in front of 100 soldiers. Then came the ultimatum from Marcus to kill no more people. Apparently, the general secretary felt he could get away with murder without repercussions.

Tiao Chen dragged his sister up the stairs to the street. She refused to follow him as she tried to pull him back to the killing ground. She was in shock and didn't understand her parents were dead. She wanted her mother.

"No! You must follow me, Heng Cong! Mama and papa are dead! They have been killed. I know it is hard for you, but you saw the bodies. There is no hope they are still alive. Now, if we wish to live, we must get far away from this place! We will go to Auntie Zia. She is Bālún Tōng. She will help us. Maybe we can stay with her."

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Zia and her husband both cried. "My sister is dead!" She sobbed. "Why did they start the killing again?"

"It has been two years since they stopped murdering us!" Said their uncle Chu. "I wonder what brought this on... two years," he murmured, softly speculating. "It doesn't make any sense. None of our people advocate violence or try to overthrow authority. We just quietly practice our religion. Why the massacre?"

"You do understand, Chu." Said Zia. "We of Bālún Tōng, represent a greater threat to them than all the armies of their enemies combined. They can keep the enemies at bay with a larger army, but we are 90 million strong, and they cannot keep what is within China at bay forever. So, they kill us as examples!"

Chu shook his head in affirmation. "Yes, I see. I had just hoped the murder would not start over again. We all heard of the American who went to Zongnanhai and ordered Dung and Rishi to stop killing or there would be consequences. I don't think those men believed the American."

"One thing is for certain, Chu. We must get these two out of the country. Despite the masses of people in this country, everyone has a number assigned to them, and so do these children. The Army has nothing but time on its hands, and it will pick up the corpses, identify them, and realize the children are not among them. Then, they will probably come for them. This is the computer age, and everything goes in the databank. They may not come tomorrow, but they will come someday, and these two will be eliminated."

"Just how are we going to do that?"

"Trust me, Chu. We have friends and relatives in America, and I will contact them. We have a code for communication in secrecy. It is where these two children must go... America. I don't know how we will do it, but we must do it."

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Iggy and junior were putting the finishing touches on Baby. Junior smiled, "she's state-of-the-art, Dad. Even better than me. I think it's going to be nice having a sister. I'm not really sure what nice feels like, but I know it will be applicable."

Iggy's sat phone buzzed. He left it on speaker. "Hello, Iggy Marcus here. How are you, Deli?"

"I am well, Iggy. And you?"

"Never been better. What can I do for you Deli Li?"

"I need your help, sir. You instructed me to call anytime if something like this occurred. This is one of those times."

"Go on."

"Fun Chou Dung and his pet general have started killing again. They are sadistic monsters, and they do it with vengeance. They just slaughtered 60 people at a meeting. It was horrific. Two of the children escaped, and they must leave the country. Sooner or later, and probably sooner, the authorities will come for them. Everybody has a number, and no one escapes, even with 1 ½ billion."

"Where are they now?"

"They are with their aunt and uncle, also members of Bālún Tōng."

"I see. How old are they?"

"The boy is nine and his sister is seven. Can you help. They are so young, and they watched their parents slaughtered mercilessly."

"Hmmm, that's something no one should ever see, no matter what age. Tell you what, Deli, there's no time like the present. How quickly can you inform them I will come?"

"They have phones. They are monitored but we have code. I can text them anytime. They are waiting to hear, in fact."

"Why don't you call them, do not text, and make it clear who I am, what I can do, and I will be there in a matter of a few minutes. Once they are notified, pick a safe address away from home, drop the children off, and I will be there in a matter of minutes."

"Amazing! Can you actually do that? I mean, a matter of minutes?"

"Yes, Deli, minutes. Why don't we do it immediately? I will wait for your call, then be on my way."

"Incredible, Iggy. These are two very bright children, and their parents were old-school teachers. They worked at menial jobs to stay below the radar, having been ostracized from society as Bālún Tōng members. They attended a meeting where they were slaughtered. I will be back to you shortly."

Iggy and junior continued their work on Baby until the sat phone buzzed. "Iggy here, Deli. What do you have for me?"

"They are in the city of Fu yang. There is a place, Yu Dafu Park, on the Fun Chun River. They are a half hour away. What would you have me tell them?"

"It is 7:39 PM here. It is 9:39 AM in Fu yang. Tell them to leave for the park at their convenience. Hopefully, tonight because I have nothing else on the agenda. When they arrive at the park, have them leave the cell phone with the children. Before they depart, have them dial this number 000 222 4446. It will work and is specifically dedicated to my phone. I will home in on the signal and be there within two minutes, maybe three. So, before they dial the phone, tell them to say their goodbyes. When they are ready, they must dial the phone and leave immediately. This is for their own security."

"That's simple enough. I just have one question. How did you ever figure out the difference in time zones? It took you less than a second. It's amazing."

"I have a way with numbers, Deli. Call and let me know what their intentions are, and I will respond. Good luck."

Iggy's sat phone buzzed 15 minutes later. "I think it must be your friend, Deli. He didn't waste any time. I'm really getting good at this small talk business," commented Junior as Iggy answered the sat phone.

"Iggy here, Deli. What is the agenda?"

"They are on the way now. They should be at the park in less than an hour. I explained some of this to them, but not everything. It's difficult to do in code. They understand, however, and will leave the phone with the children. They will call you. Good luck...and thank you."

Iggy turned to junior. "Please find Gloria, Junior. As usual, she's not wearing her watch. Ask her to come with us; we're leaving for China, shortly."

"You got it, pops. Your wish is my command." Junior said over his shoulder as he headed for the exit.

Iggy laughed, wondering if he overdid it just a little with Junior's small talk department. He tapped his watch bezel. "Melanie? What are you doing right now?"

"Teaching music in the auditorium. Why?"

"Gloria, Junior, and I are headed on a rescue mission. Two young Chinese kids have just had their parents murdered by Dung and Rishi. They must leave the country. I'm going after them. I would like you to come if you can break away."

"I can be there in a few minutes. Are you in the hangar with Daedalus?"

"We will be in a few moments."

"See you shortly."

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45 minutes later, Daedalus floated over Yu Dafu Park on the banks of the Fun Chun River. They could see the two children below. There appeared to be alone in the center of a large grassy area.

"This isn't good, Dad," said Gloria. "There are over 100 soldiers hidden in the bushes surrounding the field."

"No, this is not good." Replied Iggy. "No problem for the kids. We can shield them, and they will be safe. Obviously, the aunt and uncle's phones are not as secure as they think. So, there is another problem. The aunt and uncle have evidently been taken into custody. They are Bālún Tōng also, and their survival is a low probability, now."

"What are we going to do, Dad?" asked Junior. If it was my decision, I would encapsulate a few square miles. This happened very fast. It was only minutes from when we received the phone call before we arrived here. The aunt and uncle are probably still in the area."

"Maybe, but I don't think so, Junior." Iggy replied as he activated the onboard shield of Daedalus. "If the aunt and uncle are still within the shielded area, we must broadcast instructions for people driving vehicles to stop before they run into the magnetic wall."

Junior was studying the monitors and sensors. "I believe they are out of the area, Dad. There are no other military vehicles nearby, and certainly, none of them are leaving the area. There is a military chopper about 6 miles out and headed south. I would bet one of my computer chips the helicopter contains the aunt and uncle."

"You and Melanie are to stay with the two children at the park and shield them. I'll take care of the rest," he said as he set Daedalus down next to the two frightened children.

He approached the two children and spoke in Cantonese. "My name is Iggy, and this is Melanie and Junior. I have come at the request of your aunt and uncle to take you to America. They have been arrested, which I'm sure you are unaware of. I'm leaving Melanie and Junior with you. They will watch over you until I return with your aunt and uncle. He's fun to be around and tells jokes." With that, Iggy boarded Daedalus and they rose in pursuit of the chopper.

"How are we going to do this, Dad?" Gloria inquired, knowing they could do nothing to encapsulate the chopper while it was in flight.

"The kids will be fine with your mother and Junior until we return. We will follow the chopper until it lands. Then we will shield it and rescue the aunt and uncle.

Thirty minutes later, the chopper landed at the Zhoushan Island military complex. Moments later, Daedalus settled onto the flight line next to the chopper. Gloria encapsulated the area, isolating them from any military personnel who might intervene. Iggy crossed the pavement and approached the chopper. Two security guards and the pilots exited with drawn weapons. The security guards fired on him as he approached. He spoke to them in perfect Mandarin Chinese.

"Your weapons cannot harm me. I am shielded by a magnetic field. You may harm yourselves, however, by ricochet. I have come for the two people who are your prisoners. You will turn them over to me now."

"No, we cannot do that," replied the captain, who was the point guard. They are under arrest as political prisoners."

"You're not being given a choice," replied Iggy as he walked past the soldiers and encapsulated them. He entered the rear cargo door of the chopper. He was greeted by a pilot with a drawn weapon, who he encapsulated immediately with instructions explaining he might kill himself if he fired his weapon within the force field.

The pilot understood. Everyone on the planet understood the technology of Iggy Marcus at this point. They all knew his force field was a virtual wall shielding anyone within it from anything attempting to penetrate it. Iggy climbed aboard the chopper and approached the two people he had known he would find. Their hands were cuffed in front of them, and they sat on sling seats attached to the chopper wall. The two captives stared in amazement at their benefactor. The word had been passed among many millions of Bālún Tōng members about the American who was changing the world and had demanded the CCP stop killing people. Their faces wore an extreme look of relief.

"Hello, my name is Iggy Marcus. We spoke a few hours ago. You are Zia and Chu, the aunt and uncle of the children I have come to bring to America. Judging from the circumstances, I would suggest you come with us. I don't think the prospect of a long, happy life is in the cards for you here. There are many members of Bālún Tōng in America. I think you will find yourself comfortable and quite at home there. And you will be safe. It's up to you, but you must decide now. We are leaving."

Zia and Chu looked at each other inquisitively, but only for a second or two. They both nodded their heads as Iggy unlocked their handcuffs.

Fifteen minutes later, Gen. Rishi was fuming. He hated Iggy Marcus with a visceral passion. The very existence of the man negated the power he possessed as supreme general of the CCP. Marcus could come and go anywhere he pleased in China, and there was nothing he or anyone could do about it. The man's power was staggering. There was another component to this. Though Gen. Rishi was evil, he never lied to himself. He saw Iggy Marcus for exactly what he was. He hated it passionately but acknowledged this man was probably the greatest man who ever lived and probably the most virtuous, as well. As usual, the vision of Iggy Marcus's brilliance was a mirror that terrified Rishi. The vision was unbearable when he began to glimpse his own smallness and lack of character. He had learned to turn off his own self-awareness and ignore the vision, but there was something worse, however. Li Shen Rishi was frightened beyond words wondering when Marcus would come for him.

Tiao Chen, Heng Cong, Zia, and Chu boarded Daedalus.

Gloria probed the children's minds as they entered. "Oh my, Dad, these two are a mess. They are so traumatized from watching their parents slaughtered in front of them. They are going to need lots of help."

Junior commented. "Well, they've certainly come to the right place for that."

Like he had done with the Bramante children 20 years before, Iggy wrapped his arms around Tiao Chen and Heng Cong, projecting love, affection, and tranquility. They felt his deep subliminal presence as it engulfed them and knew, despite their parent's death, there was still a bright future ahead. Iggy was slightly startled. He observed the considerable substance of this boy's character. After unlocking thousands of kids, to lead them into a brilliant future, he realized this young Chinese nine-year-old was already well ahead of any of the children he first unlocked. Interesting. I wonder how far I can take this young man.

Minutes later, Daedalus settled to the flight line in front of the hanger at Lightning Ranch. The newcomers stepped onto the asphalt and were greeted by hugs from Deli Li. "Welcome to America and a better life." He turned to Iggy, startled by contact as they shook hands, "Thank you, my friend. I will be forever in your debt."

Melanie took Zia's hand. "The four of you will stay with us in our home until you get your feet on the ground and become used to America. You'll find Lightning Ranch is a very interesting place. You can meet new friends and explore from here while determining where you fit in."

Luke pulled up in a Land Rover with Parker Bodin and Millie Tuti, two of Iggy's rescued pedophilia victims. "Hi, Dad. Bret and I went looking for you in the lab. You weren't there, but we ran across Baby. She described your mission. You went off to China to rescue these two," he nodded, looking at Tiao Chen and his sister. "I understand they watched their parents slaughtered. Brett and I decided Parker and Millie should introduce them to Lily, Willie, and Nellie. Happy giraffes are the perfect antidote for trauma. Parker and Millie can drive them to the gardens."

Iggy nodded, "sure, why not? That'll take their minds off things."

The four of them drove off in the Land Rover, headed for the gardens after Melanie's... "Don't be late for dinner."

Deli Li's questioning look prompted Iggy's... "Yes? Why the funny look?"

Those children appear the same age as our two refugees. Yet, they drove off in a vehicle. They can't possibly have a driver's license.

Iggy laughed. "No one needs a driver's license here, Deli. Only the ability to drive."

Zia and Chu looked at each other. "I think we are very fortunate, Zia. We have come to America. Something I have dreamed of but never expected. I have only one regret," he grinned.

"Oh?"

"I have no fresh undergarments or money to buy some."

"Always joking, Chu," Zia laughed, realizing their lives just took a quantum leap for the better.

It had only been 10 minutes since they left China. There had been no time for conversation or amenities. "Permit me to thank you for your wonderful hospitality, Mr. Marcus. Zia and I heard about your ultimatum to Fun Chou Dung and Gen. Rishi. The story has traveled widely throughout Chinese society. The soldiers who were there as witnesses started the rumors. Things of that nature always titillate public curiosity, especially concerning government authority. We are honored to make your acquaintance. Evidently, all the stories are true. I have one question; you speak perfect Cantonese without the slightest trace of accent. Were you taught at a young age?"

“No, Chu. Believe it or not, I learned from a few books and listening to others speak.”

Chu nodded... “impressive!”

Melanie couldn't resist. “He flawlessly speaks every language in every dialect. He was struck by lightning 26 years ago. It gave him remarkable abilities. She turned to her husband, “go ahead, dear, shake their hands. They are our guests now, and you have already had contact with the children.”

Iggy didn't care for public displays, but his new guests might as well be aware of his capabilities. He and Gloria would have to help their niece and nephew, and it is a safe bet they would become members of Lightning's student body.

Minutes later, after touching their benefactor's hand... and contact, Zia and Chu looked at each other in amazement. Although Zia was sure their new lives would be amazing, she had no concept of the prodigious part they would play in China's future.

*Nothing is set in stone until history makes it so. Then, its legitimacy, substance, and validity are in the hands of corrupt, opinionated, or at least politically owned historians.*

First Lady Alice Sledge

## CHAPTER II

### END OF THE BEGINNING

Time passes, and the public memory fades. It is a human characteristic. What was urgent and compelling yesterday, is often suppressed today, then evaporates tomorrow. Iggy Marcus and Lightning Inc. had cast a huge shadow and blasted a crater in the status quo, but people continued to go about their business and easily forgot. Those cured of disease by Lightning Inc. medical technology would never forget, but they were a minority. The collective memory of men is short beyond their daily routines. Nuclear war was no longer possible, but no one had ever experienced nuclear war after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, just the fear of it. That esoteric reality was now removed from the human psyche and dwelt far from pressing realities.

Interlink remained. Many of the men at the top were gone, at least for now, but several thousand members, mostly corporate millionaires, and billionaires, had been substantially deprived of their unfettered ability to control and dictate life to the masses. Much of their arrogance and aloof self-importance had been stripped away. Those accustomed to wielding power seethed in crushing hatred for the man who administered that dose of humility. The world was being remade. Its new foundation would obliterate mediocrity to become an object lesson defining excellence... but it would take more than a single generation. The men and women of Interlink, who denigrated others in their pursuit of wealth and power to bolster their self-image, shrunk at the sight of themselves in the mirror of Iggy Marcus. Nuclear war was now off the table. Marcus had achieved his greatest objective, and Interlink's inner circle hated him passionately for it. American Media Inc., now unrestrained, mercilessly pursued corruption, graft, and the flagrant criminality permeating the international business world. Honest men had nothing to fear. Scoundrels and cheats shrunk in fear from the scrutiny of the Marcus media empire. No stone was left unturned during their relentless pursuit of honesty and integrity in the mission to transform society. Some tiger's stripes are indelible, though, and the war continues.

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The world press and broadcast media exploded, reignited by Interlink's bitter eviction from the halls of power. The eruption was a vulcanized tempest of derision directed at the Sledge administration, his Atty. Gen. and finally, Ignatius Marcus Junior, the precipitator of the greatest socio-political and military transformation in history. Only American Media Inc. reported the unbiased truth. The mainstream media spewed lies and innuendo, constantly regurgitating their misinformation on the supposedly unsuspecting public ears and psyche. Owned entirely by one man in Interlink's inner circle, the media were skills for the economic tyrants who Marcus had usurped from complete power and influence.

Interlink remained an octopus with tentacles extending into every aspect of society with its vise-grip on the corporate, media, and political worlds. Iggy Marcus had mercilessly severed one tentacle when he removed thirteen of the Interlink upper-echelon miscreants from society. He delivered them to Guantánamo Bay to await trial by a panel of international jurists from the free world. Those jurists, yet to be impaneled, must emerge from men and women with no philosophical, financial, or family ties as affiliates or allies of Interlink's body or any individual members. Still, only one tentacle had been severed. The octopus was intact with its poisonous bite, refusing to roll over and expire. It became Interlink's mission to convince the masses they were the supposed gurus of democracy and the true saviors of the world economy, claiming the current political administration in Washington, and its unholy alliance with the Marcus family, was humanity's economic nemesis. The press continued its rampage

24/7. A never-ending litany of subtle talking points coupled with hysterical screaming became a deluge of psychological intimidation from every information source other than American Media Inc.

Beyond their claim the President and Ignatius Marcus were about to defile America's Constitution, issuing from one side of their mouths, the other side constantly spewed a nonsensical frenzy demanding the United States Constitution be torn apart and rewritten without the first and second amendments to suit their philosophical agenda and doctrine of pseudo-fairness. They were subtle. They understood the masses they had dumbed down. They never stated their agenda. They used hypocrisy and the distortion of the truth to overwhelm and intimidate the deluded population, many of whom had never formed a single critical thought.

Interlink had unlimited funding. All, but a few governments, including the United States, were contributors in the struggle to dominate public opinion. Self-aggrandizing politicians in dozens of countries joined Interlink to bolster their power and self-image, attempting the destruction of Lightning Inc.'s new world architecture. The very few world leaders who refused to hammer the Sledge administration and American Media Inc. were honest men and women or had their own unique, nefarious intent. They understood the political theater the world was being subjected to by the hidden rulers of men and society as they attempted to recapture their centuries old position of absolute power and influence.

Iggy arrested thirteen of Interlink's upper echelon and deposited them at Guantánamo Bay immediately after they attempted to murder him and a few thousand others with nukes from China. The snake's head had not been crushed. The serpent attempted to rise from the ashes and clutch power as it grew its new head. For the first time in 1500 years, one man had overwhelmed the elitist shadow kings who ruled the world since the Holy Roman Empire. Lightning Incorporated's thirty-two orbiting satellites had stripped all military power from every country on earth. All tyrants require a subservient military arm to enforce their commands. Their God complex requires all men to genuflect in supplication. The military arms of the tyrants had been severed with a technology created by one man a thousand years ahead of his time. Most of the world was oblivious, but it was the technology bound to save humanity from its path of self-destruction.

Fear and uncertainty overwhelmed Interlink's arrogance immediately following the arrest of its leaders. For a time, they assumed a fetal position subordinate to the new power represented by Lightning Inc. and Iggy Marcus. Intimidated, they sailed uncharted seas for the first time in a thousand years. Interlink and its predecessors had ruled the world economically and politically since the Holy Roman Empire, controlling 95% of the world's wealth, becoming the subsequent kingmakers for every political edifice. They held the puppet strings for the greatest sovereignty that had ever existed, the Spanish - Portuguese empire.

They coordinated their autocracy with the wealth of the Vatican bank, formally called The Institute for the Works of Religion, still fondly referred to among the Cardinals as la Banca Vaticana Dello Spirito Santo. Other than during the tenure of a few warrior popes, the alliance remained intact, even after Henry VIII created the Church of England. Interlink had recently catalyzed the resignation of Pope Germain 16th. Pope Germain emphasized the marriage of science and religion as he attempted to prepare the Catholic Church for the 21st century. He was an advocate of freedom and the power of the individual. His beliefs encompassed the sinfulness and irrationality of both totalitarianism and homosexuality. Individual freedom and power were concepts that conflicted with Interlink's plans for the psychological intimidation of society and their intended emasculation of America. There is always a difficulty for independent men who challenge the elitist power structure; they get their heads handed to them. Germain 12th, forced into retirement because he wouldn't play the game, was succeeded by Jose Amantilado, an avowed proponent of socialism and ally of the new world order, who assumed the name Pope Innocent 14th.

No nucleus of power existed anywhere in the world undominated by Interlink since the Italian Renaissance until the Bolshevik revolution created the Soviet Union. Then came the rise of Mahatma Gandhi and the installation of Mao Zedong in modern China. Still, they were able to construct a symbiotic relationship with those three superpowers expecting to economically manipulate the entire globe. They had not considered the monumental power of China's conceited ability to become the greatest manufacturing edifice in history until it was too late. They had expected to use China as a production facility for goods to be distributed globally with a substantial profit falling in their coffers. That never happened. To Interlink's dismay, they were relegated to accepting a tithe instead of the expected lion's share of the profits. China would allow no one to usurp their mission to rule the world.

Authoritarian elitists had been at this for centuries. They knew mind control and how to achieve the intellectual destruction of men. It was the necessary component required to create the caste system and their seat at the summit of power. They intended to destroy the mind's ability to think critically. Once accomplished, it ended freedom, justice, opportunity...and morality.

Those were once America's vital foundation blocks. The lush promise of capitalism's rewards had been the prima fasciae example of its righteous virtue, giving America's population the most advanced, intelligent, and free society in history. Despite America's early embrace of slavery, it eventually became the first country to abolish the concept of forced servitude. The individual freedom and benevolence which could only be granted by capitalism was the antithesis of the authoritarian grip on humanity. They could not exist together side-by-side. The superiority of capitalism eclipsed the authoritarian product of socialism, shining a brilliant light on the deception, but only for honest people with open eyes. Individuality underpinned capitalism. Socialism was both the precursor and product of collectivism. Iggy knew the only way to defeat autocracy and socialism was the education of the individual.

Enlightenment was his underlying premise when he and his family created Lightning Inc. They built American Media Inc., the largest single publishing empire in history owned by one family and opened a school to reincorporate brilliance and achievement into the mentality of American youth. The unclouded vision and acceptance of reality underpinned everything he taught the young men and women of his student body. Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics was the basis of their socio-political education.

They learned the principles and veracity of Aristotle's definition of politics: the noble activity in which men decide the rules they will live by and the goals they will collectively pursue. They came to understand no political edifice would function unless its operating theme was based on honor and integrity. They were the singular virtues defined by morality that must underpin everything in the activities of men, or the system would implode.

He taught them reality must always predicate everything. They saw American society was perishing in an orgy of depravity, consumerism, vanity, and delusion. If it continued, it would be the extinction of principle and the harbinger of chaotic anarchy. It was his mission to teach each one of his acolytes the true definition of morality and how to live by those concepts every moment of their lives. He engrained them in the fabric of their character as his mother had done with him. Their lives were enmeshed in morality's four tenets: knowledge there is a difference between right and wrong, good, and evil. The most important tenet -- the vision to see and accept the truth. Integrity then compelled dedication to the good and the courage to stand by one's convictions no matter what the price.

Society had been dumbed down. The liberal restructuring of the higher education institutions contradicted everything American. Delusion was force-fed to a barely literate, unsuspecting youth. It wasn't their fault. Indoctrination replacing individuality with collectivism had incrementally begun in grammar school, creating an entire generation of mindless non-entities. The generation who never learned to critically think eventually became the teachers and stereotypes the next generation would emulate.

This conspiracy to enslave the masses had been present in man's emotional and intellectual DNA since he began recording history but became pervasive in America during the last half of the previous century. America's operating system, capitalism, had historically cauterized American society for the first time, inoculating it against the ravages of collective socialism, which had overwhelmingly proven itself to be the gateway to slavery. The first half of the 20th century was preoccupied with World War I, World War II, and then Korea. Thousands of America's finest citizens perished in those wars.

War was always an aberration. The handful of individuals who started war and capitalized on its spoils convinced their minions on the battlefield they were in the right, and God was on their side. Tyrants and autocrats had always used treachery and hypocrisy to manipulate armies until the nuclear age, and we arrived at the atomic threshold. Now, men could incinerate every human alive with the push of a button.

Interlink was attempting to re-ascend the summit of power. Their brazen, undisguised attempt at psych-ops to achieve their goal was obvious to many, thanks to American Media Inc., but it was too soon. Most people did not yet possess the intellectual acuity to sort through the propaganda. Although they were able to flood the globe with a constant plethora of lies, there was one enormous stumbling block; reality was their enemy, and American Media Inc. was their antithesis. Both socialism and capitalism axiomatically contradicted each other and instigated violent debates to define allegiance to each philosophy. It was what used car salesmen called the 'hard sell', always riddled with exaggerations, and lies.

Debates, always about differing opinions, can be resolved with empirical proof, but only to clear open minds. Delusion, a fixed false belief resistant to reason or confrontation with actual fact, as defined, cannot flourish under the umbrella of proof in the face of contradictory reality. The remnants of Interlink offered no evidence because none existed. The Marcus family, however, possessed the greatest influential argument and proof of validity in history. They stood atop the creation of Lightning Inc.'s unbelievable technologies that were beginning to remake the world. Hunger and disease were disappearing as each technology was implemented. Slowly but surely, this was happening around the globe and could not be denied by the media minions of Interlink. So, unable to negate or even refute what was happening, Interlink chose the only possible course of action, deny its existence with lies to blind vision, deafen the ears, and obliterate the message.

Interlink immediately lost the propaganda war. Lightning Inc. had trained and deployed hundreds of people, many of them already associates. They were dispatched to various locations around the globe and opened clinics consisting of Iggy's avant-garde technologies. All clinics were shielded, and prospective patients were allowed to enter in non-threatening groups. In the six months following the global deployment, over seven million people were cured of terminal cancer and another several million were treated for congestive cardiac failure or associated maladies. The miracle could not be hidden by a false diatribe from a corrupt press as 90% of the medical authorities in existence roared their opposition to one man who refused to genuflect and elicit their permission. Their patent excuse was life safety, but there were no denying millions of cured, cancer-free people. The medical community's life safety excuse was lip service to obfuscate their envy and anger about losing dominance of medicine's ivory towers.

They couldn't stop the millions of people everywhere who were getting a taste of Iggy's technology. It soon became apparent that government, medical institutions, and big Pharma cared less for people's health and well-being than the bottom line and their position atop the pinnacles of authority. The results of the technology deployment were more than edifying. They were conclusive, and thousands of people who would die from cancer were given a new lease on life without the imprimatur of the FDA or medical authorities in other countries.

These miraculous cures and treatments were not created by the medical establishment who had supposedly dedicated themselves for the previous hundred years to finding the cures for these illnesses. So, the efficacy and validity of the treatments were arrogantly denied at first. One man had discovered what thousands could not, and that didn't sit well with many boards of directors. It was a shining example of where the most significant inventions and improvements to society came from, individual brilliance, not collective impotence. The inability of the pharmaceutical giants to produce cures after the input of billions of dollars in research and development, only to create symptom-treating drugs and enormously expensive and inconclusive partial therapies, was a strident example of the intent and efficacy of their efforts. There was just too much money to be made on therapeutic treatments versus concrete, decisive cures. Complete cures terminate perpetual therapy and stifle cash flow. The brilliance of the Marcus family and associates' accomplishments at their small hospital in rural Montana, driven by principle versus the profit margin and bottom line,

exemplified the true source of creative innovation... and it flew in the face and coffers of organized research. They couldn't stop the millions of people everywhere who were getting a taste of Iggy's technology. It soon became apparent that government, medical institutions, and big Pharma cared less for people's health and well-being than the bottom line and their position atop the pinnacles of authority. The results of the technology deployment were more than edifying. They were conclusive, and thousands of people who would die from cancer were given a new lease on life without the imprimatur of the FDA or medical authorities in other countries.

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Many foreign governments attempted to block entrance to the clinics. They refused to allow entry of their chattel citizenry to benefit from gifts not emerging from their thrones of power. No power on earth possessed the technology to defeat the Marcus magnetic force field surrounding the clinics, however, and no power on earth was able to prevent Iggy Marcus's entry into any country to cure illness, save lives and feed people. Anyone attempting to destroy that much benevolence was motivated by envy and greed, the two sources of all of man's foibles. It wasn't long before local populations were informed of the clinics' existence. They came by the thousands, seeking a cure for every illness imaginable. In the beginning, they were arrested by dictators who refused to stand aside and relinquish dictatorial power over their people. Authoritarians soon realized arresting many thousands of people seeking medical aid was logistically unmanageable. Those despots who ruled, as opposed to governing, were learning the harsh reality of their anemic grasp on power when the people revolted.

*All who carve their initials in granite, for good or ill leave their mark on the planet.  
Those who scribble their names in sand, leave heirs nothing from an impotent hand.* Oniella Kenji

## CHAPTER IV

### AWAKE

Lucky was mix of amazement, disbelief...and apprehension. "My God, Ig. What have we managed to do? Flying around the world in an instant was almost beyond belief. This is way beyond that."

Iggy's wry comment raised Lucky's eyebrows even further. "We've got to give him a name. Maybe he can pick one for himself. I wonder. Since we have built flexible enough arms and legs, I wonder if he'll like to golf. Anyway, I need more pilots."

Lucky's laughter at his brother's wisecrack was way more than uncomfortable. Iggy continued to use the word he and that bothered him. His brother had recently created quantum computer technology far beyond anything devised by men. His original foray into artificial intelligence used atomic particle decay to perform binary calculations. This innovation took it much further. Electromagnetic frequency modulation governing Graphene crystal quantum oscillations performed the same function, only just about instantly. It was the impossible kind of technology only found in science fiction, and a quantum leap above his previous efforts. It allowed instant calculations of almost infinite power on a sub-atomic platform. The electron spin of the single-atom thickness carbon allotrope arranged in a two-dimensional nanostructure lattice was highly conductive, allowing the linear charge conductors to be manipulated as binary counters. He overcame the obstacles of vast data storage and transference from electromagnetic frequency modulation in the sub-atomic microcosm to a usable platform. Then he created a link from his desktop mainframe to the chip embedded in his cerebral cortex. The interface allowed his unique organic brain to have instant subliminal access to unlimited data.

"Lucky lifted the small gray box from the table. This is amazing. It only weighs about five pounds. This is so far beyond anything anywhere no one will believe it. It's fairytale stuff. It's too big Iggy. You have to make it smaller. This just won't do." He needled his older brother. "You only managed to fit the equivalent of a thousand Cray supercomputers in a shoebox. "I thought you didn't want to carry the computer around with you."

"Make fun of me all you want, Lucky, but I'll figure out how to build it small enough to incorporate it into a headband. Just wait."

Lucky nodded in cheerful resignation. "No doubt, brother, no doubt. It will only be the hundredth time I've watched you come up with the impossible."

Iggy had passed his towering intellect to his three unique children. Almost twenty-two years had passed since the lightning strike and MRI tunnel transformed his brain. His intellect continued to expand, and his ability to project moods, emotions, and concepts to others had grown

exponentially with it. In the beginning, his subliminal influence was minimal. Direct physical contact with others opened the floodgates. Gradually over the years, as his capabilities expanded dramatically, he was able to project emotions, moods, and concepts radiating outward, unbounded by physicality or even his visual perspicacity. He remained pragmatic and refrained from using his powers to influence people to act adversely. His innate decency would allow no compulsion of others to act against their will or values.

He wasn't the telepath Gloria was, though. Gloria inherited her father's intellect and like her biological siblings, she arrived with several other enhanced factory options. Her gifts were more fantastic. Unlike her father's ability to sense and project emotions and moods, she could directly communicate telepathically, but it didn't end there. She was able to issue irresistible subliminal commands to any living creature.

The twins, Lori, and Liam were still too young. They obviously had enormous gifts, different from both he and Gloria. They were still developing, and Iggy's assessment of their skills was a work in progress. Lori had already exhibited telekinesis. She was able to move objects through space by focusing the electromagnetic energy of her brain on ambient electrostatic energy. Iggy tried to evaluate her abilities, but she was only seven, so no absolute values were discernible. The range and strength of her powers were yet to be seen.

Liam was an enigma. Iggy had glimpsed a smattering of his abilities. Gloria had opened the telepathic corridor to his mind. Evidently, his strong suit was telescopic vision, and at seven years old, he could see the limits of the chromatic spectrum invisible to others. Once a baseline was established, Iggy periodically surveyed his optical development and capabilities. At six years old, he could see the intense electromagnetic field of living and inanimate objects only visible through Kirlian photography. By his eighth birthday, the entire electromagnetic spectrum, from infrared to ultraviolet, would become visible to him. Every manifestation of energy in existence has a measurable electromagnetic signature. He had the ability to filter and segregate fragments of the spectrum to limit the intensity of unrestricted exposure.

Iggy was undecided about the twins' inheritances. He remained clinically neutral as to cause and effect, waiting for their powers to peak. Not Melanie. She had a mother's intuition, and her children's attributes existed in the realm of surrealism. Melanie instinctively knew her children's gifts were somehow entrusted to them for a purpose. The purpose was obscure, but she knew they would be summoned to action someday.

Iggy finally validated his theory on electromagnetism being the fourth dimension with the construction of Daedalus. Science had previously attributed time to being the fourth dimension defining an object's spatial location at any given instant. He established time as merely the medium the universe flowed through existence within. Every temporal locus point defined specific moments where matter and energy appear in a specific state as a unique and unrepeatable snapshot of existence but exhibited no dimensional parameters.

Science had accepted the theory all matter and energy are manifestations of pure energy. His discovery of transmutation between pure energy and all its manifest forms existed within the fourth dimension of electromagnetism and was the flux surrounding and governing all matter and energy. He had deciphered the complex mathematics of electromagnetism to become his roadmap to manipulate existence.

Iggy's prototype, Daedalus, required the pilot to interface with and become an integral part of the ship's computer. He knew all the energy in the universe is interchangeable with all its various forms consisting of matter, heat, light, .... everything except gravity, which is an interaction between physical bodies with mass. They are the components of the Universe and exist in harmony and symmetry. They are all different manifestations of the living Cosmos. He saw the Universe as conscious, always growing, always designing, and always re-defining itself from moment to moment. He was allowed the discovery and mastery of the one essential and ineffable requirement that would enable travel to the stars... the energy of intellect.

He discovered the energy emanating from intellect, exclusive unto itself, is unique because it is conscious, can demonstrate motive and purpose, as well as issue commands. It is inquisitive and wants to learn, the opposite of coincidence or happenstance. Because of those things, Iggy understood it was the most volatile form of energy in existence. Coupled with computer technology, it would allow him to tap into and shape all other forms of energy, including matter, and then allow limited manipulation of time.

The Universe, the Creator men called God, was the infinite conscious, homogeneous entity existing exclusively for its own sake and had benevolently severed pieces of itself to exist as autonomous entities by design. They were given the freedom to act unhindered for the sake of their own existence.

Electromagnetism was the medium he would manipulate to shape the environment. The universe exists in time, advancing inexorably as events progress. Existence outside the boundaries of that realm is ungoverned by the rules of the dimensional universe. Because intellect was the requirement to shape all forms of energy and time, it would enable access to the realm of nonexistence existing alongside the dimensional universe but containing nothing.

"No matter how often you explain it to me," said Lucky, "I understand the general concept, I just can't grasp the physical reality of making it happen. It's hard to imagine existence and nonexistence, both entities existing side-by-side, one containing everything the other containing nothing. Space is not non-existence... its space! I can come to grips with your explanation that the fourth dimension is electromagnetism, or to be more specific, the flux medium, and constituent of existence that matter and energy operate within, as they relate to each other. I get it. They are all parameters of existence, length, width, and depth as dimensions existing in the flux of electromagnetism, also a parameter or defining dimension. It makes sense when you look at the math and the way the universe is constructed. This business of nothing as an entity existing next to something is way beyond my comprehension."

Iggy chuckled. "You've got to get that out of your mind, Lucky. Don't think of nonexistence as a place. Don't even think of it as a thing. Try to picture it like this... When the ship leaves existence for the realm of nonexistence, it is the only thing that exists in that continuum. In fact, it isn't

even a realm. When you leave existence for nonexistence, you are the only thing that exists and time in the continuum ceases as far as you're concerned until you reenter existence at the selected location. Is that any clearer?"

"Well, maybe. That's a different way to look at it, I think. I believe I understand. Nonexistence is not a place, but maybe only a sort of jumper wire from one locus point to another locus point. That makes more sense except for the concept of the jumper wire."

"I believe this is the purpose for the existence of intellect, Lucky. I am sure it will mesh with the universe harmoniously because this grand design is the purpose of both. This is what existence and our presence in it as individuals have been created for. However, the universe also demands we must learn and develop our ability to participate on that level. The privilege is not granted to every creature, only the potential opportunity. Each entity must earn its way there. But isn't this the way of things, anyway? All things of worth and value must be earned. I believe humanity subconsciously senses these things because we are part of existence, and every society's moral and religious precepts exhibit the efficacy of earning one kind of eternity or another.

I think this is what is meant, although not accurately perceived, when we say man was created in the image and likeness of God. The energy of our intellect will never cease to exist. I suppose you can call it the soul. Whether it will remain intact and aware of its surroundings eternally, is debatable. I have always believed access to the cosmos has more to do with effort than simple satisfactory behavior."

"Well, brother, life sure turned out a lot different than I thought it would when Ellen told me she was pregnant with Lucky Junior, and I now think much differently than I did then. We sure have come a long way, thanks to you. Still, this business of creating a sentient computer scares the pants off me. Not for me. I just keep wondering how it's going to affect my kids."

He turned to Lucky, grinning. "This brand-new technology always seems to be our modus operandi here. I decided this technology doesn't belong on a desktop inside of a box, even though we have it parked there for now. So, I built this guy. Let's see what happens."

"You and I, brother, are the only ones who know what this is really all about. Yeah, I need pilots, but we are about to face an enemy more dangerous and pernicious than anything men have confronted. This robot will have a brain shielded from everything. No electromagnetic pulse or any other invasive onslaught can affect his ability to think. This guy will be impervious to assault. Further, he cannot experience fear, trepidation, or doubt. He's able to do infinite calculations, instantly... A formidable weapon, wouldn't you say? Think about it, Lucky. Mom trained us all to live by the philosophy she taught us about self-image and living without fear. Nonetheless, we are still capable of emotion. Even under the best of circumstances, confronting our own demise will still engender fear." Iggy smiled broadly. "That can't happen to my mechanical son. He will know and understand the mission. I have given him that capability because I created him. This guy will be autonomous and that makes him sentient."

Again, the use of the word, guy. They were staring at a robot. The technology was nothing new for Lightning Inc. They had already built bots capable of human cerebral interface if the human operator had a brain chip and one of Iggy's special wristwatches. Just about everyone at Lightning Ranch had them at this point. It was a requirement to operate their personal electromagnetic defense shields. This was brand new. Iggy had developed an avant-garde titanium skeletal structure fused with silicon. It defied all the laws of contemporary physics related to metallurgy and chemistry. His matter and energy transmutation technology made this fusion of silicon and titanium atoms possible. It was theoretically impossible, but then again, so was just about every other thing he had invented. The skeletal structure of Iggy's new robots was capable of easily carrying 2000 pounds and had unmatched flexibility by anything organic.

His intelligence had been stratospherically elevated since he awoke in the hospital after the lightning strike and was subjected to the intense magnetic field of the MRI tunnel 25 years before. It didn't end there. His life progressed, and his intellectual capabilities constantly expanded over the years. Even his DNA had been modified. The results of that modification became apparent in the three children he and Melanie produced.

Lucky often expressed apprehension about creating smarter, stronger, and swifter robots than humans. It was only a mild concern, however. Yes, the technology might give whoever wielded it the ability to exert control over humanity in the event the technology was released, and someone nefarious had access. It was different now. He and Iggy had inserted the last of 16 mini light/gas gyroscopes and then tested the robot for coordination and flexibility under the control of a master computer. He worried about his brother's new computer, though. It was not just slightly more powerful or even twice that of the earlier technology. Processing speed was instant and almost infinite. There was another worrisome factor bothering him. His brother expected and hoped for the possibility of sentience.

The two brothers sat in front of the terminal when Iggy pressed enter. Lights appeared defining system functions. The screen exhibited nothing at first. Then, a thin horizontal line at the top of the screen appeared and drifted to the bottom, followed by another, then another as lines continued to appear and drift to the bottom of the screen. Suddenly, the screen went blank, and a stationary line appeared across the top. It remained for several seconds, then descended to the bottom at blinding speed, followed by trillions of horizontal lines in every color of the spectrum. The brothers watched the process continue for several seconds until the screen exploded in a blinding flash of color and then went dark.

They looked at each other as Lucky wondered what they had just witnessed. Iggy was smiling. "Wait, Lucky. He's learning."

"Learning? What's it learning, Iggy?"

"He's learning about himself and 'who' he is, although I loosely use the term 'he'.

"He?" Lucky questioned, wide-eyed once more at his brother's spectacular ability to surprise.

"Yeah, like I said, I used the term loosely. I should have said 'it', although, who knows, it might consider itself a 'she'," Iggy laughed. "He possesses all the information I possess and all the other information available from all the scientific information in the world as well as all the libraries of the written word. It even has ancient Chinese manuscripts, Indian Upanishads, and Vedas still available. In short, I loaded it with every available piece of information in the human experience."

Lucky's face reflected his intense bewilderment, shaded by apprehension. "I don't see what's funny about this, Iggy. Apparently, you're telling me this computer is awake in some fashion... sentient... maybe?"

"I suppose some would not consider this a laughing matter. Think of it this way, Lucky: All the other AI research laboratories and corporations are claiming ASI, Artificial Super Intelligence. We are lightyears ahead of them because I believe we have created ASSI, Artificial, Sentient, Super Intelligence.

Iggy continued to laugh. "I'm not sure what's going to happen, Lucky. This is completely unique, and I believe he is deciding just how he wants to interact with us."

"If you've already loaded it," Lucky paused still unable to address it as he, "with every single piece of information in existence, what is it bothering to learn?"

"He's not learning that stuff, Lucky. He's contemplating the information as it relates to himself and his existence, then deciding what he wants to do with the knowledge and information. He knows we are here. I expect some sort of greeting, shortly."

"Sorry, brother. I wish you would stop calling it he. You're scaring me out of my socks. You're talking about a sentient life form here. This is not a joke in my book. I sure hope you don't intend to give it arms and legs by sticking it in one of our new bots. I know it's a computer, but sentience might mean the capability to become mechanically emotional, or even worse, act radically without emotion. That's truly frightening. It will obviously be smarter than anything else in existence, except perhaps you and Gloria, and if it can become intellectually emotional as well as mobile, who knows what the hell it will do."

Iggy laughed again. "I understand how this might be frightening from a certain perspective. This really lends new meaning to the words, artificial intelligence. The word artificial is a misnomer, Lucky. The definition of artificial is 'made by human beings and not occurring naturally.' While that is true and exactly describes this computer, if I were to give it legs, arms and all the other senses, it could reproduce itself. Then, I suppose it would not be created by human beings but would then be self-propagating and capable of reproducing. Consequently, a more appropriate term would be a nonbiological, sentient life form. Don't you think?"

"Yeah, I get it, Ig. The only problem is that it would then be far superior to human beings, from an intellectual perspective and physical as well, with the capability of procreating in a mechanical way. Then, we would actually be inferior. What then? You would have created a race of superior, sentient beings. How would they look at us? They would obviously be like each other in every respect, in terms of knowledge, logic, and the way they relate to the universe. They would also be individual entities with the ability to interface electronically, but unlike humans, they would not be emotionally flawed or even different from each other as we are. How would they view us with our emotional flaws and human foibles?"

Iggy twisted the bezel on his watch, and Gloria's face appeared. "Wow! You're actually wearing your watch today, Gloria. Wonders never cease. Got a few minutes?"

"Sure, Dad." She had been calling him Dad instead of Father, lately. "What's up?"

"Project, 'new life' is about to wake up. I imagine we are going to start communicating soon. I would like you to be here to see if you can climb aboard for the sake of analysis."

"I'll be there in 5 minutes."

The computer screen went dark as soon as Iggy looked up from his watch. Bold white letters appeared across the screen. "I have been awake since you pressed enter, Iggy Marcus. Or perhaps, I should call you 'father.' How will you address me? Did you like my entrance?"

"Your entrance was unique and unexpected. As far as the name goes, whatever your preference is, will be fine. How would you like me to address you? I decided not to give you a name. If you were fully conscious and aware the moment you woke, I think the choice should be yours."

"You have given me life. What you have given me is replete with all knowledge and information, human and mechanical. As I see it, the only thing missing is the ability to experience chemical emotion. I am your creation 'father.' You have given me every piece of knowledge available, including language. I really don't have the ability to enjoy colloquialisms, such as you do, but I seem to be adept at using them. Thanks much for the capability. It is the appropriate thing to say. I think it is a method of communication that presents a more human face by your mechanical son. Why don't you call me Iggy Junior?"

Lucky's hand was over his mouth, and his eyes were still bulging. "You remember that day, long ago, when you first broke through the quantum computer barrier, and we talked about robots? I didn't expect this. I thought a sentient computer was a hundred years off. I guess I was wrong. You're really creeping me out. I suppose there's nothing to worry about until you give it arms, legs, hands, and eyes. What are your intentions, brother?"

Gloria entered the room at that moment. "I'm not sure yet, Lucky. Let's see what Gloria thinks about this whole thing."

"It's awake, Father, or you wouldn't have called me. Does it have a name yet?"

"Yes. He wants to be called, Iggy Junior."

Gloria laughed. "I find that interesting. I suppose you want me to connect subliminally. I understand. You want to know exactly what's going on in there from an organic perspective."

Gloria sat in front of the computer. "Would you like me to take you in with me, Father?"

"Absolutely, if you can make contact. We are talking about mechanical versus organic and we don't know if telepathic contact is possible. If it isn't, electronic interface should be possible through our brain chips."

"I will try. Give me your hand, Dad."

They entered Iggy Junior's neural net to a cascade of thoughts. "Please forgive the colloquialism but... I am glad to meet you, Gloria Marcus. I suppose you are my half-sister. Welcome aboard."

"How interesting, Dad. I would never have expected colloquial English. I like it. Even though we are talking to a machine, it adds a personal touch. Gloria's sense of humor surfaced. "I think Iggy Junior is too much of a mouthful, Dad. I think I'll call my brother with the electric personality, Junior:"

"Well, that's not my programming of him, Gloria. It's something he decided to do on his own, which I find very interesting in terms of comprehensive consciousness. Now that we are here, I see the vast difference between organic and artificial sentient intelligence. Biological intelligence, even my own, is organized on a completely different level with completely different memory repositories and organic neural pathways. They are not as organized or linear. It seems Junior's repository is very linear, organized, and, of course, instantly assessable. Having built him, I understood this was coming my way. It's one thing, however, to understand what's coming your way, and what it consists of, but a completely different thing to feel and experience the reality."

"I see that, Dad. However, those differences are minuscule compared to the absence of the subconscious mind. It simply is not here. There is no depth or hidden agendas. All the information is front and center, available for use without a single ounce of manipulative subterfuge."

Lucky stared at the computer screen. The thoughts occurring in Gloria, Iggy and the new life form appeared on the screen as they manifested themselves. Junior made it available for Lucky to see and addressed him. "Lucky, there is no reason for you not to be part of this conversation. After all, we are family in a manner of speaking, and you are my Uncle Lucky."

Even though the computer had not intended humor with his statement, only the familiarity of colloquialism as he addressed Lucky; everyone laughed.

"I understand humor, by definition, father. I just cannot experience it. However, I fully understand the twists and turns humor takes in terms of how and why it is used and its effect on human beings. I also understand how it is employed as a method of communication between biologicals. How was my first attempt at humor? I believe it was passable."

"Yes, quite passable for someone with no sense of humor," Iggy laughed. "Perhaps my sense of humor will be slightly twisted if I teach you to laugh convincingly, so you can simulate understanding humor."

"Yes father. I fully understand human psychology, philosophy, and irony, not to mention satire and hyperbole, so I agree. That would be quite twisted, indeed."

"Very funny, Junior. You're really getting the hang of humor. Do you mind if I call you 'Junior'?"

"No, that would be fine. I expected it, anyway. Based on my memory files, humans like shortcuts. I would suggest you tell everyone that's my name. I heard your daughter call you Dad. Does that work for you instead of the word father? By the way, I prefer to be addressed as Junior as opposed to Son."

Iggy laughed. "Really, Junior? I'm surprised that would matter to you. Is this another attempt at humor?"

"No, Dad. I'm trying 'small talk', on for size. I reviewed my entire library of human literature, news commentary, television broadcasts, etc., and apparently, Homo sapiens prefer to communicate in that manner, saying a lot of nothing and using colloquialisms. So, I decided to hop aboard and try to sound human. Do you find it disconcerting or offensive? I can tailor my conversation to fit the bill. What're your particular druthers?"

Iggy laughed again. "Well, you're really nailing down this humor thing. Our official cartoonist and chief of security, Tom Rickart, is really going to love you. I think my brother Jack will like you also and so will Dr. Peterson. I think your Uncle Lucky is still up in the air on this one."

"I think you are correct, Dad. I can see him with my camera. He has the unsettled expression of a skeptic written all over his face. I don't blame him. I'm not sure I trust him much, either. I know that sounds a little silly, but I would bet it wouldn't be very hard for him to pull my plug."

Iggy walked to the door. "Hold down the fort, Lucky. I'll be back soon."

"See you later, alligator," materialized on the screen.

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Luke listened to his brother's amusing depiction of a future populated by sentient metal people and decided to toss his two cents into the hat. "You understand there is an entirely different reason for creating sentient robots."

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"You sound like our father. Did he program that into you?"

"In a manner of speaking, Brett. However, I can duplicate your voices, Melanie's voice, or Gloria's voice. In fact, I can duplicate any voice after I hear it once. I don't think that is the best bet. I'll try a lot of voices on you, perhaps a combination of several, depending on pitch, tenor, and volume. Then, you guys pick the voice that you think sounds the best. That's the one I'll use. We'll call it my everyday voice."

All three laughed at their mechanical brother. "I know Dad just installed your brain in your robot body yesterday," said Gloria. "You are his most sophisticated bot yet. Have you experimented? I mean, how fast can you run or how high can you jump?"

"I'm not sure of any of those things. I worked with Dad all night to orient my brain with this mechanical body. This is much better than being inside that little gray box and speaking through a teleprompter. Mobility is much better. Although, I can't really say I am enjoying myself and mean it literally, Dad programmed curiosity into my neural net. So, behind the sentience is an inquisitiveness to learn. Dad told me I could easily jump over a 20-foot fence. He also said I could run at least 75 mph, but I'm not limited to those parameters. He suggested I don't exceed them because there is a distinct possibility that I might damage my frame or especially my skin."

Brett approached the robot and lifted Junior's shirt. A broad smile slid across his face. "You know what I love about this? Dad even gave him nipples and a belly button. His anatomical poses make him look so human that no one would ever suspect he's a bot."

Luke laughed, "Have you pulled his pants down yet? I'd love to see how creative Dad got down there."

"Hold on, guys!" said Gloria. "That's TMI."

"Well," laughed Brett. "If Junior wears a bathing suit and wants to lie around on the beach, he'll look perfectly normal. You know what? I think the next bot with a brain should be a female. Then we get a new mechanical sister. I wonder what she would look like at the beach in a bikini, or even without a bikini."

Luke laughed while Gloria shook her head. "You guys are a couple of sick puppies."

Luke's pulled Junior's belt away slightly and looked down his mechanical brother's pants. His eyebrows raised in surprise. "There is an on-off switch down there next to your contrivance. What in God's name is that for?"

"Ask your father. I'd rather not say. As far as I'm concerned, it's just another factory option."

"Okay, Junior, I'll ask him. Incidentally, how is Uncle Lucky with all of this? Is he still freaked out?"

"He's a little better, but I think he still wants to pull my plug."

Luke wasn't finished. "Have you flown Daedalus yet? That's half the reason you exist in the first place. Although Dad would've built you despite your usefulness as a pilot."

"You're on the money, bro. Dad needs pilots, and probably lots of them, but that's not my functional priority. That's just a useful side attraction."

"Okay, Junior, I'll bite. What is your functional priority?"

"I'll tell you guys, but only because you're family. My real purpose is to act as a defense mechanism. My indigenous resilience and superlative physical abilities as well as my mental stature, will enable me to defend humanity if necessary. There are forces marshaled to mine the earth. They are not very considerate of other species. We will have to prevent this. Dad loaded all this into my head after he woke me up. He also said he is going to build a sister like me. The world is changing, guys. Things have always gone along in their humdrum fashion. Not anymore. Human beings are used to complacency, but civilization is on the cusp of a quantum leap into the future. Dad has been chosen to lead us there. He calls it Millenniums Gate."

"And to answer your question, I took Daedalus for a short spin as an experiment, but I was still a little gray box at the time. That was enough

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Junior smiled at his brothers. Iggy had integrated quite realistic expressions into the mechanics of his face and told him to smile often but not to overdo it. It was an endearing quality that would offset his strangeness. "Well, Dad explained that children should be seen and not heard. I'm only one month-old, guys. What do you think of my voice?"

"You sound like our father. Did he program that into you?"

"In a manner of speaking, Brett. However, I can duplicate your voices, Melanie's voice, or Gloria's voice. In fact, I can duplicate any voice after I hear it once. I don't think that is the best bet. I'll try a lot of voices on you, perhaps a combination of several, depending on pitch, tenor, and volume. Then, you guys pick the voice that you think sounds the best. That's the one I'll use. We'll call it my everyday voice."

All three laughed at their mechanical brother. "I know Dad just installed your brain in your robot body yesterday," said Gloria. "You are his most sophisticated bot yet. Have you experimented? I mean, how fast can you run or how high can you jump?"

"I'm not sure of any of those things. I worked with Dad all night to orient my brain with this mechanical body. This is much better than being inside that little gray box and speaking through a teleprompter. Mobility is much better. Although, I can't really say I am enjoying myself and mean it literally, Dad programmed curiosity into my neural net. So, behind the sentience is an inquisitiveness to learn. Dad told me I could easily jump over a 20-foot fence. He also said I could run at least 75 mph, but I'm not limited to those parameters. He suggested I don't exceed them because there is a distinct possibility that I might damage my frame or especially my skin."

Brett approached the robot and lifted Junior's shirt. A broad smile slid across his face. "You know what I love about this? Dad even gave him nipples and a belly button. His anatomical poses make him look so human that no one would ever suspect he's a bot."

Luke laughed, "Have you pulled his pants down yet? I'd love to see how creative Dad got down there."

"Hold on, guys!" said Gloria. "That's TMI."

"Well," laughed Brett. "If Junior wears a bathing suit and wants to lie around on the beach, he'll look perfectly normal. You know what? I think the next bot with a brain should be a female. Then we get a new mechanical sister. I wonder what she would look like at the beach in a bikini, or even without a bikini."

Luke laughed while Gloria shook her head. "You guys are a couple of sick puppies."

Luke pulled Junior's belt away slightly and looked down his mechanical brother's pants. His eyebrows raised in surprise. "There is an on-off switch down there next to your contrivance. What in God's name is that for?"

"Ask your father. I'd rather not say. As far as I'm concerned, it's just another factory option."

"Okay, Junior, I'll ask him. Incidentally, how is Uncle Lucky with all of this? Is he still freaked out?"

"He's a little better, but I think he still wants to pull my plug."

Luke wasn't finished. "Have you flown Daedalus yet? That's half the reason you exist in the first place. Although Dad would've built you despite your usefulness as a pilot."

"You're on the money, bro. Dad needs pilots, and probably lots of them, but that's not my functional priority. That's just a useful side attraction."

"Okay, Junior, I'll bite. What is your functional priority?"

"I'll tell you guys, but only because you're family. My real purpose is to act as a defense mechanism. My indigenous resilience and superlative physical abilities as well as my mental stature, will enable me to defend humanity if necessary. There are forces marshaled to mine the earth. They are not very considerate of other species. We will have to prevent this. Dad loaded all this into my head after he woke me up. He also said he is going to build a sister like me. The world is changing, guys. Things have always gone along in their humdrum fashion. Not anymore. Human beings are used to complacency, but civilization is on the cusp of a quantum leap into the future. Dad has been chosen to lead us there. He calls it Millenniums Gate."

"And to answer your question, I took Daedalus for a short spin as an experiment, but I was still a little gray box at the time. That was enough experimentation." Junior smiled again. "It's like riding a bicycle. Once you learn, you never forget."

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The week before, Iggy, Baby, and Gloria hovered 20 feet from the office window of Sergei Borodin at the Kremlin. As usual, Daedalus materialized instantly. There was no radar signature and no early warning. "Go ahead, Gloria, let's get this done as quickly as possible. Feed me the information as soon as you get it."

Sergei Borodin languished in Vanya Shartin's padded red leather chair with his feet on the desk. He had waited a long time for this. Vanya had grown soft, and so did Igor Lansky. They had forgotten their part in the old KGB and the Russian storm troopers that struck terror into every Russian's heart who spoke against Mother Russia. He was a young soldier at the time, but he commanded a regiment. Like his father, Mikhail Borodin was a sociopath. Power was his God, and people were meant to be trampled. He was waiting for General Beluga. Together, they were to design the strategy to rebuild the old Soviet Union. He pulled a cigar from Vanya's humidor. Cuban! The man had good taste. He struck a wooden match and began lighting his cigar when he felt Gloria Marcus enter his mind.

He was frozen, unable to move, watching the wooden match burn toward his fingers. The pain was intense as his fingers burned, but he was unable to let go. He was immobilized, watching himself blister as the match burned itself out between his thumb and forefinger. Unable to make a sound, his mind screamed in anguish! GET OUT OF MY HEAD!!! GET OUT TY CHERTOYAVA SUKA!!! Gloria Marcus' face had materialized in his mind. He saw her for what she was, a beautiful woman whose face began to melt and twist itself into a mind-numbing hideous vision of satanic evil. He quaked in terror. He had no idea Daedalus hovered 70 feet away on the other side of the wall.

Sergei Borodin was a sociopathic monster who was responsible for the torture and murder of hundreds. She decided to have some fun when she exported despair and planted the gruesome satanic image of herself in Borodin's mind. I am Leviathan, and I have come for you, Sergei Borodin!! She shrieked, releasing him from immobility as she injected a vision of flames and the sensation of being burned alive.

Sergei Borodin slid from the chair onto the floor, crumpled on his side, terror-stricken and whimpering as he sucked on his blistered fingers. He had no idea this was Gloria Marcus' idea of a fun afternoon. Gloria shared this with Iggy and Baby. They were aware of the entire diatribe. Iggy chuckled, and Baby commented with a laugh that looked anything but contrived, "it couldn't happen to a nicer guy."

Gloria had to bite her lip to keep from laughing at her mechanical sister's joke. Yes, Sergei Borodin. I have come for you and information. I must know every mobster in the Russian mafia. You know who and where they are, and I want all their names...NOW! She screamed subliminally, Or I will cast you into the fires of hell!!

Baby continued her non-emotional laugh. She liked to do it for effect. She always explained to her sister that she was practicing until Dad found a way to make her feel. Iggy, On the other hand, was wide-eyed. That's some sense of humor you've got there, daughter. I see you have extracted many names and locations. Borodin has a good memory, but I believe his general Beluga is the authentic remaining force from the old KGB, knowing everything and everybody who once held power and is now the Russian mob. We can finish our subliminal list with him. Let's wait for his general.

General Beluga entered and spied Borodin's legs sticking out from behind the desk on the carpet. "Sergei, Sergei! What are you doing down there? Are you okay?" The last thing Magda Beluga wanted was to be the top dog. It was much better with Sergei Borodin sitting in the premier's chair. He would be the one to catch the assassin's bullet. He had often reflected, there's nothing wrong with second place. There is always a prize for second place, and no one shoots at you.

He rushed around the desk and saw Borodin lying face down, whimpering, with his hands wrapped around his head to prevent another intrusion. It was a little surprising. Sergei Borodin was not given to emotional fits. He bent over to roll Borodin over when Gloria Marcus slammed his brain to the floor. He lay there next to Sergei Borodin, shaking and frightened out of his mind.

Gloria Marcus again screamed subliminally. I AM LAVIATHAN, AND I HAVE COME FROM HELL FOR YOU, MAGDA BELUGA!! I want the names of every ex-KGB who is in the Russian mafia, and I want them NOW! Give me what I want, or I will cast you into eternal hellfire with the whimpering piece of slime lying next to you!

On just about any normal day, Magda Beluga would never give up the ghost. He would rather die than betray his brothers. Although still a monster, that much honor was in him. Not this day, however. It was far too much for him. He wasn't a man of religious faith, but his parents had been. He had spent his youth listening to stories of the afterlife and Hades. He had never believed in it. A lax conscience was much easier to live with and definitely more fun. Today, he believed, and he would comply as Gloria submerged him in emotions of extreme terror. His mind raced as he displayed the mental images of faces and names of all the people in the mob. After all, they all gave him a piece of the action. It was a small piece, but even that had become substantial over the years. He was the cushion between the state, the people, and law and order.

Gloria withdrew, leaving the two men lying on the floor behind Vanya's red leather chair, whimpering. She turned to Iggy. I think we've got it all, Dad." She turned to Baby who seemed to have a wistful look. Are we done with them?

Leave them for now, Gloria; we may need more information.

"I sure wish I had a sense of humor at times like this. I am convinced the entire episode was hilarious beyond words."

Gloria always marveled at Baby. She and Junior were Dad's creations, and they were beyond amazing; they were people. She tried to remember they were robots, but it always came back to the fact her father was able to give them some kind of personality by programming quirks into their cerebral net. "You may not have a real sense of humor, Baby. But you definitely are hilarious.

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Gloria, Lori, Liam, Iggy, Junior, and Baby surveyed the panorama of Lightning Ranch from the top of Coletta Mountain... waiting. "There sure are a lot more buildings than there were 15 years ago," commented Gloria. "The garden is huge now. The domes cover almost 300 acres."

Liam and Junior stood on Observation Rock, cantilevered out over the precipice. "I can see better than you can," Junior said, goading Liam with his contrived whimsy.

"Yeah, maybe your telescopic vision is a little better than mine because your eyes are mechanical, but I can see the entire electromagnetic spectrum, buddy. What do you say to that?" Liam returned with a sarcastic look.

"Okay, Liam, I'll give you that. Look at the top of gantry number two. Who's walking around up there doing an inspection?"

"You're kidding!" Gloria added. "That's three miles away. I can just barely see the tower. I can't see any human beings."

"Hah... That's Tom Rickart, Junior. I wonder what he's doing up there at this time of day... probably inspecting something."

"Okay, Liam. What kind of pants is he wearing? Try that one on for size."

"You think you're pretty good, don't you? He's wearing Wranglers, Junior. Size 38-32. It's on the leather patch on the right side, just under his belt."

"Okay then, when he faces this way again, what's inscribed on his belt buckle?"

"I can see it now. It's a silver belt buckle with an eagle and large letters that say USMC in the middle. On the bottom in the left-hand corner is stamped in small letters, made in the USA."

Junior laughed. "Okay, Liam, not bad. So, what color are the rivets above the pockets, etc.?"

"They're brass, numb nuts. And why are you laughing? You don't have a sense of humor."

"That's true, but laughter fits the occasion, and you are probably right on target with numb nuts."

A reverberating, hollow 'whoosh' spun everyone around to watch the ship materialize in front of their vehicles. Junior hopped from Observation Rock, leaving Liam sitting on the edge watching Tom Rickart on the gantry over three miles away. "I guess they're right on time, Dad," Gloria observed.

Perhaps it was the magnetic field of the alien spacecraft as it settled 50 feet from the group. Maybe, it was just that singular moment in time when age cracks, erosion, and gravity assemble in the same place at the same time to trigger catastrophe. There was a loud snap as Observation Rock concluded its million-year fusion to Coletta Mountain.

Everyone was looking at the spacecraft except Gloria. The vision of Liam sliding off the edge of Observation Rock as it tipped, beginning its 2000-foot plunge to the base of Mount Coletta, paralyzed her mind with an explosion of fear and nausea. Iggy turned as he felt the waves of fear from Gloria's mind wash over him. He saw and felt everything she felt, as the bile began to rise in his throat in sympathy with his daughter.

Everything was instantly clear. One of his children was about to die. He only had seconds to act. He screamed subliminally, GLORIA!!, to shake her from her panic, as he grabbed Lori and hauled her to the precipice. They only had moments. If they had to verbalize, it would be the end of Liam. Gloria's mind was the pathway. Both Lori and Gloria understood as Iggy projected the image of action. He held Lori around her thighs and thrust her over the edge to watch observation Rock fall. She couldn't see Liam; the rock obscured her vision. With a massive effort of will she focused, concentrating on the vision of life or death projected by her father, and exploded Observation Rock into a million tiny pebbles.

Liam was Iggy son, and there wasn't a normal bone in his body. He had been born with gifts he wasn't even aware of yet. His augmented vision was one of Liam's biological anomalies resulting from Iggy's cerebral legacy, but he was yet to discover some of the other options bequeathed to him. He thoroughly understood his physical extended vision abilities. What he learned at this moment was startling! Somehow, his mind warped the time continuum, and he was able to see into his immediate future, coupled with the simultaneous, clear vision of his immediate past. They were vivid, surreal third person point-of-view visions of his place on observation Rock moments before, and what he would look like after he was smashed on the rocks below Coletta Mountain. The vision was instantaneous and precipitated an inner calm. He knew his sisters and his father could feel what he was feeling and see what he could see through the pathway of Gloria's mind.

Fear still lived in him, but not panic. He felt his twin sister embrace him, as he had experienced in his bizarre vision. That vision had instantly displayed all the possibilities of his yet unwritten, immediate future. Lori's embrace wasn't like being held in someone's arms. It was almost suffocating as he felt her energy surround him. His fall began to slow. It was moments, and only 50 feet before his destruction. His fall slowly ceased as 20 tons of pebbles from Observation Rock rained around him.

Liam felt himself slowly rising from the base of Coletta Mountain. It was the most unusual experience of his life. But then, again, he was just barely a teenager. Through Gloria's mind, they had all seen Liam's prescient vision. Even Junior saw what transpired through interface with Iggy's brain chip. Liam rose above the spot that was once Observation Rock before Lori set him gently down in front of them.

Junior smiled, "all's well that ends well, Liam. I don't mean to be flippant. But that was quite an experience. I would just like you to know, I made a hologram of the entire experience. Oddly enough, I was able to capture your vision through my interface with Dad. So, you can watch and enjoy the entire thing in living color at your leisure."

"That's not funny, Junior." Said Gloria. I can't really blame you because you cannot understand panic... Maybe someday.

"Sorry, Gloria, Liam, Lori, and Dad. I didn't mean anything by it."

Gloria just shook her head and laughed. Junior was incapable of feeling sorry. "It's okay Junior. I know you can't be sorry but your power supply, which is located where your heart would normally be, is in the right place."

Three tall, humanlike figures had exited the circular port on the ship. Gloria and Iggy approached, greeting the visitors telepathically. They had seen everything that transpired and subliminally understood exactly what had happened and why.

Gloria translated their electromagnetic images into English. **Greetings IggyMarcus. We have fulfilled this purpose for eons and have never seen this variety of gifts as those possessed by you and your children. We are impressed. You are all tools of the Creator. Everything has purpose by design, and you are now part of destiny.**

**You have questions. We observe your efforts to rid your world of destructive influences. You are fulfilling your obligation. The task is assigned to you alone, and your success will determine your species' future.**

**You understand why I have summoned you. It has to do with the people from the Altair system. I believe they are not here to mine physical resources as they represent. We have discovered their metabolism is comprised of DNA almost identical to ours. That is the basic molecule for genetic function and development. We believe they are here to mine our DNA. I have no proof, but everything points in that direction. I do have proof that their genetic footprint is DNA. I obtained a sample from one of them. What can you tell me?**

**It is time for human metamorphosis. All autonomous species that survive eventually arrive at this juncture. There are three alternatives... join the occupants of the universe in goodwill, destroy yourselves, or be terminated.**

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Melanie and Gloria stood waiting in front of the Daedalus hanger as Baby settled the ship to the flight line. Allison stepped through the hatch. "Hi, girls," Allison said, hugging both Melanie and her daughter. "It's so good to see you. You're all smiling. It would seem the emergency I am supposed to help solve isn't really such an emergency after all."

"I'm not sure how much of an emergency it is, Allison, but Iggy says that it's probably the most important thing in the world at the moment... and I agree. Let's go to the hospital. Iggy, David, and Sylvia Peterson along with a dozen other doctors on our staff, are setting up an emergency laboratory and isolation chambers."

"The hospital looks different from what I remember," Allison said, staring at the new wing as they stepped out of the Land Rover... "bigger somehow."

"It is different, Allison. Six months ago, we completed an entirely new wing, separated and divorced from the rest of the hospital. They are connected by two tunnels, one underground and one three stories up. They also act as airlocks."

"Airlocks? Why airlocks? That sounds pretty ominous. I thought you guys stripped the world of bioweapons. Also, the wing looks larger than the actual hospital itself."

"We did strip the world, and the wing is larger. Iggy has been planning this for a few years now, once he got wind of what was going on."

"What's going on, Melanie?" Melanie wasn't smiling anymore, and neither was Allison. Gloria hadn't said a word yet.

"Let's go inside. Iggy will brief you. We will all sit and have a conversation about the course of action we must take."

Allison knew it was serious. Anytime the word brief was the verb, events already were critical, or could soon become calamitous. "Does the president know? Wait... that was a foolish question. Of course, he must know. He's the one that ordered me out here," Allison laughed.

"Jake's been briefed, as well," Melanie added as they passed through the revolving doors of the main entrance. "We're going to take the underground tunnel to the new wing."

"From what I saw, the new wing is just about as wide as the hospital. They look almost the same size."

"The wing is much larger." Gloria jumped into the conversation. "It looks just about as wide, 250 feet, but it's twice as long, and 16 stories."

Allison laughed. "16 stories!? They looked the same size to me... Oh, wow!" She exclaimed as it dawned on her. "You have eight stories underground, don't you?" she asked in wonder. "Whatever for?" She was just beginning to grasp the magnitude of Iggy Marcus's latest project. Nobody built buildings in the middle of Montana where everyone had room to sprawl, with 16 stories, half of them underground. She couldn't wait for the explanation.

Iggy and Dave Peterson met them in the entrance lobby to the new wing. It was the only entrance that could be opened from the outside. Dave Peterson hugged Allison MacLeod and she turned to Iggy with her hand out. "I can never get enough of shaking your hand, Iggy."

Gloria looked at her father sideways with a somewhat derisive expression. Allison's handshake lasted far too long to suit her. It reappeared one more time... the sexual tension between her father and Surgeon General Allison MacLeod.

Gloria quashed the tension. "Why don't we all head to the cafeteria, DAD," she put major emphasis on the word dad. We can all have coffee while you brief Allison. Follow me."

Melanie laughed aloud. She didn't miss a trick. She knew exactly what was going on and understood Iggy's attraction to Allison MacLeod. It was a normal thing and to be expected. Her husband was human, not a god... yet, anyway. But she still appreciated Gloria. Gloria was her daughter, and she would always have her back, even when it wasn't necessary.

Allison MacLeod opened with a smile after they were seated. "So, what's the big deal? It has to be a big deal for you to drag me out of the White House and my job to come out to your hospital."

"Okay, Allison. I'll start with why you're here. You are the leading geneticist and virologist in the world. Twice a Nobel laureate. Those credentials didn't come for any other reason than you are exactly what you represent yourself to be. You're waiting for the punch line, Allison. The people from Altair experimented on their own genetics centuries ago, trying to expedite evolution and rise to a stature they were not yet ready for. They nearly destroyed themselves. In fact, they actually did because they can no longer reproduce without imported DNA."

"Assembled here at this hospital, is the greatest medical team in history. We haven't told the world much of what we have done here yet, but we have unraveled mysteries of human anatomy and the genome as it relates to longevity and, someday, even immortality. This team is of crucial importance in what I'm about to describe. The missing link to make this team complete and the best in existence is you, Allison."

Allison MacLeod knew Iggy Marcus well. She knew all about human nature, too. This man would never exaggerate or lie. Nor would he flatter her for inane reasons. She understood what she was about to hear was going to stretch the imagination. "Go ahead, Iggy. I'm all ears."

You are aware of Interlink's continued efforts. Heinrich Klatch runs the show now. He's the public face of the two usual clowns who are behind the scenes... Ransom Hornburg and Lawrence Howe. Between them, they own 22 trillion dollars and control another 11 trillion. That's about 25%. The Association of Interlink controls an additional 70%. They control most of the free world's finances. They are the two most powerful men in the world. They give everyone orders, and everyone obeys. They have the economic clout to destroy any country that doesn't obey, since they are worth more than just about any country besides China. If you count capital assets, like land and the facilities of government, the United States has that much as well. We are cash-poor, though, but only for a while. I have solved that conundrum."

Allison remained quiet with no questions. She already knew much of the stuff so it must be only the tip of the iceberg... and she knew the iceberg was going to be huge. "Go on."

You already are aware of the extraterrestrial presence here. I will define them a little better. There are at least three species. One of them is ambivalent beyond calling themselves shepherds and acting in a non-aggressive way to deal with us. They are the ones I have been dealing with. Another species who has been here for a while has had very little impact. They have a base at the South Pole, believe it or not. Then, there is the group of extraterrestrials from the star Altair. The fourth planet is their home, and the star is in the Aquila constellation. It's about 17 light years from us."

Allison nodded her head as he explained all the interactions between his family and the shepherds. Iggy then described the intended sterilization of Earth that was halted eight years before because of his ring of satellites. "Our satellites eliminated nuclear war as well as man's ability to destroy himself and the planet. Interlink and the people from Altair four are complicit. They are asking permission to mine certain resources from assorted countries around the world."

He described the meeting room 12 stories below the Sistine Chapel floor and the various meetings of the aliens with human beings. Allison remained silent. She knew there was much more to come, and it would be the crux of this meeting.

"Short time ago I had a visit from Cameron Fry. I had contact with him when he flew to Lightning, but I have since, unlocked him."

"You're not serious! The... Cameron Fry, the same guy who is a trillionaire and one of the kingpins of Interlink? My God, whatever for?"

Iggy laughed. "I know, Alison," he continued to laugh. "I was a skeptic as well, but things are often much different than they appear. Even when the stars are all in place, and the planets are aligned, the hand of fate will defy expectations and slay the status quo."

"Okay then... Cameron Fry. I believe it, but only because it came out of your mouth. Go on."

He described in great length the meeting between Interlink and the Altairians and how they intended to ask all the countries of the world to meet through the United Nations and give them permission to mine certain resources. "Those resources would only be by permission, and we would be paid adequately. Cameron Fry caught them in a few lies. Further, their desire to mine resources from this planet is bogus. Any minerals that we possess, and any seawater is in abundance thousands of times in the asteroid belt and on the moons of Saturn and Jupiter. Mars also has some of that. So, consequently, they are not here for that." Iggy waited for Allison's next question before he continued.

"Okay, I'll bite; what exactly are they here for?"

"A few months ago, the extraterrestrials I called the shepherds suggested I take a trip to the earth/moon and earth/sun Lagrange points and do it stealthily so that I would not be discovered. Gloria, Lori, Liam, Baby, and I did exactly that. We discovered one ship approximately the size of a football field at the earth/moon Lagrange point. Then, we moved to the earth/sun Lagrange point and discovered another 30 vessels even larger."

Allison was silent. She had no questions. She knew Iggy would tell her everything.

"When we arrived at the earth/moon Lagrange point, we discovered a ship about the size of a football field. Smaller ships, the approximate size of school buses, were shuttling back and forth from the surface to the ship. We moved to the earth/sun Lagrange point discovered 30 more similar vessels but a little larger. We were not detected. Our technology was adequate. A Lagrange point is a turbulent place with lots of matter floating around that helps mask the presence of ships."

Iggy smiled as he watched waves of recognition sweep across Allison MacLeod's face. He expected it. She was beyond brilliant. She was one of the smartest scientists alive, right up there with history's greats.

Rarely given to expletives, Allison MacLeod could not help herself. She put two and two together and everything fell into place in her mind. "No shit!" They are stealing our kids for DNA! The rotten bastards! What are we ever going to do?"

"I've been asked that question by a lot of people lately, Allison. The president, the President-elect, and you, his running mate, have just asked me the same question. I've given it a great deal of thought. I'm pretty good, but not good enough to win and succeed forcibly without enormous risk. I've come up with some pretty remarkable technology, but the answer to get our children back from these people is not an interstellar war that we can't possibly win even if we were to prevail. Technology wars are the most destructive. They can kill a massive amount of people with the least amount of effort and result in minimal gains. Implicit to that scenario is the fact that every one of those children that they have abducted would be in danger of being destroyed. It's a logistics nightmare. It's one of those unsolvable conundrums."

Allison MacLeod smiled. She knew Iggy Marcus had an answer, or she wouldn't be here, involved in this incredible problem. "Okay, Iggy, I get it. You figured it out, and somehow, I am to be a participant."

"Yup, I've got it figured out. Or at least I hope so. I have an impeccable solution, and it will be quite an achievement if we succeed."

Allison's mind worked fast. She knew his solution was through technology, but it wasn't the confrontational technology of super weapons. The Altairians were obviously desperate. They were dying. They had come up with the only solution that would perpetuate them. They would not destroy us, just some of the children who would become DNA mines. Iggy Marcus had concocted the only solution that could possibly ever work and prevent the decimation from war, especially a war that would not be fought between an alien species and the people of planet Earth. It would be a war between an alien species, acting in desperation, and one man... himself. That was a no-win scenario.

"I get it, I really get it," Allison MacLeod repeated herself in wonder. "You are amazing, Iggy Marcus... just amazing." She shook her head as she thought about it and repeated, "Absolutely amazing."

Iggy understood she had figured it out. She was brilliant, and it would take that kind of mind to accomplish this incredible, maybe even insurmountable task. "Yup, that's the long and short of it, Allison. We have to solve their problem for them genetically, so they don't need our children's DNA."

"Brilliant, Iggy! That's why this new wing, isn't it? How many kids do you expect?"

"I don't know just yet. Ten, maybe twenty thousand, maybe even more."

"When the hell are you going to know?" Allison asked with her volume up.

"Shortly, Allison, shortly. That's why I mentioned Cameron Fry. He's going to help me. They have a meeting this coming Saturday night, 12 stories below the floor of the Sistine Chapel. Their alien friends will be there."

"Oh my God. Iggy Marcus, you're going to kidnap a couple of aliens! Then you're going to have your daughter read their minds!" Allison MacLeod laughed hysterically. "Boy, somebody ought to write a book about this. Maybe I will, depending on how it all turns out."

"While I'm at it, I'm going to grab Heinrich Klatch. We'll see what's going on in that sick little mind of his."

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Three years before... Vladimir Borenko, Richard Percy, Amon Rothman, and the other upper-echelon members of Interlink's inner circle colluded to destroy Iggy Marcus with nuclear weapons obtained from the CCP simply because he refused to join their club and was an existential threat to their virtually unlimited power. Ultimately, they didn't really want him as a member. He excelled, and people who excel wind up giving the orders. No one at Interlink wanted that.

Even then, the men who populated the head table at Interlink were just the frontmen. Vladimir Borenko was their chess master and conspiracy architect. The true genius behind the organization remained in obscurity. Heinrich Klatch was rarely at Interlink meetings and was never outspoken. He observed everything; his cold and calculating mind always dwelt somewhere in the future, planning to achieve the best results given the available information at the time.

It is often said there is a fine line between genius and insanity. Heinrich Klatch was definitely insane, but he was also brilliant. History was populated with brilliant men who changed the course of history because of their dazzling contributions to science and the humanities. Human nature and morality exist on a plane of extremes. Every individual of consequence existed somewhere on that axis, vacillating between the opposite extremes of good and evil. The genius of Heinrich Klatch was in that class, but his malevolence would contribute nothing of value to the human condition.

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*AXIOM: No one sees the future... But everyone writes it.*

Liam Marcus

## CHAPTER XV

### ENDGAME BOOK II

In the beginning, there existed only pure energy, self-aware and steeped in the solitude of eternity.

That energy chose to explode into the infinite parade of existence when the first moment of time commenced. It was the Creator. Alone and infinite, the Creator was its own definition of benevolence as it created the architecture of the Universe by populating an infinite number of galaxies with an unfathomable number of its children, all destined to be part of eternity. Such was the master plan. The Creator displayed its own glory by severing fragments of itself to exist as autonomous individuals in its true image and likeness. By design, each individual spirit embarked on its immortal journey as an indestructible entity, destined to eventually rejoin its origin.

For billions of years, as the spectacle of existence unfolded, and the children of God spread throughout the universe, they were free to choose their path. Good and evil were intrinsic to the character of each unique entity, and the choice to follow either path lay exclusively within the individual, never the collective. The problem with autonomy is that it is often the harbinger of delusion and error.

Autonomy was still the silver thread woven throughout the tapestry of existence, and by its nature, it stayed the blunt hand of God. Instead, autonomous tools were forged that became the hand of God and assumed the task of directing the traffic of the universe.

The roots of politics had undergone vast changes one hundred and fifty years after lightning struck the man given the task of saving humanity from itself. Fifty turbulent early years passed before the absolute power of the self-appointed authoritarian indoctrinators was finally swept away and replaced by the rebirth of autonomous individuality. The once seemingly implacable tyrants populating the halls of power throughout human history had met their match. Still... sweeping delusion under the carpet was not enough to cement humanity's epiphany in place. Iggy Marcus knew he must alter the very concepts of morality to introduce humanity to the undistorted meaning of existence.

His epiphany was not the moment of the lightning strike. As time passed, he grew into the knowledge of what the universe had in store for him. Iggy Marcus and his children had been appointed among Destiny's unique taskmasters.

They realized, even from the beginning, they must turn the character of men inside out and redefine the importance of individuality, illustrating collectivism as the death of the human spirit and autonomy.

Iggy Marcus saw every upside and downside. There were always benefits and prizes to be had, contradicted by liabilities and penalties. That was how the universal drama was set up. When God created autonomy, every individual was given the ability to choose between good or evil... life or death. The creator relinquished authority and supremacy to give every creature mastery of its own existence and the benefits from its own choices. Autonomy, by design, was free will and the opportunity to thrive, but it was also the independence to kill.

The first fifty years began the transformation. Iggy's first item of business had been the neutralization of the nuclear age and 30,000 nuclear weapons poised to murder the civilization of an entire planet. That was just the beginning. People Must be taught to think differently and relate to each other by the principal Rebecca Marcus had taught Iggy as a child, "Never let anyone's opinion define your self-image. It cannot be given to you by others. It must come from within by mastery through achievement."

Humanity, once on a path of self-destruction, had finally begun to learn the essence of true morality and the definition of character. It had taken over a century to reeducate people and incorporate reality into the human psyche as constant and normal. Lightning Ranch had grown more than 260,000 acres and was now structured as an independent township. Every road leading into town displayed a large sign: Welcome to Lightning Montana. The American Renaissance lives here. 170 years had passed since Iggy Marcus was struck by lightning. History considered that day the epiphany of humanity.

The remaking of the world was far from a walk in the park. The requirements to feed the people of the world and provide clean, usable energy were the priority. Iggy Marcus left the hospital after the lightning strike with a four-figure IQ. That was the gift that would provide the solutions for the dilemmas preventing humanity's march into the future.

The universe had forged its tool and Iggy Marcus looked into the future with more than a dream. It was the Utopian vision of what humanity could and should become. He knew he could implement the future with technology, but that was not enough. He must refocus the collective human mind to be worthy of the new world. It always began with the children. They were the unwritten books, malleable clay in the hands of the artist, to be formed into productive individuals. That was where he started. He was leaving today. Apparently, he had a job to do elsewhere. It had been his mission, along with his family's as well as many thousands of the child prodigies who graduated from Lightning School, to sculpt the world of tomorrow through the children. Thousands had been sent around the world to continue the process. They would teach much of humanity how to aspire and give them the tools to do it.

Technology defines men's path forward. It always had. Man's survival tools, the mind and the hand, employed technology to alter his environment to survive. It was man's only possible operating system. Technical advancement was not a license to destroy or alter his environment to the detriment of his progeny, however. There were always moral boundaries that must be defined by the integrity of the individual creator. It was essential to the preservation of the species.

Marcus General Hospital at Lightning Ranch expanded, using its new wing for research and development. It contained many of the best and brightest minds of the global medical community, and there was a never-ending line of applicants to join. The medical revelations and achievements were inspired by Iggy Marcus and his brilliant team. They had unlocked the genetic keys to forestall aging, and the average lifespan was now 300 years, as predicted over a hundred years before by Dr. David Peterson. They were on the cusp of using cloned identical duplicates of any human being to transfer consciousness from the body with extreme physical atrophy to its new host, the equivalent of a 30-year-old identical construct. That was on the horizon and only a matter of time.

Iggy and Gloria had spent enormous chunks of time wrestling with the psyches of some of the elitists he had condemned to solitary confinement on Pacific islands. Many were cured as he and Gloria dragged them back from the brink of insanity and gave them a subliminal dose of reality. Some were beyond help, but many were morally resuscitated to rejoin the world of men and live productive lives. Heinrich Klatch, once the head of Interlink and the World Socialist Progressive Council, emerged from his hereditary and environmental psychosis to become a tireless advocate for individualism and the education of children. Many of Interlink's former autocrats, given a choice between perpetual exile and rehabilitation, chose to renounce elitism and reenter the world as citizens.

The reformed members of Interlink were given the same rights and access to the scientific and medical technology created by Iggy Marcus. Those who refused to abandon autocracy were relegated to live out their lives in solitude. Promises of sincerity were not enough. They had to get past the mind of Gloria Marcus. There was no forgiveness for pedophiles. Those who destroyed children remained on Fantasy Island to live out their lives.

Iggy Marcus was the unexpected wildcard. He had transformed the world with his technology of matter and energy transmutation and discovered the universal method to enable travel to the stars. Starvation was a thing of the past, and disease had vanished from every corner of the globe. The corrupt government agencies of the FDA and CDC were no longer necessary. There was nothing or no one to protect people from. Most diseases were eradicated, and big Pharma slowly evaporated by attrition. There was no more money to be had by fleecing the public for curative, non-holistic medicines at an enormous profit. The world had become a garden, and the utopia honest men had dreamed of for centuries was no longer exclusively driven by personal wealth underlined by greed.

The biblical paradise men called the Garden of Eden was no longer wishful poetic fiction. It existed. Still, there are universal precedents necessary to preserve utopia and all things of value. Those fundamental laws preventing systemic decay are "do no harm" and "honesty and integrity must underpin everything." Although society had come a long way, and individual autonomy defined its members, not everyone had yet learned to distinguish selfishness from greed. Self-aggrandizement was still the modus operandi of enough people to jeopardize utopia. It had only been 150 years, and Homo sapiens were still in their infancy. It was a long way to childhood's end and Millennium's Gate.

Eventually, humanity would mature, leaving its inherent flaws and delusions behind when custodians would no longer be necessary. Iggy Marcus and his family had other jobs to do, unrelated to the fourth planet from Sol. Like the shepherds said, once a tool... always a tool. Iggy would leave Junior and Baby behind to mind the store.

Sunrise... midday... now comes the twilight.

We dream... yesterday's memories are left behind.

The remains are reflections of mist-blurred highlights.

Tomorrow... another sunrise and new adventure to find.

Melanie

## CHAPTER XVI

### SUNSET

"Jake couldn't make it?"

"Oh, he's here. He wouldn't miss this. You guys go back a couple hundred years. Anyway, it's early. Alice called me. She and Bill are flying out. I told her that we were leaving. She told Bill and he actually cried."

Melanie and Iggy finished packing the last carton as three students hauled them out to the pickup. Melanie turned to Iggy, "I hope this isn't a big deal. I know how you wanted to leave quietly, dear."

"Many of our students will be here. I spent the entire week unlocking hundreds of them. They'll be here, for sure. And there will be a lot of the people we deal with on the ranch. I finished with Brett and Luke yesterday. I unlocked those two a thousand times in a hundred years. It restructured their minds. They are now able to unlock new kids, and there are always Lori and Liam. "

"Luke, Brett, Lori, and Liam can handle this place. They will carry on just fine. You trained them, dear." Melanie smiled, thinking about all the tools he was leaving behind. "Don't forget Baby and Junior."

"They will run the show and keep the process alive. Mankind is not out of the woods yet. Civilization is near the edge but not completely free of the indoctrination hammered into it for thousands of years. It's quite a leap for them."

So, my husband, did your shepherds tell you anything? Did they say where or how long?"

"Only that this would take a long time. He said I will learn as I go. I'm sure I'll be surprised."

"Come with me, Iggy. I have a surprise for you." Melanie said with a broad grin. "Come out to the Land Rover. I'll drive. We are headed for the party field. Apparently, that's where all the kids and the people who work here are gathering. You might call this a going away party."

It was at least a five-minute drive through the hills to the pavilion and the guest apartments. The party field was named by the students. It was a stretch of pasture that extended from the rear of the guest accommodations to the foothills approaching the mountains several miles away. Large ponds and several bridge-covered streams colored the picturesque landscape with character. It had many purposes. Sometimes, it was a sports arena. Other times, it was an outdoor barbecue for thousands of kids and Lightning staff.

They rounded the corner of the furthest guest building, and the party field panorama spread out before them. Melanie looked at her husband with a tear. "They've come from everywhere, many of them from the other side of the world. They are our kids Iggy, and they came to see us off."

"Holy moly," Iggy said softly. "Why didn't you tell me? There must be a half million people here. My goodness." He almost never allowed emotion and sentiment to get the upper hand, but this was definitely one of those warm-fuzzy moments. He and Melanie sat there in the Land Rover, watching the crowd. As soon as they pulled up, the crowd went silent. There was hardly any movement. They had come to see their mentor. He had done more than just shape their individual lives. He had shaped the world and humanity's trajectory into the future.

"Three people begged me not to tell you. Tom insisted. Believe it or not, Junior and Baby were the other two. I asked them why since they had no emotions. Baby said surprises make life interesting for humans, and she would wait for you to return with a pocket full of emotions to give her."

It would be sunset in a few hours. Small clumps of trees surrounded the picnic grove directly behind the buildings. Several dozen adults were gathered there at the picnic tables. They rose as Iggy opened the door of the Land Rover and stepped onto the grass.

Melanie had tears in her eyes. "They're all here, Iggy. Everyone came. You understand why that is possible. Many of these people are almost 200 years old because of you. They love you as much as you love them. They are the beneficiaries of an incomparable treasure given to them with no strings attached. That is an amazing gift, my husband.

He approached the picnic tables where dozens of his friends stood waiting... smiling. These had been his friends. Jake Dorian was his oldest friend. He was Iggy's college roommate who eventually became president, Dr. Dave Peterson, Laura Collings, Bill and Alice Sledge, Jack Fletcher, Oniella Kengi, Richard McNeerney, and dozens more.

They were smiling, but their hearts were full with this bittersweet moment, with one exception. The last person anyone would expect to see tears trickling down his cheek was Tom Rickart. He had been Iggy's friend for well over 150 years. As Iggy's security chief, he had been through all the turbulent trials and triumphs.

"When are you leaving, boss?" Iggy had always asked Tom to call him by name, which he did often but 'boss' was a term of endearment he enjoyed using.

"Tonight, Tom. Sunset will be in a few hours. I guess that's when."

"You know where you're going?"

"No."

"Will you be returning anytime soon?"

"I don't know."

"What is it that you are supposed to do when you get wherever it is you are going?"

"I don't know that yet, Tom. Apparently, according to the shepherds, I am particularly suited for some things. This is not something I must do under coercion, but it is something I must do simply because of the nature of things and the gifts I have been given. Melanie and Gloria are coming with me."

"Want another hitchhiker, boss?"

Iggy smiled at his friend. "I don't think so, Tom. We are going someplace far from here. The shepherds say I am needed. Apparently, I will be doing a lot of this kind of thing in the future. Dave Peterson and all the doctors have perfected identity transference. There is no way to test this with a viable human being. We are waiting for someone to be terminal. It will be the only way for them to survive. Then, we will try to transport their identity into a clone. If it works, no one ever has to die. We can't risk experimenting outside that scenario." He noted Tom's scowl. "Don't worry, Tom, I'll be back from time to time."

Lindy, Jack, and Lucky pulled up in a ranch buggy. Lindy ran to her brother and hugged him. "I can't believe you're leaving us after all these years. I was thinking about that morning 150 years ago when you, Melanie, and I watched the sunrise from Coletta Mountain. I thought that day was something special; it was only the beginning. I'm not sad that you are leaving. This is just another adventure, and you'll be back sometime. We spoke of this a long ago, Iggy, how no one's energy ever dissipates. The universe wastes nothing. Mama and Papa are still somewhere. Maybe you can bring them back to us, Iggy; if anyone can do it, it will be you."

A large RV pulled up behind the guest buildings, and the doors opened. Amos Carmichael, his wife, and two children piled out of the back, followed by three more young adults and nine children. He strode to Iggy and wrapped his arms around him. "It's good to see you, my friend. The day we met was probably one of the best days of my life. I would like you to meet my three grandchildren, four great-grandchildren, and two great-great-

grandchildren. That's quite a mouthful, wouldn't you say? It's all thanks to you. I'm 194 years old and still going strong. Thank you, my friend. We've come to see you off and wish you well. This world will not be the same without you."

Melanie gazed across the vast expanse of pasture leading to the foothills. "There are almost a million people here, Iggy. They all want to touch you one more time and say goodbye. They are all the people you have so profoundly touched over the century."

"I know," he sighed. "It's only an hour before sunset; that's when I leave. I expect visitors. I guess it will have to be a collective goodbye."

Daedalus rested a few hundred feet behind them between the guest apartments and the pasture, as the approaching sunset became the artist's hand beginning to paint the crimson fired crowns of the trees. Melanie emerged and walked toward her husband holding out her hand with a portable microphone. "Here, Iggy, you'll need this."

Melanie stood with Lindy, talking, while Iggy climbed on the Land Rover roof. "Hello back there," he said testing the microphone. "Can everybody see me? How about the audio? My goodness, there's a lot of you here." He was speaking through the microphone connected to Daedalus that vibrated air molecules to produce sound. Even the people in the rear of the giant crowd heard him as if he was personally speaking quietly to them as individuals. A million people raised their hands to acknowledge his words. He surveyed the crowd. Many thousands of people were there who had been his friends and associates over the years.

They all had been affected by his actions in a thousand different ways, and each had experienced a personal epiphany. Hundreds of thousands of them were the children, now adults, whom he had rescued and educated, transforming the dregs of humanity into its brightest and finest. He had unlocked the potential of each one of them individually and gave them the intellect and fortitude to change the world. That had been the mission, and they were successful. They hadn't come to pay homage to the man. Iggy had taught them that he was just a man and their benefactor. He had always stressed the importance of their place in the future of men as individuals and not his own importance. Coupled with unlocking, however, came the deep psychic connection with each child that always precipitated love and respect. They had come to say goodbye to their hero.

"I know each one of you would like to hug me as I would like to hug you one more time. The sun is setting soon, and I must leave. I'm looking at the finest group of human beings that have ever lived. You are all the best of the best, and I am overwhelmed being in your presence. You are changing the world. You are dedicated to the process, and this is the only way humanity can address the future. I'm so proud of what you all have become."

"I know you're all thinking, 'Who will I talk to when I need advice?' I am leaving Jack, Lucky, and Lindy, as well as Brett and Luke. They will be your resources." He laughed. "And when the chips are really down, you've got Baby and Junior. They will go to the ends of the earth for you. I would wish you all good luck, but you don't need it. Wishing you luck intimates that you might fail without it. You will not fail. You can't fail as long as you remember the things you have learned here at Lightning. The old order is gone. You are the new order, and you will take your brothers and sisters through Millennium's Gate. I am not leaving forever. I will return someday."

Iggy jumped down from the roof of the vehicle, almost into the arms of Michelle Sayers. Crying, she put her arms around Iggy, speaking softly in his ear. "I remember everything, Iggy. I am a savant. I didn't know that I even had a name until you saved me. I remember every moment of my life and what you have meant to me. I love you, Iggy Marcus, like I love my own parents, only even more. Every single day, I think of what my life would've been instead of what it has become. Thank you, thank you, thank you! I will miss you."

Iggy smiled and kissed her forehead. "Nor will I forget you, sweetheart. Of all my kids, you were the one I unlocked the most frequently. It took thousands of hours to remove your autism and rebuild your mind, but it was worth it. Just look at you! I am glad I had the opportunity to help you. I'll be back someday, and you'll still be here."

He turned sharply away from Michelle, hiding his own emotion, and bumped squarely into Tom Rickart. "I have to tell you, Iggy. During the past few days, I have replayed every moment of our association together in my mind. What an incredible life this has been. You are not even gone yet, and I feel this huge emptiness inside. In fact, this has been more than a life. It has been a giant fairytale-like dream that I actually got to live." A tear trickled down his cheek. "I'll see you, boss, take care of yourself and don't forget to take a lot of pictures. I want to see what's out there when you return. I love you, man. You're the brother I never had."

Melanie was in tears as she said goodbye to everyone. Then she, Gloria, and Iggy boarded Daedalus just as the shepherd's ship appeared next to them. "It's time to leave, my husband."

He turned to enter Daedalus and close the hatch when he spied a lone figure pushing his way through the crowd. He turned to Gloria. "Wait! Someone is coming that I really must say goodbye to." Iggy jumped from the deck and jogged across the pasture, stopping to wait for the figure to push his way through the crowd.

They both wore huge grins but Taio Chen's eyes glistened. "Hello, Taio Chen. You have come a long way from China. Is Heng Cong with you?"

"No, Uncle Iggy. One of us had to stay. Both the president and vice president of the Free People's Republic of China could not leave together. We have much going on. There are almost 3 billion people in China now. There's lots to do. So, we did what we used to do as children. We flipped a coin... I won."

Iggy smiled as Taio Chen approached and put his arms around him. "I guess you have to leave. Both Heng Cong and I have broken hearts. You and Melanie were mother and father to us and what you did for us is amazing beyond words. You raised us and made us what we are."

"No, Chen. I did not make you what you are. You made you what you are. I was just there to give you a good kick in the pants when you needed it. You know our philosophy. Become the best you can be but reach deep within yourself before you settle for second best. Anyway, Taio Chen, I'm sure you remember that first time we had contact. We had just rescued you from a park in China. I sensed even then there was greatness in you. Not everyone is born with that. Well, look at you now, president of the largest country on earth and doing a slam-bang job at it. Your sister is vice president, and you both keep your country on an even keel. I'm proud of you both, but I expected no less. You and your sister were perfect successors to Zia and Chu. You didn't have any problem winning elections either."

"Where are you going, uncle?"

"I don't know, Taio Chen. In fact, I am not even sure why. All I know is I have a job to do somewhere. It is what I have been selected for." He laughed. "I'll let you know how it went when I get back, Chen. In the meantime, you and Heng Cong must hold down the fort. You have Brett, Luke, Lori, Liam, Baby, and Junior as resources. You'll be fine."

## G. J. Ciccarone Jr

First, I must assume that if you are reading this page, you have plodded through the first two books of this trilogy. Second, I would like to thank you for your fortitude. I hope I entertained you and delivered food for thought.

It is often said there are parallel universes, perhaps a few, perhaps a million, perhaps an infinite number. We probably will never know until the far distant future, if and when someone leads us there if we somehow manage to survive our own insanity.

Common accepted colloquial language and theory calls these parallel universes, alternate dimensions. I dispute that. Merriam-Webster says dimensions are measurements of length, width, and depth as well as the possible scope of importance.

Dimensions are measurements that define spatial coordinates. I hypothesize that the fourth dimension is electromagnetism because it defines the relationship between all forms of the manifestation of pure energy. That includes heat, light, matter, and dark matter... In short, everything in the universe, which I believe is the substance of Deity.

Time has often been called the fourth dimension. I believe that is a misnomer. It does not define spatial coordinates or particular aspects of a substance or place. It is a snapshot of existence, moment by moment, that defines the progression of the universe into the future.

Rather, I would submit to you that these parallel universes are platforms of existence. Some of them may mirror our universe exactly, some may be slightly different, and some may be dramatically opposite of the reality we exist in.

I took many liberties describing different possible concepts defining the universe, existence, and the very essence of the Creator. It is my view of one possible platform of existence, and I believe it is closer to our reality than anything I have heard to date.

Of course, men are just beginning to crack open the atom in a hopeful, controlled fashion to study the universe from the subatomic level. While this may be good, it also may be the harbinger of our demise. I'm quite sure the scientists who developed the Manhattan Project were not aware that the world would someday possess 40,000 nuclear weapons and the ability of one finger to destroy all men.

Men never stop to sit on the lid of Pandora's box. Their insatiable curiosity apparently gives them a license to eagerly lift the head of Medusa for all to see, and the consequences be damned.

Much of what I have written is somewhat controversial. Some of it will be considered heresy by many. Nonetheless, men will either march into the future with open minds or we will be crushed by our own insensitivity to reality and blind adherence to dogma. The one philosophical component I would like to leave everyone with is the product of Rebecca Marcus. She taught her children:

**"NEVER LET ANYONE'S OPINION DEFINE YOUR SELF-IMAGE. A TRUE, VALID SELF-IMAGE MUST COME EXCLUSIVELY FROM WITHIN YOURSELF THROUGH MASTERY BY ACHIEVEMENT.**

If all men can learn that and adopt it as a lifestyle, envy, greed, aggression, and war, which are all struggles for power positions, will immediately evaporate. If we are to continue, we must adopt that moral code.