

*Homo sapiens, still in their infancy, were unaware they existed in a universe never given to the vagaries of happenstance. Man had tried to define the cosmic hand guiding existence, so he had conceived of a supreme being...God. His understanding of the deity was relegated to the meager, limited experiences of his own physicality. No accurate understanding of the universe or Godhead was possible, given his adolescent intellectual stature. The universe's self-originating natural order of cosmic progression was oblivious to individuality, but the individuality of its occupants was the essence of its divine purpose. The universe incessantly develops the necessary tools to complete its spectacular tapestry of existence and eternity as it chooses its taskmasters.*

## CHAPTER I

### AFTERMATH

Iggy sat in front of the computer and camera in the control room with Adolph Silas, Chandri Kumar and the assault team behind him. The six-foot screen blazed as Amon Rothman's blurred facial expression sharpened, dramatizing an unsuccessful attempt at his usual aloof, noncommittal arrogance. "Mr. Marcus, we meet again. How did you get this number?" Iggy noticed the almost imperceptible seething undercurrent of frustration and anger Rothman attempted to disguise.

"I have my ways Amon. I see Gunther and Richard are with you. Have you heard from your people in Argentina, yet? You can see your scientists, Silas and Kumar, sitting behind me. Your lawyer, Ainstead, is in the infirmary. He took a bullet, but he'll live. He was shot by a doctor while he was leveling his pistol at the back of my head. I believe I'm going to keep these men here for a while. I have a video recording and hologram of the entire episode in Argentina, from the moment we touched down at the airport, to the moment we left."

"I have no idea what you are you're talking about concerning Mr. Crenshaw and Doctors Silas and Kumar. There will be serious legal repercussions for you. Assault and kidnapping, especially across international borders. I demand Mr. Crenshaw's release, immediately, and the two doctors, as well."

The three men glanced at each other. Obviously, Borenko had underestimated this man. The plan was supposed to be foolproof. They would have the technology, or Marcus and his son would be dead. Either way they were winners, or they might not have the technology, but at least its creator would be dead.

"Let's cut to the chase, gentlemen, and stop the fencing. You are not in a position to demand anything. I, on the other hand, want nothing. This is merely an exhibition of the status quo. I have two international lawyers in the family. They are among the best in the business. Also, who are you going to have as an advocate, President William Sledge?" He laughed. "I just wanted you to know where the bear sits now. You have kidnapped my son and ordered a lethal device to be placed in his head after you stole one of my devices from the same location. I have men in custody who will testify to that. You threatened his life and mine as well, so you should know better than to threaten me now with inuendo. You have decided to make this a fight to the death, in opposition to the offer I made you over a month ago. Fine. So be it! Thank you, so much, for the gracious invitation to your South American party, but I decided to be a party pooper. I sent the men, who remained alive, hiking down the mountain before I vaporized your facility. Those who didn't survive are buried beneath the rubble. Now, I am inviting you to my party. The offer I made you the day of President Sledge's press release, at our ranch, still stands. I doubt you will take me up on my offer. It's not within you to become one of the common folks."

"Cement this into your blue-blooded aristocratic DNA memory, gentlemen. You have decided to make this an open war. This is not what I wanted. My offer to you was genuine. Since you have no intention of joining us, understand this fully: From this moment forward, anything you attempt to do to our organization, expect us to retaliate, in kind. I defined the philosophical points of where we are and where we are headed, to you that afternoon. They obviously fell on deaf ears."

"Gentlemen, you are just beginning to become aware of the technology we possess and the power we wield. Unlike you, we don't use power to abrogate the rights of others, but rather to guarantee their rights. I understand exactly who and what you are. Consider that when you decide to act. I will give you all the time you need to learn to live among men, instead of trampling them. However, I issue this warning. I forbid you to harm another person in your attempt to retain your power. Almost everything you do is harmful to others, in some fashion. I mean exactly this gentleman; you will not deliberately harm anyone physically in any way, is that clear? If you do not heed this warning, we will encapsulate you and you can live your life out, inside Yosemite Sam or Elmer Fudd."

"Do not expect to see Dr. Silas or Dr. Kumar soon. As far as your lawyer goes, we don't want his presence littering the Ranch. We will return him to you as soon as he is well enough to travel, and I might add, after he and I have had more than just a few conversations. As you

now know, I have effective ways to question someone." Iggy's glare was riveting and even though he could not project across the Atlantic, he knew Amon Rothman and Gunther Lichtenberg were both squirming in their seats.

"One more thing, gentlemen. You can tell Vladimir Borenko he is overmatched. That's all I have. Unless you have something significant to offer, I bid you farewell, until we speak again." Ten seconds passed. Both men across the Atlantic sat in silence. He punched exit and the screen faded.

Tom Rickart wore his usual ear to ear grin. "That was amazing, Iggy! You just forbade some of the most powerful people on the planet to do something and freaked them out. Well, actually, I think you're the most powerful person on the planet at this point. Could you see the look of fear? It was visible. I'm not sure what they're afraid of, maybe just losing power, but they're definitely having a bad day. I'm glad you're my friend and not my enemy!" he said shaking his head. "I'd be scared enough to leave brown skid marks in my underwear, after that."

"I thought my brother Jack was the consummate Crass Meister," Lucky said laughing. "You've got him beat all to hell, Tom."

Iggy turned to his head of security. "Tom, take the Gulfstream to Miami.

Tom nodded his head, "You want me to pick up Dr. Boli's assistant, correct?"

"Yes. Take three of your best men and get down there ASAP. You must leave now and all of you must wear shields. They want her very badly. Now that Dr. Boli is beyond their reach, the next best person would be his research associate. They are either going to use her as a replacement for Dr. Boli or they are going to threaten him through her, perhaps both. She and her husband announced a two-week vacation in Miami, the day before yesterday, as per my instructions. Her husband is a medical doctor. He helped her scrub the computers and destroy Boli's hard files. The University doesn't know this yet, but when they find out, there's going to be hell to pay. Interlink controls the Polytechnic di Milano, like they control just about every other western school. Sophia Molinari and her husband Roberto are in grave danger. We must get to Miami airport and intercept them as they deplane. That's exactly what Interlink will try. They left Rome just under seven hours ago and it's an 11-hour trip. You have a four-hour trip from here to Miami, slightly less if you really crank it up. So, you see how close we're cutting it. I'm sending Dr. Boli along for identification purposes and to reassure Dr. Molinari of our intentions. Boli will accompany you to the terminal but keep him shielded while they deplane. They are arriving on Italia Trasporto Aereo, flight 622, Gate F18. Be there Tom. We can't let them have Dr. Molinari or her husband."

"You better call Dr. Boli ASAP boss. The Gulfstream is serviced and fueled. I can be out of here in 15 minutes after I commandeer three of my men."

"Good, Tom. Stay in touch the entire time. I'll be using my sat phone to text Dr. Molinari on her husband's phone. Park the Gulfstream off the beaten path and leave it shielded when you leave for the terminal."

"It sure is a good thing we have these things," Tom said as he patted the little gray box on his belt.

Just under four hours later, Tom Rickart and four men stood at the docking terminal to gate F18 awaiting Sophia Molinari and her husband. One of his men was braced to shield Dr. Boli if any threat materialized. Tom turned away laughing. Evidently, someone was worried Dr. Boli might be recognized. He wore a pair of black horn rim glasses with a plastic Groucho Marx, Mr. Potato head nose and mustache. Still laughing, he twisted the bezel on his watch as he turned away from the Interlink people. "Okay men. There are at least five of them here for the same reason we are. The two men in business suits off to the left, who seem engrossed in conversation, and three of the uniformed airline representatives are all Interlink. This is how we are going to work it. Identify all these people that I have just described. Keep in mind there may be a few more, so stay on your toes."

"You have pictures of Dr. Molinari and her husband. When you ID them descending in the terminal tunnel, encapsulate everyone Interlink on my command. Jim, you take the two businessmen. I'm sure they are armed. I don't believe the other three are armed. They're not wearing clothing that will conceal a weapon. Mickey, you encapsulate the other three and I will shield Dr. Molinari and her husband."

"Arthur, stay with Dr. Boli and keep him shielded and out of harm's way." Tom said, still laughing... and get that silly thing off his face so Dr. Molinari can see who he is. That's the reason he's here in the first place. Where did you get that, anyway?"

"Iggy's daughter handed it to me before we got on the plane. I thought it was kind of funny. I haven't seen one of these in years."

Tom Rickart laughed and mumbled, "the whole family has the same silly sense of humor."

Flight 622 taxied across the flight line and docked. It would only be a matter of five minutes or so before the passengers began to deplane. "Okay men, stay on your toes. This is it. No mistakes. Bear in mind we are only encapsulating Interlink people so they can't create a ruckus. As long as we keep Dr. Boli, his assistant, and her husband shielded, they cannot be approached or harmed. That's the priority. Depending on your proximity to the captives, you may wish to include yourself behind the shield. I'd stay away from the two turkeys in business suits. They are definitely armed. I don't know if they would use them... But they might, and I don't want any of you men hurt. It isn't necessary. Keep them encapsulated while I escort Dr. Molinari and her husband to the Gulfstream. At that point, Art, you are to escort Dr. Boli to his assistant, her husband, and myself. I will escort the three of them to the Gulfstream in my shield. I will let you all know when I arrive and then

you can release these clowns and join us. Then they become irrelevant, but you should keep yourselves shielded in case there are unidentified players around.”

Flight 622 began to empty. 60 passengers, give or take, exited the terminal tunnel before Tom spied Sophia Molinari. Two men, also passengers, obviously Interlink, closely followed the Molinari’s. “Okay men, there they are. Get it done.”

Tom Rickart hopped over the rope security fence and moved quickly toward his charges. All three uniformed Interlink men with other airport security personnel, instantly moved to restrain him. I’m going to have some fun with these two assholes, Tom laughed to himself as he encapsulated the two men following the Molinari’s with Porky and Petunia pig. He shielded the Molinari’s as he approached them, pointing over his shoulder at Dr. Boli. Sophia Molinari spotted her associate, and immediately realized she was in good hands. She was also quite startled as translucent Looney Tunes characters materialized everywhere. The rest of the passengers laughed in amazement at the spectacle of people struggling with Yosemite Sam, Elmer Fudd, Wiley Coyote, Bugs Bunny, and Daffy Duck. Tom laughed in the faces of the two men in business suits. “This is payback for the wing walk over the Atlantic, boys, even though you can’t hear me.”

Arthur escorted Dr. Boli to Tom Rickart. Their shields merged as Marcos Boli embraced Sophia Molinari and shook hands with her husband. “Grazie a Dio stai bene Sophia, ero preoccupato!”

“Sì, anche io ero preoccupato, ma per te. So che hai molti problemi. È Interlink?”

“Sì, Interlink. But we are safe now. This is Ignatius Marcus’s chief of security, Tom Rickart. He is responsible for our safety and the unusual circumstances of your arrival. He will take us to Lightning Ranch.”

Dr. Sophia Molinari was smiling. Brilliant, like her associate and mentor, she saw the many cartoon characters surrounding people struggling to get out of captivity and immediately understood the implications. She remembered the giant Yosemite Sam in space from the broadcast by the American President and Ignatius Marcus from Lightning Ranch.

Fifteen minutes later Tom Rickart and passengers boarded the Gulfstream awaiting the two remaining security men. Tom reported in. “We are all aboard, Boss. We’re just waiting for two of my men, and we’ll be airborne. One man is standing guard at the foot of the steps. It went off without a hitch, but it wouldn’t have happened without the shields. We put Bugs Bunny in charge and left a lot of people who have never seen the technology scratching their heads, but that’s just how it goes sometimes. We’ll see you in about four hours, Rickart, out.”

Five thousand miles away, 36 men and women in the Interlink conference room awaited news while discussing the events in Argentina that compromised Vladimir Borenko’s less than foolproof plans. Vidal Machinski entered quietly, walked to the head of the long conference table, and handed a thin folder to the men seated there. Richard Percy flipped slowly through the pages. He was expressionless but the two men on either side understood his silence. They sent their best men to Miami and apparently, they had failed again. The men and women they used for these types of operations were usually ex-KGB, GRU, or MI 5 operatives with long histories of ruthless efficiency, excellence, and the ability to get the job done. They were consummate professionals who never failed. Yet, they were failing now at every turn. Further, their attorney and greatest resource director and planner, Ainstead Crenshaw, was held in captivity at Lightning Ranch in Montana, and it seemed there was nothing at all they could do about it. This group of men and women and their predecessors had historically overseen and controlled almost every political theater, other than that of Stalin, Hitler, and Mao Zedong. They were primarily responsible, however, with their support of Lenin, for the Bolshevik revolution, and were the principal financiers that put Adolf Hitler into power. They coerced Nixon to play the China card and placed Chairman Mao at the head of China’s rapidly growing industrialization.

There were many reasons for the nine Crusades lasting 200 years, but they were in no small part due to the European nobility, the predecessors to modern Interlink, and the papacy’s efforts to eliminate the Ottoman Empire and win back Jerusalem. This consortium of nobility that would someday evolve into Interlink, controlled all psychological, societal indoctrination efforts in Europe and the Western world from 500 AD to the present. They were now being overwhelmed by one man, armed solely with his wits and an impenetrable defense.

They had enlisted the aid of the three greatest theoretical physicists in the world to assist in deciphering the technology of their nemesis, Iggy Marcus. Their lead physicist, Marcos Boli, and his family defected immediately to Lightning Inc. and became an ally of their adversary. The other two physicists were now captives of Marcus.

Amon Rothman, discouraged, depressed, and awash in recriminations, had allowed Marcus to get the upper hand and manipulate him. That had never happened before, and humiliation was a hard pill to swallow. Callous manipulation of society to achieve an end had always been his strong suit. Now, apparently, the shoe was on the other foot as Interlink was being manipulated. He, his associates, and predecessors, had always been the masters of psychological operations. Manipulation of the collective societal mentality with propaganda on the world stage had always been their forte. They had handled the threat this man represented badly from the beginning and there was no way to trigger a do over. Apparently, this man, Iggy Marcus, was much better at it than they. He had been subtle. He designed his empire quietly and slowly with his ultimate intent well below the radar, then quickly ascended to the pinnacle of prominence and power that he represented as their antithesis.

The foundation of his empire was laid in bed rock, seemingly unassailable. He was obviously the most technically brilliant man who had ever lived. He had changed the power structure of the planet in 15 short years, but the actual transition of power had come instantly. His defense mechanisms represented a technology, hundreds, if not thousands of years into the future. In a matter of minutes, he stripped every nation on earth of their ability to destroy each other en masse. He had removed the cudgel of nuclear intimidation and all significant power from

authoritarians everywhere, gathering it around his own bastions. The men at this table were convinced this man would declare himself king and was apparently unstoppable, because it was their modus operandi and the only type of mentality they understood.

These arrogant men and women who believed themselves superior to the masses, had no idea what true human quality consisted of. They believed everyone, like themselves, were self-centered egoists who required the subordination of others to elevate their personal stature. This had been their core belief for centuries. They could never comprehend a man could exist who did not derive his self-image through envy, by the destruction or deprecation of others. It was incomprehensible. They had been married to their insolent vanity for thousands of years as men had repeatedly destroyed each other in pursuit of validity. They were incapable of understanding they were the epitome of weakness and failure as the paradigm of humanity, and their adversary was the shining example of near perfection and the best within us that everyone should aspire to.

The elevator stopped on the eighth and top floor of Marcus General Hospital. Gloria and Iggy exited the elevator and greeted the armed guard stationed at the only exit from the suite of rooms at the end of the hall.

"Hi Gary, anything interesting over the past few days?"

"Nothing Iggy. He doesn't say much. I bring his meals and he occasionally asks when he's going to be released. That's about it."

"Thanks Gary. He'll be going home soon, after he meets my daughter. I'm sure you'll be relieved. This isn't the most exciting duty. You are needed elsewhere, anyway. "

"I'm ready Father, I will follow your instructions explicitly," Gloria nodded her head as Iggy knocked on the door.

They heard a single muffled, "Yes," from within.

"Good morning Ainstead, you're looking fit and healed from your wound. I think it is time for you to leave us and return to your comrades in Brussels."

An irritated Ainstead Crenshaw leered at his captor, saying nothing as Iggy and Gloria entered the room. "Do you remember that afternoon in Argentina, Ainstead, when you entered the room and pointed a gun at me? I'm sure you remember all the details. That was the day you intended to steal my technology and then kill my son, Luke, and me. That makes you a murderer by intent," said Iggy with a slight smile. "So, you kidnapped my son, implanted an explosive device in his brain and one of your rocket scientists, acting under your orders, pressed the button attempting to kill him because I ruined your plans. Both of those men, Silas and Kumar are still here and won't be leaving anytime soon. I know that is presumptuous of me but given the actions and intent of you and your comrades in Brussels, I feel quite justified in doing what I am about to do."

"Well, you said you were going to let me out of this place. Let's get to it then," Crenshaw sneered with arrogant venom.

"In due time, Ainstead, in due time. First, however, it's time to pay the Piper, and you are the designated payor. I would like to introduce you to my daughter, Gloria. She has most unusual gifts. It is time you learned what you and your people are up against."

Iggy nodded his head at his daughter. She raised her head and stared directly into Crenshaw's eyes... "I AM HERE," her thoughts thundered painfully in his skull, causing him to take a sharp breath and grasp the sides of his temples between his hands.

"Get out of my head!!!" Crenshaw screamed. "Get out of my damn head!!!" He screamed again. "You have no right to do this. Who the F#\*% do you people think you are!!! Get the hell out of my head!!!"

"Sorry to disappoint you Ainstead. It's funny you should mention rights. I don't intend to kill you like you intended to kill me and my son as well as my wife and his doctor. I intend, however, to find out every scrap of information that lurks in that corrupt little mind of yours." Iggy nodded to his daughter.

Ainstead Crenshaw screamed, "NO! NO!" and hurled himself from the bed onto the floor. He rose and started toward the window.

He's going to kill himself, Father... The window!

Iggy was on the other side of the bed, too far away to stop him. Crenshaw was going to make it and jump through the plate glass window from the eighth floor.

Gloria raised her arms with her hands facing Crenshaw..."STOP NOW!" She bellowed subliminally as Ainstead Crenshaw froze in his tracks, horrified. The eight-year-old child approached Crenshaw, then led him by the hand as he meekly followed her to the bed. "Please lay down Mr. Crenshaw, I will not physically harm you," she said aloud.

Iggy watched Gloria execute another feature of her incredible mind. "Wow! Did you know you could do that Gloria? That is one of the most amazing things I've ever seen."

"Not until this very moment father. He was going to kill himself so we could not question him. It was a reflex action on my part. I told him to stop and then he did. I'm surprised, myself."

Crenshaw lay in the bed, subdued and whimpering. He was shaking, terrified by a small child who reduced him to a quivering shamble. These people were obviously much more than they had anticipated at Interlink. He knew there was nothing he could do to stop what was happening. It made him nauseous as the bile and vomit rose in his gut. All Interlink's connections and operations were in his brain. His photographic memory cataloged it all. He knew the location of every Interlink property as well as the names and private real estate holdings of the individual members...and... he knew about all the money, trillions that had been fleeced from countries around the world, the German World War 2 gold hoard remnants and bags of gemstones, their location and how much. More than that, however, he knew the plans of Interlink as well as all their subtle machinations. He understood the subterfuge of their entire history, including the methods and intent of the psychological operations employed by his associates to dismantle western society and enslave the masses.... He also knew about the others.

Gloria and Iggy stood on opposite sides of the bed where Crenshaw lay in tears, covered in his own stomach contents. "Go ahead Gloria. These people want to kill us, and they haven't finished trying. At least now we will know everything about them."

"Gloria gently placed her hand on Ainstead Crenshaw's forehead and held her father's hand with the other. The process began. She delved into Crenshaw's mind. "How deeply should I go father? Only you understand how this affects someone else, especially someone corrupt."

"That's not necessarily true Gloria. Melanie, my brothers, and my sister know what this is like. This man, and his ilk, are examples of the root of everything that is wrong with the world. They are sociopaths and given the opportunity, they will kill you as casually as speaking to you if it accommodates their needs. Don't concern yourself with what might happen to Mr. Crenshaw. Rather, concern yourself with the damage to the people of the world if these people continue to have their way."

Ainstead Crenshaw's shrill ear-piercing wail wrapped Gloria's decent deep into his subconscious, uncovering every memory and nuance, even back to his birth, as well as all the information he possessed about Interlink. She squeezed her father's hand as she passed everything to him. Although brilliant, Gloria was still a child cloaked in innocence. It was difficult for her to watch Crenshaw's pain as he relinquished every secret of his subconscious mind. If it weren't for her consummate maturity and wisdom as a critical thinker, it would have been impossible to execute this. Still, she understood everything her father was doing and this necessary expedition into Ainstead Crenshaw's subconscious was an essential part of her education and training to unhesitatingly embrace reality in all things.

Iggy approached the bed where Ainstead Crenshaw lay shaking, and said with a modicum of compassion, "we will not tell them at Interlink how I acquired this information or its magnitude, despite your attempts to kill my son, my wife and me. What we did to you here was beyond your control. Our motives are not the domination of others or revenge for some of the mistakes that many of you have made while causing enormous harm. We are going to use our gifts for the benefit of everyone, not just a select few. You have gifts also, but Interlink's self-aggrandizement is your only priority. That must end now. You offer nothing of value to anyone. Despite your egregious history, we made you an offer to join us that was valid and still stands. Do you see that? You can have productive lives, just not as masters over all of existence. If you can abandon your predilection to be slave masters, you can join us and still live superlative lives."

Ainstead Crenshaw, still whimpering, offered no response. He did not comprehend that Iggy had just set him up to manipulate Interlink by offering him the choice of telling his comrades the truth or remaining silent about this interrogation. Iggy turned to Gloria. "Dr. Peterson isn't wearing his watch. Please ask Gary to locate him and bring strong sedatives up, then return here. We will stay with Mr. Crenshaw until Dr. Peterson arrives. This man is still in danger of harming himself after unlocking him and we cannot allow that."

He twisted the bezel on his wristwatch. Bernie Dolan's face appeared. "Bernie, I need a favor. What does tonight look like? You free?"

"Of course. Where, and when, Iggy?"

"I am going to notify Crenshaw's people in Brussels that we are returning their attorney in the morning, but only shortly before you land. Rest up. I would like you to leave for Brussels by midnight or 1 AM for an early arrival. Take Bill Montrose with you. He can do some of the flying on the return trip and shield the aircraft at the airport if necessary."

"Consider it done, Iggy. I'll find Bill and preflight the aircraft."

"Thanks Bernie. Crenshaw will be sedated for the flight. You can give him a wake-up cocktail before you land."

Dave Peterson's usual double knock preceded his entry. "Hi Iggy, what's up?"

"We must sedate Mr. Crenshaw. We're sending him back to Brussels in the morning."

"Just out of curiosity, why do you want him sedated?"

"Gloria just unlocked him a short while ago, and it was traumatic. I think he might be a danger to himself if left to his own devices until he boards the aircraft."

"Gloria did that? Wow! I didn't know she could do that. Wow!" He repeated. "I have been here for 15 years now as your associate and doctor. You all never cease to amaze me. It's always something new and exciting. I'll say this much, I often think how much my life has been affected because I was on call the day you were carried in, burnt to a crisp. Had it been any one of five or six other doctors, I might not be standing here experiencing this incredible life. I just thought to mention it."

"Thanks Dave. We go back a way, don't we?"

"You certainly can say that Iggy."

Iggy smiled. "One of fate's unexpected surprises. In the mood for another surprise, Dave?"

"I think the word, fate, is appropriate. After the last 15 years I don't think you can surprise me with much, though."

Iggy smiled with his gotcha grin, and looked at his daughter, silently asking her to speak to Dave Peterson, telepathically.

Gloria smiled seraphically at Dr. David Peterson as she spoke to him in silence. "I have always felt it was the most wonderful day when Sylvia delivered me. Because I am alive, I feel, from my perspective at least, it was the greatest day in the history of the universe."

Iggy's broad grin depicted his affection for Gloria. Dr. David Peterson, on the other hand, stood with his mouth open, speechless. Astonished, he had just felt a little girl speak to him telepathically. He also saw the stature of her enormous intellect and instantly realized Iggy's gifts, as miraculous as they are, were superseded by Gloria's inheritance. She was a new kind of human being, representing a quantum leap into the future. He began to smile. He had also seen the inherent virtue of the little girl in front of him with eyes that radiated serene wisdom. "There are no black birds perched on that fence," he murmured to himself.

"Touché my friend, I take it back. You can surprise me! Each time, it's more amazing than the last. I can't imagine what's next but I'm sure it will be unbelievable. I can't wait to get to know Lori and Liam. So, to the business at hand. I will administer the sedative and send a nurse to remain in his room with him until he leaves later tonight."

"Perfect Dave. Despite the trauma this man has created for others in the past few months, he is the one deeply traumatized now. We're sending him back to Brussels. Would you ask someone to help him clean up and change clothes?"

"Yes, I'll send someone right away," Dave said before he left. Gloria and Iggy waited for the nurse to arrive. They finally left the room in silence but continued their conversation.

"Well, father, I'm sure you saw everything as well as I did. You were right. I do not feel sorry for these people. They are monsters. Who are the others, father? There wasn't a clear picture in his mind, besides the knowledge they were not human.

You saw what Interlink intends for Senator Dorian and Justice Carmichael. You also saw that they already have plans in place to kill the President and other members of the government who threaten them. They especially revile you and want you dead. From their perspective you are the greatest threat the world has ever seen. I suppose, if I was one of them, I would agree. I was frightened when I saw his mental images with his hands around my throat. It was so vivid. His imagination pictured me turning blue as he choked me. I wasn't frightened that it would really happen. I was frightened when I realized that so many people in the world were capable of that kind of hatred. There is no way back for them, is there father?"

"You have much wisdom, Gloria. No, there is no way back for them. There's an old trope I agree with: 'Dance with the devil once, and you dance with him for life.' It had to come to this Gloria. I know it, Tom Rickart knows it, and so do the people who are targets. I didn't explain it to you, knowing you will undoubtedly learn these things soon enough. When you do, you will sit on my shoulders, and I will guide you. Because you are who and what you are, you will see things no one else can see, and hear things no one else can hear. That is the reason for your training. Vision that lucid requires a firewall for you to retain your sanity. Knowledge, perpetual exposure to reality, and the explicit crystal-clear vision of everything beyond normal human experiences is not an easy thing to manage, especially from the perspective of an elevated intellect. I will explain many amazing things that are all part of reality, yet invisible at first glance. Because you are who you are, you must be aware. As to the others, they are not human. They evidently occupy bodies similar to ours, but they are not native to our world. I became aware of them eleven years, six months, and five days ago. I never had clairvoyant contact with anyone from Interlink until this morning with you and Crenshaw. "

"Everyone in the family and many of our associates know they exist. We don't speak of it except among ourselves. Now, you are aware also. There could be many reasons they are here. Soon, now, I will contact them once our tribulations with Interlink, and the other superpowers, are resolved. Whoever the others are, they obviously do not like notoriety, so they have only revealed themselves to the people that run the planet, which happens to be Interlink. I'm sure there is collusion between the aristocracy and these beings, to keep the population in the dark. I can't say that I blame them. Most people believe this is the center of the universe. Can you imagine the upheaval in societal conventions if mankind had to face the reality that other intelligent beings have been here for eons and this tiny planet is far from the figurative center of the universe?"

"They must be extraterrestrial, father. That is the logical conclusion. Unless, somehow, another intelligent species of life has evolved here, but that doesn't make any sense. If they're intelligent and wield any kind of technology, they would not be able to do this in obscurity. I also find it very odd that your President Sledge doesn't know of them. You would think he would."

"It is not odd. Think about it. He is an elected official. They come and they go. They influence society during their tenure, but it is always temporary, and their policies can be remanded until the next election transfers the reins of power. Further, because of their temporary status, they are unpredictable. There is a possibility that some of the totalitarian regimes know of them because they are generally in power for the long haul, but I am not sure. We will soon know. Incidentally, President Sledge now knows. I have told him and asked for his silence until we resolve the current state of affairs. He is extremely annoyed with his generals. They knew and didn't tell him. He intends to replace most of them because of that. Obviously, his generals communicate with the people of Interlink. You can see how convoluted the avenues of power are and the inappropriate allegiances people owe. They conflict with the obligations of government in our supposedly free society. All that is going to change now. "

"Of course, you are the harbinger of that change. How have they been able to keep this from the public for so long, father? I think Interlink is very powerful. They manage to control society effectively, somehow. I think you are more powerful than any of them. Besides the love of a daughter, father, you have my overwhelming admiration. "

Iggly smiled at Gloria and continued, "Psychological indoctrination is more than a mere casual method Interlink uses to influence society. It is the very basis of their operating system and how they indoctrinate and control the population is a form of mass hypnosis. They have been doing this for centuries. After the Revolutionary war, America broke free of this psychological oppression. Historically, the powers that be, had very few ways to disperse propaganda. With the advent of mass media, beginning with the radio, that has changed, and now all of society is under their thumb.

American Media Inc. has been putting a dent in that by waking people up, but that is a long, tedious process. Whoever or whatever these 'others' are, I am certain they are extraterrestrial. They are obviously aware of my existence because of our notoriety. They have yet to approach me, but I am sure that is about to happen since Interlink will no longer be the top of the food chain. Otherwise, I will find a way to approach them. Logic would have it that our technology at Lightning exceeds theirs somehow. We will find out soon enough."

Gloria spoke aloud. "I'm worried for you Dad." She rarely called him that. "You are carrying the entire world on your shoulders. I see it clearly. You are so courageous! I hope the load is not too heavy."

"Worry not," He reassured her, smiling. "I have only two choices. The charted course I am on or do nothing. No matter what the danger, I could not live with... do nothing. Anyway, my dear daughter, you are now part of the equation. I didn't ask for you to have this genetic inheritance from me. It is what the universe decided and intends for you. Things like this don't happen accidentally. That's why I am training you. You are going to be a major player in the scheme of things. That I can see. I can't quite see the future yet, but I know your destiny is much more than simply living out your life. There is a ray of sunshine, however. My mother, your grandmother, was my mentor and she died young, in her 50s. She left me to my own devices. I did well, but only because of her training. Our medical experiments for inhibiting aging are really coming to fruition. I am probably going to be here for a good long time, a few hundred more years at least, so you will have someone badgering you with training," he chuckled. "You can always sit on my shoulders. I will be here for you until you master your own existence and destiny. Although you are just becoming aware, you will eventually bear tremendous responsibility. It is what we have been selected for."

As they walked towards the staircase, he thought about the others. He knew very little, but logic dictated they were technologically advanced. Evidently the technology was not as sophisticated as his 'brain children' or it would likely have been used against him unless there were other mitigating reasons. The possibilities were endless, but it made sense. The others were somehow allied with the people who ruled the planet from the shadows, but their motives were hidden. Their existence demanded answers to a myriad of questions that would evidently be answered soon.

They decided to take the glass tunnel staircase to the lobby. It was a beautiful evening; a perfect time to admire the spectacular view of the mountains and approaching sunset. They descended the staircase holding hands, a doting father, and his little girl. That was the insouciant appearance, but the universe tacitly observed two of its giants.

*The eyes of our children reflect our measure.*

*Our best or worst always on display*

*Love and embrace them; they are a fleeting treasure.*

*In the blink of an eye youth passes away*

Rebecca Marcus

# CHAPTER II

## CONSEQUENCES

President William James Sledge even slept with Iggy's Lightning phone as it woke him from a sound sleep. These were tenuous times. Decrepit supply chains, inflation, and constant ideological squabbling ruled the day. The mainstream media continued to propagate the unrest and leveled an endless litany of criticism, innuendo and lies against the administration, decrying every ill in society, blaming it on the President and his leadership, despite his weekly fireside chats. They helped considerably, but the media assault would've been insurmountable without the contradictory editorials, TV broadcasts, and podcasts from American Freedom Media Inc. The Marcus family publications owned about 60% of the domestic news dissemination market by popularity, and at least 10% of the overseas printed media publications.

The lightning phone rang again as he fumbled trying to answer. It was 11 PM. "Hi Bill. Sorry about the hour but this is important."

"No problem, it's always great to hear your voice.... always reassuring."

"I'm sure You remember me telling you about Ainstead Crenshaw, the attorney and associate for Interlink. You also remember our little excursion to Argentina. I briefly mentioned that I had to go there to rescue my son, Luke. I gave you only a smattering of the story."

The President laughed. "I remember it well. You needed a favor and I complied. You are the only entity outside of the United States government to whom I would lend a C5 transport."

"Lend is the wrong word, Bill. I owe you a debt that I must pay. I had to rescue my son that day and if you had not helped, I would not have been able to do so, easily. I never filled you in on the entire story. It was sponsored by Interlink. They kidnapped my son and intended to kill us both once they acquired the technology. That is what it was all about. My chief of security, my wife and another doctor foiled their ambitions. During the scuffle on that mountaintop in Argentina, Ainstead Crenshaw was shot by a young female Dr. that was in my party. There were two nuclear scientists involved. I brought them all back here to Lightning Ranch. I will make this long story short. When Crenshaw healed from his wounds, Gloria unlocked him."

"Interesting...Gloria can do that? I know what that's all about Iggy. So, what did you find out? I'm quite sure that is the reason for this call."

"Very perceptive, Bill. He is one of the major brains of their operations and he is also the chief legal counsel for Interlink. I learned everything that was in his conscious and subconscious minds. I know everything that he knows. They have you targeted for assassination, Bill. Unfortunately, the plan had not been completely developed so he didn't contain the particulars in his mind. It is scheduled not too far down the road, though." They are going to use ex- KGB and MI five operatives and a combination of technologies. You are not the only target. Jacob Dorian and Amos Carmichael are to be kidnapped, interrogated, and then killed. They might even be subjects for ransom in their quest for my technology."

"What do you suggest?"

"Bill Montrose just returned from Brussels. I want him to fly with you on Air Force One if you must travel. He has the ability and technology to prevent a missile strike if he is in the cockpit with the radar scope. As for an airstrike, they will use the latest technology. Probably a Chinese missile launched from a sled and be traveling at hypersonic speed. You need a wall between Air Force One and anything that approaches because the countermeasures on Air Force One will be far too slow. Your shield would do it, but you have to be very precise and well-practiced. You're not up to it yet. There is another consideration, and it is extreme. I'm having Montrose bring a large parcel with him. It must be mounted anywhere on the belly of Air Force One. Give orders to everyone aboard the aircraft that they are not to interfere with him or this package. Only you and he will know its purpose. These people might choose a small nuclear weapon to guarantee success hoping the magnitude of the blast will incinerate the aircraft. The field generator in the package with Bill Montrose can encapsulate and suppress a nuclear blast up to 5 Megatons. Any questions, Bill?"

"No, I get it. I sure am glad that you see all the stuff coming. I'm really not in the mood to be incinerated," the president said, laughing. "Thanks Iggy. We sure kicked a hornets' nest, didn't we?"

"Don't allow Alice to go anywhere without a security detail of five men and insist that she always wear the shield. You and Alice must practice the double shielding within a shield, that Tom Rickart demonstrated." These people are dead serious, Bill, and they will stop at nothing. Still, we will give them the chance to join humanity instead of oppressing it. If they try to harm you or anyone else, all bets are off, I will personally encapsulate them so they can do no more harm. I don't like flexing those kinds of muscles, but I cannot allow anyone to be killed intentionally as collateral damage. Unfortunately, we cannot allow domestic or foreign judicial systems to handle such, because Interlink owns many of them."

"Your concern and awareness are more than appreciated. Alice and I have an entirely different perspective on life because of you. You are changing the world, and it is wonderful. For the first time in many years, I have faith in the future. Thank you for that."

"Is Alice there with you, Bill?"



"Yes, she's right here."

"Hi Iggy," Alice said into the phone.

"Put me on speaker, Bill." He heard the customary beep and continued. "How would the two of you like to have your own biological child?"

"That's impossible," Alice responded. "I was born with a deformity. I have no fallopian tubes or ovum to contribute. It is heartbreaking for me because I always wanted children, but things are the way they are for purpose, I suppose."

"No," said Iggy. "Many things are the way they are by accident, not design. Your birth defect is nothing more than 'the luck of the draw'. Well, Melanie and Sylvia Peterson have been doing research. You know of some of our avant-garde medical technology. Those girls are brilliant. They have been thinking of your problem and they believe they have a way, with my technology and their research, to create an ovum that would be the exact genetic product of your body as if you had no birth defect, implant it in your uterus, and fertilize it with Bill's sperm in vitro. Want to be a mom, Alice?"

Alice Sledge began to cry. She abandoned the idea of motherhood in her teenage years when she was told by the doctors, she was sterile and could never have children due to her defective equipment. Her inadequacy made her feel substandard as a human being. She was resigned to her fate, but always grateful for the love of a husband who was her life's companion despite her deformity. "You people can really do that?" Alice sobbed into the phone. "I mean, you really can?"

"Apparently so, at least according to Melanie and Sylvia. All you need to do is pick the month to bring your child into the world."

Bill Sledge had tears in his own eyes as well. "You're amazing, Iggy Marcus. What would the world do if you hadn't come along to save it from itself by an accident? Is there anything you can't do?"

"I thought of that myself often, Bill. Why have I been the fortunate victim of this amazing accident? After all these years, and the birth of my daughter, I have concluded that this is not an accident. Melanie calls it an 'on purpose'. We'll see. Anyway, I have to go. We'll speak soon about Bill Montrose and perhaps a visit to the ranch for you and Alice to get Melanie and Sylvia's fertility therapy."

"So long for now, Iggy."

"Ciao, Alice... Bill. Let's stay in touch."

Bernie Dolan was halfway across the Atlantic when the black Bentley transporting Ainstead Crenshaw arrived at the offices of Interlink. He was frightened...almost on the verge of a nervous breakdown, due in no small part to his subliminal interrogation by an eight-year-old child. Though he had no culpability, he was still responsible for the act that had given Marcus every piece of information he held in the deepest recesses of his mind. He reflected on his life and association with Interlink. He had been one of the top dogs...The man who all the members regarded as the intellectual guru of all Interlink policies. Like almost all humanity, Crenshaw derived his self-opinion from the opinions of his associates. If they thought he was great and competent, then it meant he must be great and competent. His stomach broiled with recriminations of what happened to him in Argentina. He had followed Vladimir Borenko's plan to the letter. They had underestimated their adversary. The results were beyond everyone's control except Marcus. Crenshaw knew he probably had contributed to the destruction of Interlink because Marcus now knew everything, including the existence of the others. He sat in the rear of the limo with his head hung and propped on his hands, asking himself how he could have ever let this happen. The realization of the magnitude of their mistake consumed him.

He oversaw most of Interlink policy. His education encompassed a vast store of knowledge about economics, history, and international law. The men he answered to, were the final authority, but they rarely acted without his guidance, and eventually he had been accepted as one of them.

Vidal Machinski sat in the front seat with the driver. He had been watching Crenshaw and knew something was wrong. Both Rothman and Lichtenberg had asked him to pay close attention to Crenshaw's attitude and demeanor. They remembered Marcus's statement to them about questioning their attorney.

"Are you feeling poorly Mr. Crenshaw?" Machinski inquired. "You don't look well."

"No, Machinski, I was shot a month ago and I'm still recovering," he murmured."

Ainstead Crenshaw held undying loyalty and allegiance to the men who had given him a quantum of power beyond anything, anyone else could grant. His position at the top of the organization had taken him a lifetime to garner. He hadn't entered the game and acquired his position because of his lineage or wealth. His enormous intellect, credentials and unfailingly spectacular advice purchased him a trusted seat among the aristocracy. He had just betrayed the trust with the men who enabled him. It wasn't his fault, he knew that. That man and his daughter had invaded his mind and privacy. He had even attempted suicide to prevent their intrusion. That despicable slip of a child had commanded him to stop, and he was powerless. It frightened him that another human being had the ability to make him act against his own will by a simple subliminal command. The ride from the airport filled him with inner conflict. How much should he tell the men he was about to

face? He knew they had no tolerance for disloyalty or any action contrary to their agenda. He had witnessed, and often suggested the elimination of people who threatened Interlink in even the smallest of ways.

Now he had not only threatened the existence of Interlink, but he had also given their adversary the history and knowledge of his associates. There were other things to consider. Marcus now knew that they intended to interrogate and kill Justice Amos Carmichael and Senator Jacob Dorian. They also intended to assassinate the President of the United States. Those plans had now become problematic. If he revealed his forced disloyalty, they might liquidate him. If he did not, then they would probably continue with the plans against Carmichael and Dorian. He knew that if he allowed that, Marcus would be there waiting for them. Everything they had attempted to date to shackle Marcus had been an abject failure. Now he knew why. Marcus and his daughter had mental capabilities that were almost inconceivable. He reflected on the previous afternoon when that mere child ordered him to stop, he relived the overpowering fear and resentment it had caused him. Most of his life revolved around being the final authority. It was the basic construct of his ego. A small child had destroyed him as an independent entity in an instant. He did not understand that was only possible because of his flawed self-image. He wanted to kill her. He didn't want that simple experience. He wanted to feel his hands around the child's throat, choking the little brat as he squeezed the life out of her, watching her eyes bulge and her face turn blue. For one fleeting instant, Ainstead Crenshaw saw himself as he really was, a killer consumed with self-hatred and the desire to torture and kill anyone that did not submit to his will, just as he had felt when the child had overpowered his mind. He quickly abandoned that vision of himself to recede into delusion again. He could not allow the vision of his inherent evil to surface and possess him.

Ainstead Crenshaw was between a rock and a hard place. If he told the leaders of Interlink what he had done, there was a good chance they would liquidate him. It wasn't definite, but there was a good chance. The alternative was to say nothing. Then, when they conducted their plans to fruition, Marcus would be there, and it would be the probable end of Interlink. He was quite sure that Marcus could easily kill them all. Interlink had not seen Marcus's ability up close and personal... but he had... and he could see no way to neutralize that much power. As part of Interlink, it would precipitate his own demise as well. There was an alternative. He could abscond. He had deposited over \$100 million of his own money in anonymous numbered accounts in assorted banks around the world. So, no matter where he went, he would never starve. But there was a catch 22 to that scenario. If he disappeared, the men of Interlink would understand that he had compromised them. It wouldn't matter that it was forced from his mind by a child. He would have compromised them and that would be enough to trigger their revenge, especially because he had fled. That avenue would require him to disappear, change his identity, and live in remote solitude for the rest of his life. Not a very attractive prospect. He realized at that moment, living out his days, lying on a beach, watching the tide come in and drinking pina colodas was only slightly more attractive than being liquidated by Interlink. He made his decis

Two hours later Ainstead Crenshaw sat before 14 members of Interlink's upper echelon as Richard Percy questioned him. "You've been gone for more than a month, Ainstead. We know you were shot. We spoke with some of the men that were involved that day in Argentina. We heard their description of events. They were soldiers, however. They don't possess the same intellectual faculties that you possess. Please, give a description of the events. We want to know exactly what happened that upended Borenko's 'perfect plan.'"

"I will tell you gentlemen exactly what transpired that day. I wrestled internally with telling you the truth. In the end, however, it is the only avenue that I can take, and all that is left to me. Anything else will bring about the end of this organization and my own demise as well." Crenshaw looked around the table at everyone. He knew this was a gamble, but it was the only possible way that either he or Interlink had any chance of prevailing against Marcus.

"What I am going to tell you may seem impossible. Consider this, comrades, my life can be forfeit if you so desire, but I have even no small thing to gain by misleading you in any way. We are stacked up against a power that has never existed before in the history of the world. It is immense in scope and potential." Ainstead Crenshaw requested a pitcher of water. His nerves had brought on enormous anxiety and a very dry mouth.

"Go on," said Amon Rothman. "We are all ears."

Crenshaw related the events of the incident on the mountaintop in Argentina with chronological precision. He described how Marcus had somehow smuggled a shield device in and used it to thwart Borenko's plans.

"No one here has any idea of the stature of Ignatius Marcus's intellect. I saw inside his mind. They are able to psychologically penetrate your mind and read your thoughts. It's very frightening. That's not all there is gentlemen. He has a daughter who cannot be more than eight or nine years old. I know this will sound impossible, but that child was able to enter my mind, proceed back to my birth and strip every item of information from my memory. I had no way to stop this. Also, during her visit to my psyche, I witnessed the stature of her intellect. Gentlemen, this child is to us intellectually, as we are to an animal. These people must be destroyed! They cannot be allowed to live in the same world as the rest of us."

The room was quiet while everyone pondered the things they were hearing. No one had really understood this much about their adversaries. They knew Marcus was brilliant with other great mental powers, but no concept of their scope. "Go on Ainstead, continue. We want to hear everything. Is that the extent? An elevated intellect?"

"No sir. That is not all. I wish it was. On my last day in their hospital, I experienced the most horrifying event of my life. I will never forget this. It is indelibly stamped in my memory as if it happened five minutes ago. The child entered my head. It was painful. I felt her presence as an entity inside my skull. It's very difficult to describe but it was all consuming. It wasn't done with language. It was more of an exploratory as

she traveled all the different pathways of my mind for my entire life, even back to when I exited the womb. I was powerless as she violated me. She forced me to look at myself, my past and it was the most painful thing that had ever happened to me. She had a connection to her father as she held his hand. She passed the information from me to him. As much as I hate to tell you this, every memory, every scrap of information that I possessed, they now possess. I could see her mind, just as she could see mine. I could also see the stature of his mind through her vision. I have never felt so inconsequential and minuscule in all my existence. Just thinking about it reawakens the nightmare.”

The room remained silent. No one had comments to offer. It was beyond their understanding. Crenshaw’s description was vivid and compelling, but it was not the same as living the experience. Rothman leaned back in his chair. He still could not forgive himself for not killing the Marcus family at Kelmars. “Is that the extent of it? The child who can enter your mind and learn its contents?”

“No sir! That was the easy part.” The memory of that day was so vivid, Crenshaw’s anxiety was reawakened, and he was almost on the verge of tears. He tried to compose himself before continuing.

“So, Ainstead, now that you have captured our imagination, finish telling us, please.”

“You may find this difficult to believe. My loyalty to this organization has been complete, honest, and true to a fault. When this child entered my mind and I realized she could view its entire contents, I jumped from the bed and ran to the window on the eighth floor hoping to hurl myself through the glass and kill myself before divulging any secrets.” Crenshaw sat there in silence, tears slowly running down his cheeks as the memory of that day resurged.

Crenshaw’s distress was obvious to everyone. In so far as most of them were narcissists, they still felt a degree of compassion for their comrade. Crenshaw had made the right decision. The group was convinced of his sincerity and believed that he had no power to control any of the events of that day.

“Please continue,” said Gunther Lichtenberg. “You referred to a hard part; obviously it was very difficult. I have never seen even a tear from you in the 22 years I’ve known you. Please continue.”

Ainstead Crenshaw composed himself. “I told you I had jumped off the bed and was running to the window. I could see Marcus was across the room and there would be no way he could stop me. I did not want to die, but I knew killing myself was the only avenue I had, to prevent the child from entering my mind. I approached the window and the girl exploded in my head.” Tears fell from his eyes again and he had difficulty describing what had happened. “When I say she exploded in my head, I say it because it is the only way I can describe what she did to me. She occupied my brain and told me to stop running toward the window. If I remember correctly, all she said was STOP NOW. It was like a clap of thunder and excruciatingly painful. I could not resist her. It felt like almost a demonic possession. I no longer owned my own thoughts, mind, or body. She possessed them, and I could do nothing.” He sobbed. “That’s when she led me back to the bed and asked me to lay down, which I did. She then proceeded to enter my mind and steal all my thoughts. You cannot comprehend the kind of experience this is. To have someone enter you and take possession of your entire being, forcing you to act against your will and view your own subconscious is distressing beyond belief. I will never forget that as long as I live.” Crenshaw dried his eyes. He was exhausted. Reliving the experience made it almost as poignantly difficult as his original violation. No one in the room, including himself, gave any thought to the fact that Interlink had been doing that very thing, for centuries, invading and violating people’s subconscious with psyops and propaganda, convincing them to act against their will.

Everyone, still silent, listened to Crenshaw’s emotional display and description of what had happened to him in Montana. It was believable but difficult to empathize with. Vladimir Borenko had been asked by Richard Percy to attend this meeting. The reasons were many. They wanted to understand why the plan had failed. He had been their strategist for 18 years and he had never failed them yet. Percy knew if they did not prevail against Marcus, the existence of Interlink would be terminal. Our organization and Marcus cannot exist on this planet together, was Percy’s thought as he listened to Crenshaw in silence. That was why Vladimir Borenko sat silently in the corner observing Ainstead Crenshaw. The information Crenshaw delivered today will be the basis for his new strategy. There was now another vital consideration for their plans. Marcus was now aware of the existence of the others. Rothman, along with the highest echelon of the organization knew these beings had been here for thousands of years but despite the alliance, none of them fully understood the others’ motives and purpose.

Amon Rothman nodded his head. “I believe you Ainstead. I have known you for years and don’t doubt a single word you said. Further, I don’t think you made any mistakes. Underestimating our adversary was a mistake by all of us. You could not know what Marcus was capable of. I say that because I did not know what he was capable of and made the largest mistake of all of us. I did not understand his intellect and subtle plans. I should have killed him and his family at Kelmars. He is obviously a master tactician and enormously prescient. However, it is all spilt milk at this point. Now that we know more about this man and his family, we are going to have to alter our plans to deal with them. I’m not sure if we can deal with them because they possess abilities that we cannot match. We do, however, have some sophisticated rabbits in our hats in the form an alliance with other superpowers, and it may be time to pull a few out.”

Gunther Lichtenberg was probably the most pragmatic and astute member of Interlink’s upper echelon. Like his adversary, he was a consummate realist. Evil though he was, he never evaded reality or donned blinders to avoid seeing consequences. It was part of the Prussian DNA he had inherited from his German ancestors. The logical examination of every factor to decide the best chance for success was his consistent method of operation. He was head of his group of financiers in Germany. Most of them were family and they knew each other as the

Lichtenberg group. They were members of Interlink and he was the family representative. The kind of success never mattered to them. Whether it consisted of achievement or murder, success was the underlying motive, not the morality of the issue...and...he did not like to punt.

"Gentlemen," Gunther Lichtenberg addressed everyone present. "This is not a pleasant prospect. As much as I hate to admit it, we are dramatically outclassed. We are dealing with someone who has superior abilities. Not minimally superior, but vastly so. Would you attempt to hunt a tiger with a pocketknife? I believe that accurately describes our potential struggle with Marcus. There is little or no success possible if we attempt a conventional assault. That doesn't mean we are resigned to defeat. What it means is we must act in a gargantuan fashion with superior weaponry that equalizes the battlefield, and we must do it immediately. The element of surprise is always the greatest weapon. I am thinking, perhaps we can poison the tiger."

"I have been informed the others will not assist. They have been instructed to maintain their laissez-faire attitude. Who instructed them, or why they did, is irrelevant. The decision was made, and it is final. We are left entirely to our own devices. I believe when this is done, the others will choose to be associated with whomever is left standing. Apparently, they wish to deal with the highest form of authority, and that has yet to be decided. I also have the opinion, call it just a feeling, they did not want to shape reality or victory. They are merely observers, which is not particularly good for this organization."

"Gunther," said Rothman, "Do not forget that this man knows everything that Ainstead knows about each of us and our organization. He holds an immense weapon in his hand with that knowledge. If we attempt to destroy him, it must be from a different avenue than anything we have attempted before. Lichtenberg continued, "yes, but we also know a great deal more about him now, than we knew before. Further, we must not forget his promise to retaliate in kind. It is my belief, the only reason that we still live, is that this man is soft. He has compassion. He cares about people to a certain degree. I believe he will eventually make himself king, but wants to do this as a benevolent king, supported and loved by the masses. We have seen that type of ruler historically. He doesn't realize that the masses are dumb and gluttonous."

"We don't allow them to hold any power over us so they cannot threaten us. I believe he thinks, from everything he said, people can retain their status as thinking individuals and still be controlled and given their marching orders of subservience. That attitude is his folly, but not allowing individuality to flourish has been our facilitator. We have been masters of society for 2000 years. It is our rightful place. The world is not large enough to sustain a population of achievers. A population of unmanaged achievers would breed individual arrogance and aggression against all those who threatened to usurp their status and positions by even a slightly greater achievement."

Such was the nature of envy and allowing other people's opinions to define character. What Gunther Lichtenberg could never understand is that he continued to make the same enormous mistake of attributing to his adversary the same character disparities he and his associates possessed. They simply could not conceive of a man who didn't care about other's opinions. It was evidenced in his supposition Marcus wanted to be a benevolent king of the masses who loved him.

Lichtenberg did not realize his words were a self-description and admission of his own character weakness. Many people at the table heard and understood what he said, but none accepted reality allowing the vision of their own flawed characters to emerge and crystallize in their minds. He had just described envy as the philosophical motivation of almost all society, and consequently, everyone in the room as well. They would never admit this because it would mean a good look at themselves and the realization, they were no different or better than those they trampled. They were exactly like the masses they supposedly ruled by right and inheritance, living lives littered the with same internal inadequacies populating the lives of the "herd."

"Their emotions and intellects were submerged in fear just like their subordinates, but they also existed on the pedestals of arrogance and snobbery. Fear of life, fear of death, the fear of being diminished in their own eyes by the superlative achievements of others, was the root of their inferiority/superiority complex. Envy had been man's legacy for thousands of years. The 'green eyed monster' was the manipulative tool the aristocracy had always used as masters of the world. They used it so well because they understood it so well, having characters subliminally awash in envy themselves. Envy had become man's operating system when dealing with his brothers since he first stood erect, and he consistently bequeathed it through the generations to his progeny. It had inspired the eternal conflict and destruction between men over the centuries. Those centuries were survivable only because war was limited in scope. Such was no longer the case and men were about to lead their brothers into a mass grave that would leave no one standing after the carnage. It was inevitable unless men could learn to live with each other free of the 'green-eyed monster'.

The monster drove the greed. Good men had always incorrectly blamed greed alone, as the underlying cause of the strife, but forgot to ask the question...what is the source of the greed? They never admitted greed was born of envy, and it resided in the foundation of every person's soul. It was not indigenous to the soul. In fact, it did not belong there at all because it was a contradiction to the natural, logical order of existence. It had been placed there by those who would enslave their brothers because it was the only method they had mastered to deal with others. Thus, society, collectively and individually, had been immersed in malignant envy for so long, it had become man's accepted generational destiny.

Those with a death wish born of self-loathing, hatred of others, and all of existence, accepted envy as the perfect answer to the fear of their own existence. They sought the willful destruction of everything rational, to obliterate the vision of reality. To them, the greatest fear and opposition to their depravity was a mirror that illustrated who they really were. That mirror had materialized in the form of a man, Ignatius Marcus, their antithesis.

To those who were self-aware, but still embraced depravity while hiding behind a mask of benevolence, he represented the extreme risk of forcing them into the open for all to see.

To others who attempted to live within the bounds of morality and virtue, he was someone hopefully sent intentionally or by coincidence, who would enable men to save themselves and drive the insanity of delusion from the world.

Those who did not want to be saved sought to destroy any benefactor who appeared and contradicted their destructive agenda. They had existed for thousands of years and lived with the flaw in their psyche, allowing other people's opinions to define them. This was the driving force of the 'killers' responsible for all the death and destruction during the long centuries... until a small, slight woman who cast a giant shadow, trained her children how to live as complete human beings without the manacles of envy. Others had attempted this before Rebecca Marcus but were quickly devoured by societies wallowing in self-destruction. Those enlightened men and women who had tried to light the way for their brothers and sisters were immediately destroyed by their counterparts. Finally, through Rebecca Marcus and man's first unobstructed vehicle of freedom, America, an almost indestructible man had come to save the world from itself. That man, his progeny, and adopted children had been chosen to lead men through millennium's gate.

Across the Atlantic, eight adults and a young girl watched the overhead crane lower a 60' long cylindrical tube onto a wheeled flatbed attached to a steel tug in the new hanger. Lucky Marcus, John Jennings, Ronnie Ellis, Dr. Sophia Molinari, Dr. Marcos Boli and Tom Rickart stood with Iggy, Luke, and Gloria Marcus beneath the latest product of Lightning Inc. and Iggy Marcus's genius.

"What's your target date to finish this, Ig?" inquired Lucky. "I was able to keep up with you on the other stuff but the math for this is way beyond me. We're in a different realm now brother. I hadn't thought our research would come this far, this quickly. If it does what it's supposed to do, it will be beyond anything anyone, including me, would've imagined or can wrap our heads around."

"There is a long road ahead, Lucky. This is only the skin. There are still complex problems to work out. I hit a wall solving the inertia problem related to living organisms, but the inspiration came while explaining the problem to Luke. Still, inspiration and implementation are miles apart. It's an entirely different approach than the physics of our previous accomplishments. The greatest stumbling block is going to be navigation. If we had not created a computer system with virtually unlimited power, this would never become close to possible."

Sophia Molinari and Dr. Marcos Boli were fascinated. "Please continue Signore Marcus. Explain this concept involving the human brain/computer interface and what it will yield."

"Okay then, First consider none of this would come close to being possible without our quantum Qubit computers. Without a lengthy discussion, suffice it to say that one of our quantum computers, which is about the size of a refrigerator, is equivalent to one hundred thousand Cray supercomputers. The concept is not new. It was just impossible to execute because it would only operate at close to absolute zero temperatures. I have solved that problem. The computers you all wear on your wrist in the form of a watch are equivalent to a thousand Cray computers and can compute more information, more rapidly than all the personal computers in America combined."

"Picture the universe as comprised of pure energy in all its diverse forms. It encompasses everything that exists including each individual brain, human or otherwise. You are aware of my theory and belief electromagnetism is the fourth dimension. It is the force that allows all manifestations of energy to exist and binds them together. It defines the parameters or measurements of every entity's many properties but is also a definitive property in and of itself. I am convinced an intellect of sufficient stature, coupled with instrumentality can tap into this infinite reservoir of energy and manipulate it to induce practically anything, including unrestricted movement between all loci."

"This form of energy emanating from the intellect is completely unique and exclusive unto itself. It 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, I believe it is the most volatile form of energy in existence. It can tap into all other forms of energy, including matter, and then shape them as well as manipulate time. The universe is an infinite conscious homogeneous entity existing exclusively for its own sake. Its inhabitants are detached from that entity, existing for their own sake by design. "

"I believe this is the purpose for the existence of intellect. I am sure it will mesh with the universe harmoniously because it is the purpose of both. This is what existence and our presence in it as individuals has 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 understands these things because we are part of existence. I think this is what is meant, although not accurately perceived, when we say man was created in the image and likeness of God."

"I also submit to you that science has incorrectly considered and labeled the infinite number of platforms existing in the continuum, as being each a dimension. Such is not the case. Dimension is defined as a measurement and/or description of spatial magnitude, parameters, and scope of an entity. A dimension is not a singular plane of existence, as is intimated in casual conversation. What is being referred to is a platform of existence, each having its own unique dimensions, electromagnetic resonating frequency, and signature. Those fluctuations in frequency are what separates the platforms from each other. They are not accessible from each other, but they are individually accessible from the alternative to existence."

"Please allow me the redundancy, but I wish to hammer the point home. Platforms are platforms, not dimensions. Every platform contains dimensions such as length, breadth and width, and the most important dimension that makes the others possible, electromagnetism. Everything... solid matter, light, heat, radiation, including electromagnetism are manifestations of pure energy, and electromagnetism defines the boundaries and interconnection of all the components. All the dimensions exist in time which always advances as events progress. That is what I call existence. Outside of all those defining characteristics of existence, exists a realm ungoverned by the dimensional universe. It exists simultaneously with existence, side-by-side, yet containing nothing, except perhaps a universal consciousness. I know this is really a stretch for you, but I believe this is the truth and I intend to explore existence from there.

"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. I understand your explanation that the fourth dimension is electromagnetism, or to be more specific, the flux medium and constituent all of existence, matter and energy operates within, as they relate to each other. I get it. They are all parameters of existence, length, width, 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."

"Where I fall short, is understanding how you propose to permit matter, including living organisms, to step outside the electromagnetic operating system of the universe. You claim it is not another dimension or platform. It is the absence of all the operating systems or platforms in existence in the universe. No dark matter, energy, or any electromagnetic influences. Your explanation of how this places the traveler outside of existence, but existence or the universe, as you would have it, is still observable from that position, is beyond my ability to comprehend. You're describing existence occurring in nonexistence. How impossible is that to understand?"

"I will accept it as being a possibility because you are the proponent of the theory. What I have no ability to comprehend is how you could navigate to any position, anywhere, instantly, depending on where you chose to reenter existence. Your statement, in essence, says it is the only realm, actually the non-realm, in which the speed limit of light and the advance of time become irrelevant. This is really out there, Ig. If you make it happen, it will be more than a little bit frightening. My guess is it will open doors we don't want to open and expose us to things horrifying or shocking we probably don't want to see. Except for you and Gloria, we are in our intellectual infancy as a species, and I'm not sure we can handle this. It might work for you two, but the rest of humanity might not be able to comprehend or accept the vastness. Personally, I'm willing to try but if you are successful, no one knows what the results might be."

Iggy nodded his head in the affirmative. "I understand, Lucky. Nonetheless, I must explore this. It is a portion of reality I cannot walk away from. The universe and existence are what they are, and for some reason I cannot turn my back on them in pretense. What I am describing is creating an entity that is self-contained, divorced from, and unaffected by all of existence. I know how impossible and contradictory to the imagination and common sense that seems to be, but I see the possibilities clearly as well as a method to accomplish this through instrumentality directly coupled with computer enhanced cerebral direction."

"This entity will be able to leave the universe of existence and reenter it again. I know it sounds crazy and no one else can see it, but I believe in it and am compelled to try. Science has incorrectly considered the infinite number of platforms existing in the continuum as being each a dimension. Such is not the case as I've described. Platforms are platforms, not dimensions. I am also of the belief the intransigent mind of sufficient stature or power, interfacing with instrumentality, i.e., computers and a vehicle, can eventually manipulate matter, energy, and time. We are unable to enter that realm yet, but the entrance exists, and someday, when we are ready, men will pass through millennium's gate."

Marcos Boli, twice Nobel laureate for his theories on electromagnetism, was more than grateful to be here. He had dreamed of things like this since his childhood, but never expected for one minute he would be personally involved as the reality of those dreams materialized in his world. When he thought about the concept of 'his lifetime,' he was now contemplating a life that would probably last several hundred years. He was Italian and deep emotion was no stranger to him. When he thought of how life's fortunes had blessed him, he usually turned away from others to hide his tears of gratitude. Sophia, also, was delighted to be a member of Lightning Inc. and a participant in the most exciting scientific discoveries in the history of man. "Signore Marcus," said Dr. Marcos Boli, this is most amazing. When you so courteously invited us to join you in your enterprises, I had absolutely no fantasy at all I would be involved in a project so unbelievable and impressive. I am excited beyond words."

Iggy laughed. He had been trying to get Marcos Boli to call him Iggy for six months. Boli's mindset required him to pay respect to his benefactor with the prefix Signore, he felt was due Iggy Marcus as an honor.

Ronnie Ellis wore his usual ear to ear grin, staring at yet another stupendous achievement of Iggy Marcus's intellect. "I thought nothing would beat rebuilding the broken leg of a giraffe in the middle of a field at midnight, but this takes the cake. What are you going to name it, Iggy? Have you thought of a name yet?"

"Yup, Daedalus. But without the wax and feathers. We've got a long road though. There are some problems I'm wrestling with now that are right out there at the limits of my abilities. The theory is sound, and I believe this will work. You already know some of them. The complexity is staggering, but I've worked through most of it."

Sophia Molinari smiled at Gloria. "You are always with your father. You wish to become a scientist like him someday I would bet. Is that what you would like?"

Gloria nodded her head. "Yes, I would like to become a scientist like my father and a doctor like my mother. That is what I intend to do with my life."

"That would be a tall order for anyone I would think, but in this place, it seems there are no limits to achievement of tall orders and personal goals. I will bet you accomplish that someday, Gloria."

Lucky winked at his niece. Only the Marcus family, Dr. Peterson and his daughter knew about Gloria's incredible talents. It was a secret kept from everyone else except Ainstead Crenshaw and subsequently, Interlink. Gloria preferred it that way as well. She enjoyed the cloak of anonymity. Like her great-grandmother, she understood keeping the ears open and mouth closed was the surest path to wisdom. No one besides the immediate family and the Peterson's understood that Gloria Marcus was more than halfway toward the achievement of her goals. She had been working with her father, Uncle Lucky and brother, Luke, to solve the problem of negating inertia during acceleration and her mother had been teaching her medicine. Marcos Boli was also involved in project Daedalus. They were unaware that Gloria's silent presence during their research was anything but silent. Unlike her father, she had the ability to make contact, but for Gloria it was volitional. The necessity to touch someone or automatic contact when touching others did not exist as a requirement, like it was with her father. Her telepathic abilities superseded the need for physical contact.

## CHAPTER III

### COLLUSION

Maj. Gen. Richard McNerney pressed the button on his intercom. "Sgt. Wilkes, would you please have my personal vehicle brought to the front entrance?"

"Yes sir, right away. Are you leaving early today sir?"

"Yes, Sgt., I have an appointment for personal business. Hold down the fort Sgt. I might return in a few hours."

"Yes sir, will do, general."

Gen. Richard McNerney pocketed his scrambled satellite phone and left his office for the afternoon. He was not a happy man. He had spent his life as a US Army career officer. It was his job. His training, however, had begun in Vladivostok on his fifth birthday. At five, he spoke fluent Russian, but the training would change that. He would speak nothing but English for his remaining young life until his training was complete, and he accepted his mission. The training consisted of everything American from slang to rock 'n' roll. His education revolved around various subjects taught from American school textbooks. Most of his teachers were Russian but there were a few American defectors who had embraced communism. They were intelligent underachievers who resented capitalism as a philosophy because it required effort to produce success. While this was happening for most of his young life, the logistics describing his life, credentials, and history were being embedded across the board in American institutions. He would be a mole and his authenticity establishing him as an American with credentials had to be beyond reproach.

At 12 years old he was brought to America to live with Agne and Benas Menyakosh, a Lithuanian couple who had immigrated to America in 1944 and legally changed their names to Agness and Benjamin McNerney. The world was recovering from the turmoil of World War II and bookkeeping for immigration and citizen status was sloppy at best. They were plants, established in America to begin the foundations of Soviet espionage. Even then, the Soviets who were masters of duplicity, were setting up the mechanisms and systems they would use to undermine their greatest enemy, the United States.

Besides his intellectual training and indoctrination, his physical training had been extensive. He was a rugged young man and part of his persona would be participation in scholastic athletics. His entire personality construct would impart the impression that he was an All-American male child steeped in the contemporary traditions of American life.

He had no contact with the Soviet Union during his young life. For all intents and purposes, he was an all-American boy who exhibited all the traits of excellence any parent would be proud of. He graduated with an A+ average from Lincoln high school in Nebraska and excelled as an Allstate quarterback. When he tested for his college boards, he had a combined total of 1420 for math and verbal... He was going places. His only contact with the Soviet Union in his youth was through his adoptive parents. They rarely had contact with anything Soviet other than an annual progress report about Richard.

At seventeen, during the month of March in his senior year in high school, he was contacted by a sports journalist who had watched him play in the state championships as quarterback where he led his team to a trophy. The journalist arranged to meet he and his parents at a

local restaurant for the interview. "Maykl, ty yeshche pomnish' svoye russkoye imya i svoy rodnoy yazyk." (Michael, do you still remember your Russian name and your native language?)

Richard McNerney sat silently for several minutes, thinking about what he had just been asked. Da, no eto slozhno. Eto bylo tak davno." (Yes, but it is difficult. It has been so long)

The interviewer continued in perfect English. "It is good that you remember. It must be lonely for you."

"Sometimes, but I have made friends here and I am in school with other people my own age. I miss speaking the language somewhat, but I was instructed to always use English so I would learn to think in English, and they would be no doubt about my ethnicity as an American citizen."

"My superiors and I see that you have been accepted at West Point. It is excellent and you have done well Maykl. We are proud of you. Richard nodded his head in acceptance of the complement.

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Five years later, he Graduated from West Point with honors after leading as quarterback, West Point's United States Military Academy football team to victory over the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland. It was a huge feather in his cap and undoubtedly played a significant part in his periodic review for promotion in rank.

He spent the next 30 years preparing for war and he had no other significant skills. After West Point, he served a short tour of duty stateside where he was promoted to captain, married Angela Basher and she gave him two sons before his deployment to the Middle East. That deployment had been particularly difficult on his wife but in the long run had been fortuitous for his career."

"Shortly after his arrival in Iraq during the ousting of Saddam Hussein from Kuwait, he was promoted to major because the command position was open, and his credentials were impeccable. He was promoted more rapidly than many of his contemporaries because he was a competent officer, graduate of West Point, and had aced command school. Being a notorious college athlete as well as being in the right place, at the right time, had helped as much as anything else. He continued to be rapidly promoted over the years due to his professional competence, inherent ability to understand and deploy strategy, as well as active participation in theaters of war, until he attained the rank of Maj. Gen.

After 32 years of marriage his two children were grown. He and Angela had settled down to a life of complacency and were reasonably happy despite his lifetime of varied deployments around the globe. Angela loved him enough to put up with abandoning friendships to relocate to new duty stations every few years. They were comfortable with each other, but that was the extent of his feelings about their relationship. The marriage had grown somewhat stale like a pair of old worn shoes you infrequently wore in public but kept in the closet because they felt good, even though they needed a good shine and new heels. The marriage had originally been part of the construct necessary to solidify the image demonstrating his "all American" identity. He had learned to love Angela because it was a natural occurrence born of that kind of intimacy and she had been a good wife to him in all respects.

Whenever he acquired information, he wanted to pass it on to his superiors, he visited his parents who were the conduit. It was a natural thing for him to do and above suspicion.

His job and rank of Maj. Gen. defined him more than his personal life. It had consisted of a lifetime of total commitment dedicated to everything military. Philosophically, he was now supposedly an American who swore to defend his country and the Constitution. Practically, he was a military man who spent his life preparing for war. In essence, he had been training and preparing to 'kill the enemy.' That's what warriors did and that's what Maj. Gen. McNerney was, a warrior whose job consisted of handing wholesale death to the enemies of his country. It had always resulted in conflicts concerning small countries where the United States had become either peacekeepers or nation builders. There had been no conflicts directly involving Russian or Soviet troops so there had been no conflict of interest in his mind.

Richard McNerney was now stationed stateside, and suddenly realized his job was no longer a career in the military based on being in command of combat troops poised for battle but overseeing peacetime military activities instead. He had become obsessed with his job during the past several years. Many times, his country had engaged in small local wars in various theaters around the world. Sarajevo and the Middle East had been hotspots where he was able to engage in his trade. Those were the most rewarding moments of his life... doing what he had been trained to do. It was what he lived for, and it also brought him closer to Mother Russia.

His preliminary psychological indoctrination in Russia had been extremely intense. He felt he was still Russian but there were certain psychological disconnects. He often compared himself to General George Patton. Other than military battle campaigns, life held no other desires or priorities for him. He had been a strategist and battlefield tactician in Iraq and Afghanistan. He oversaw tactical troop deployment, design, and execution of strategies to kill the enemy. He had been particularly good at it. However, the civilian authorities were closing the deployment in the Middle East. Isis and the organized troops of Islam had been defeated for the most part. It had been America's longest war, and it was time to stop spending blood and treasure defending a pile of rocks for a people who intrinsically did not want democracy. They were a totalitarian theocracy, and some things just cannot be changed in one generation.



Immediately following Afghanistan, he spent a few years in Europe as a NATO commander. Angela loved that duty. During that tour, everything between them was better. Their social life was enhanced, and their private life seemed to be much more vibrant than when they had been stationed in the armpits of the world. Socially, they were invited everywhere. They attended dinners, cocktail parties, and conferences for several years. Richard McNerney believed he knew why this social life was so prolific. He was a Major General and when high society conducted a soiree, he was considered a person of substance to fill a seat and make an impression. Along with hobnobbing in high society, came acquaintances and sometimes casual friendships with people of aristocratic notoriety. Angela enjoyed that because she often socialized with the wives of some of these important individuals. Richard enjoyed it too because it boiled down to that same irrational delusion of self-definition exuding from the opinions of others.

Two of the men he had socialized with frequently and considered casual friends, belonged to Interlink. Sean Burke, an American billionaire, Richard Percy, and their wives spent time socially with the McNerneys. The general did not understand their motives, nor did he care. The attention of royalty and one of the richest men alive stroked his ego. Of course, Sean Burke and Richard Percy were sociopaths. They needed no friendships outside their circle of Interlink. When they exhibited overt friendliness to people outside their organization, it was always people of substance that they could acquire something from or ask a favor if they needed it.

He was eventually transferred to Washington and given the job of overseeing domestic troop deployments on American soil if they were ever needed. Constitutionally that had been unacceptable in the past. However, if civilian authorities had a reason to declare martial law, the active military would be empowered to take charge of America's domestic territory. If that ever materialized, he would undoubtedly be promoted to Lieutenant general and ranking commander of the domestic troops. Besides his Russian superiors, he would answer exclusively to the joint Chiefs as well as the President.

Presently, he was just marking time and spent his days bored to tears since war apparently had become obsolete. Obsolescence didn't occur for the reason humanity had finally grown up. People still had the same historic petty squabbles and territorial greed. One man, however, had risen and completely dominated the specter of war for the entire globe. It appeared there would be no more possibilities of strategic nuclear war, and it was rumored Marcus had a way to prevent tactical warfare. Nuclear arsenals had become obsolete. No country could now launch because they would destroy themselves and achieve nothing. At first, despite his origins, he breathed a sigh of relief like most of the world. That was the natural response to having the weight of responsibility for war and inflicting death, lifted from one's shoulders. That was the human and valuable side of Richard McNerney.

There was another side, however. It is said that all men have both good and evil within. Depending on mood, circumstances, mental and physical health, all men occasionally vacillate between the two. The dark side of Richard McNerney deeply resented Ignatius Marcus Junior. One man had erased his purpose in life as a military man, as if it had never existed. He was no longer needed, or at least, wouldn't be soon. A lifetime fixated on a bizarre philosophy, especially one constantly enmeshed in the insanity of death and destruction, often negated common sense, and consumed the soul of the individual who struggled to acknowledge reality. The world was full of people who were delusional. They were unable to consistently see the reality surrounding them, so, they closed their eyes and attempted to make reality conform to their irresponsible desires.

Maj. Gen. McNerney was a conflicted man. His psychological indoctrination as a young Russian had been intense. It left scars that would never heal even though it had been long ago. The first five years of his life had been normal, or at least he guessed that. He remembered none of it. His life started when he was five and his indoctrination began. It lasted seven years until he was 12 and brought to America to begin a life of subterfuge. His indoctrinators could erase the past and through intense psychological brainwashing, establish a programmed submissive mindset. The one thing they could not do was erase an uncertain future, and the effects it would have on his personality. Richard McNerney was now half Russian and half American. His indoctrination occupied one side of his persona. His life as an achiever and an athlete shrouded in all the benefits and self-esteem American life bestowed on its citizens, comprised the other side. That was the partial intent of his indoctrinators... to create an achiever with the ability to infiltrate the American establishment. In doing so, however, the repercussions resulting from achieving excellence and all the benefits of living in freedom, inexorably shifted the loyalty towards his job as a spy, to those of self-interest as an independent agent.

Although he had achieved some notoriety and accrued a certain status as a general, his self-image was just as stunted as most of the world. Other people's opinions of him quantified his worth and that was what he accepted as valid. It always reverted to the basic flaw adopted by most people. They allowed others to think for them. His stature as a general defined him by emotion, precipitated by interactions with others, as opposed to his stature as a man, which must be determined by one's adherence to morality and principle, which could only emanate from the intellect. These feelings were not mitigated by his Russian indoctrination; it had been too long ago.

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Richard McNerney spent his life serving the US after taking the oath of office 30 years before. He was a young man who spoke the words that committed him to a life of service like thousands of men before him. "I, Richard McNerney do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter. So help me God."

Major David Carrol, the officer who led the oath takers with, "repeat after me" as he began to administer the oath, had done this hundreds of times. He was a practical, thinking man and he wondered how many of these men standing before him, really gave deep introspection to the words of the oath, or were they simply completing the requirements for office. Some of them would give their lives for their country, perhaps. It was always selfless, but the oath giver wondered, if these men could see into the future and know it was their life that would be forfeit, would they still take the oath of service, or run the other way. He liked to believe the true patriot would place his faith in God and continue with the oath. He could not label the men who ran the other way as cowards. They were just looking for a career and their demise in battle was not an acceptable trade-off."

No one knew who was courageous or was a coward until the test of battle when the chips were down. In fact, he believed most men did not know that about themselves until the moment of truth. Major Carrol was a battle tested patriot who had faced death on many occasions, which was his reason for the quiet assessment of the men standing before him. Fortunately, he was still standing. He looked at the faces of the men in front of him, repeating the words of the oath as they followed his lead. Some were heroes and some were mice. He refused to use the word, coward, because he didn't feel it fit anyone until the circumstances of battle defined the soldier. It was sort of a game to him. As he gave the oath, he looked at the faces and cataloged them as "men" or "mice." He knew his opinion was not an accurate judgment of a damn thing, but it had become force of habit. When his eyes rested on second Lieutenant candidate, Richard McNerney, the word man precluded mouse.

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Thirty years later, Maj. Gen. Richard McNerney sat in his car on the bluffs overlooking the Atlantic Ocean 20 miles from his base. He was thinking about his career. He was only 53 years old and far too young to retire. He also had his duplicitous allegiance to Mother Russia. Without his job, where would he go? What would he do? He had hoped for promotion to Lieut. Gen. but apparently that was not in the cards. Things were changing. The President was obviously a good friend to this Marcus fellow. Ever since the press conference at that Lightning Ranch and the exposition the President and Marcus staged, military tensions around the world had dramatically subsided. Still for the past few months, the media had hammered President William James Sledge mercilessly. He knew they had an agenda, and that agenda was to somehow neutralize Marcus and President Sledge's unholy alliance that dismantled so many world powers. The general had mixed feelings. Apparently, the major superpowers who possessed nuclear weapons were beginning Salt 3 talks. Every country but China was willing to at least meet and attempt to construct a treaty for the reduction of nuclear arsenals. To some it appeared that China did not believe Marcus and his technology was as capable as he claimed. No country has tested it yet.

## CHAPTER IV

### DUPLICITY

"What do you recommend?"

"What do you prefer?"

"I'm partial to seafood, old chap. We are near the ocean so I imagine it will be fresh."

"I have the perfect thing, Richard. Try the filet of sole, stuffed with stone crab claw meat, shallots, and thinly sliced morels, sautéed lightly in bourbon butter then lightly dusted with panko, all glazed with a butter, medium dry sherry, and a touch of white wine vinegar velouté with truffle oil. It's amazing. That's what I'm going to have. It's a signature dish here. It's Angela's favorite also. What would you like to drink?"

"A dry Beefeater Gibson. It will help me unwind. I don't like transatlantic flights. Too much time over water to suit me. I never was much for swimming."

Richard McNerney laughed at his joke. "So, what was Charisse sick from? I hope it wasn't too serious."

"No, it was a touch of the flu, but it kept her off her feet for the better part of two weeks."

The two men spent half an hour talking about their association together in Germany as the drinks and appetizers arrived. Gen. Richard McNerney waded through the small talk, waiting for Percy to tell him what this new business venture was all about. He was quite convinced it had something to do with Marcus and Lightning Incorporated. Dinner finally arrived along with a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc.

"So, what do you think of the new world order, General? Things have changed dramatically for all of us, but especially for people like you. I think you are rapidly becoming obsolete."

"Yes, apparently many things are going to become obsolete. Marcus's technology, if it is accurate and what he says it is, will alter the face of the world. I'll be out of a job but apparently, you folks at Interlink and big pharma aren't going to fare very well either. Supposedly, starvation

and carbon emissions will eventually be a thing of the past. Marcus obviously commands incredible technologies. According to what he has stated and what President Sledge says, this technology is not going to be released for consumption by the public anytime soon."

"Why should they ever be released for consumption by the public, General? The world's going along fine as it is. Why do we need all this innovation?"

"So, you're telling me it's your opinion nuclear war being off the table is not a good thing because the world was going along just fine with the possibility of nuclear war existing? Apparently, that's what you're saying."

"When you say it that way General it sounds insidious. But that's not how I meant it. We have had the concept of mutual assured destruction for over 60 years. We are still here, and nobody has used nuclear weapons. They actually contribute to the balance of power and prevent countries from overstepping their bounds. You see, if countries could resort to tactical warfare instead of strategic nuclear war, the larger, stronger countries could easily overrun the smaller ones and war would become constant. Nuclear weapons keep everyone at bay. So, you see, they do have an intrinsic value."

"Well, if you ask me, Richard, when you look at the second half of the 20th century and the first fifth of this one, we have constantly been at war somewhere, anyway. I don't have a problem with it because my country generally is a peacekeeper. It's what I do for a living you might say. I help keep the peace as an officer and a general in the United States Army. I don't always agree with politicians, but as a military man I am obligated to follow orders as long as they are not illegal." Richard McNerney knew he was being drawn into a debate he really didn't love the tone of. However, he was half inclined to agree with Richard Percy on some of the points. True, nuclear war was no longer a possibility, and it was rumored that tactical warfare might be on the ropes as well, from Marcus's technology.

It was not something he could consider evil or bad. Even though he spent his life as warrior, it seemed moral for the most part. The only thing giving him pause, was the fact one man, Ignatius Marcus, could make unobstructed war on a completely defenseless world and that was just too much power for one man to possess. Richard McNerney had never known a truly honest man. He knew of Diogenes of Sinope, the naked Greek with a lantern who sought an honest man and couldn't find one, but that was simply myth or legend. He was strongly convinced no such a thing as an honest man actually existed anywhere. He had never met one. He knew many men in his lifetime of service. Most of them were military and most of them were honorable... to a point. Every honorable man he had ever known, had no problem stretching the truth or acting with subterfuge of one degree or another to acquire an undeserved benefit. Even if that benefit was merely something to assuage the ego, it was intrinsically still dishonest.

He was intellectually sophisticated enough to know honesty is honesty, and absolute true honesty permits no deviation or subterfuge. The logical conclusion was that no one was truly honest, only honest to varying degrees. Everyone lied or stretched the truth occasionally, and he was quite sure Ignatius Marcus was one of them. The general had obviously not been truthful considering his position as a spy, so, he assumed that everyone was like him. He had been indoctrinated by Mother Russia to believe spying for his country was moral, and consequently "honest." However, he had lived with Americans for 42 years and the experience had tempered that outlook considerably.

"True." Replied Percy. "But that is the nature of man, however. Man is basically a warrior and to be masculine is to be aggressive against other men. It has been the signature of the gender since time began. Look at yourself for instance. You are a general in an army dedicated to killing other warriors. That's your function. Your military is the fighting machine, arguably, of the most peaceful country in history, especially one of the stature and power of the United States. Yet, how many people have died because of your country's military actions? I'm not talking about wars that you are drawn into in self-defense. I'm talking about ancillary wars and the collateral damage resulting from them. How many people have died, general? I'll answer that for you...many thousands."

They spent another hour discussing the subject over glasses of Drambuie. Except for a few differences, both men agreed war was a necessary evil brought on by man's greed and avarice. In that sense, they were correct. What they were wrong about was the concept war was a normal, justified, and legitimate consequence of being human and masculine; therefore, greed and avarice were a necessary and acceptable fact of existence as natural. Neither man had the intellectual acuity to dive to the root of the problem for genuine understanding of man's culpability when slaughtering his brothers.

Richard Percy was a persuasive man. He had been taught by his father who was a veteran at the deployment of propaganda and population manipulation. His purpose here was to elicit an ally. They would need someone to help them carry out the bold plan Vladimir Borenko had helped them conceive to eliminate Marcus. They all knew there were no guarantees that this would work, but if they didn't try, they were relegated to the trash heap containing common men of irrelevance.

"We at Interlink believe Marcus is attempting to set himself up as the ruler of the world. He is no different than any other man that has ever lived and been in power. That's why Interlink is a consortium. We are comprised of thousands of members worldwide. Our members are all industrial paragons and entrepreneurs and have a say in world economic affairs. We believe absolute power, in one man's hands, corrupts absolutely. It is our belief that is exactly where Marcus is headed once he dismantles the military capabilities of the planet. Then, with his technology, he will be unassailable. We have made it a mission, or an obligation, old chap, to prevent this man from becoming the king that I'm sure he considers himself."

Gen. Richard McNerney patiently listened to all the things that Percy said. He knew there was some validity to everything he had just been told. Absolute power did corrupt absolutely. He was convinced of the truth in that because of his knowledge of human nature, his

upbringing, and societal conditioning. That conditioning was in no small part the results of 30 years in the military, most of them in a command position. So, from one perspective he believed Richard Percy was correct.

"Okay then Richard, let's get down to brass tacks. We are sitting here having this conversation because you have flown all the way across the Atlantic and you want something from me. What is it? I don't mean to be blunt, but we could unnecessarily fence all night."

"We would like to sneak a small weapon past the security of his ranch and into his compound. We think we have a way to accomplish this."

"By a small weapon, I take it to mean a nuclear device. Am I correct Richard?" McNerney was taken aback. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. Interlink actually wanted to nuke Montana or portion at any rate. "What do you consider a small weapon, Richard?"

"One to two megatons. No more. The compound is 22,000 acres. That won't leave anything there intact. The entire ranch will be destroyed with very minimal damage to the surrounding area. They are sequestered. They have their shield technology surrounding the ranch. We know of this because of our attorney. He was a prisoner at that ranch for a few months. If we can get a weapon inside, their own shields will deflect most of it from affecting the surrounding area. The surrounding area is very sparsely populated as well."

Maj. Gen. Richard McNerney was more than surprised. He could hardly believe his ears. A man was sitting across from him, British royalty in fact, asking him to assist Interlink to detonate a nuclear warhead within the boundaries of the continental United States. He was able to suppress facial expressions of surprise while he furiously thought about what he had just been told. He knew Interlink was comprised of thousands of people worldwide. Most of the large global corporations and businesses including American billionaires, and in fact, many newly minted Russian billionaires were part of that organization. He was sure this plan was developed in Interlink's core. It was too audacious and insane to allow all the peripheral members of Interlink to become aware of the plan. Especially the American billionaires. Whatever their feelings were, and wherever their loyalties were directed, he was sure none of them would condone something like this.

Though he still considered himself a spy, life held a monumental change for him after Perestroika. The Soviet was dissolved, and Russia was once again Russia. He still worked for them, but things had changed dramatically. His contact through his adoptive parents still existed, as they were still alive, but communication was very infrequent. He became less and less enamored with fulfilling his obligation to his motherland. Life in America had been very good to him. He knew if he lived in the Soviet Union, or Russia today, life would be far less opulent than the life he lived now.

McNerney wished Marcus would disappear but not by a nuclear weapon in the middle of Montana. It went against every principle he had lived by as a military man and the oath of service he took. Also, he had grown up immersed in American culture and freedom. Somewhere along the way, he had begun to love the backdrop of liberty that encompassed this country. He wanted to know more, however. He saw all sides of the issue and thought about exactly what he must do or say to cultivate Percy's trust and further information disclosure.

"How do you expect to pull this off Richard? This is no small thing. I'm sure you'll have no trouble acquiring a weapon from one of America's enemies. Like I asked you before, what do you need me for? Besides a little job security, what's in it for me. You're asking me to put my ass on the line. Evidently you need someone to be an inside man and you would like that someone to be me. Obviously, you need someone of a certain stature to make this work. If this entire operation goes south, I'm sure, that someone, will be the fall guy."

"If a United States Maj. Gen. is involved, it will not go south, as you put it. As for what's in it for you... \$20 million in gold British sovereigns will be placed on deposit in a numbered account only you have access to in UBS Switzerland. It's their largest bank."

General McNerney sat in silence. That was not unusual considering what he had just been asked. "Give me a little while to think about this Richard. There's a lot to this and this is not something to be decided or committed to, off-the-cuff. It seems I'm being offered two choices. One of them is to allow my military career to slide into oblivion because I will no longer have a job. The other one is to have \$20 million and retire abroad."

"Yes general, that's about the size of it. I'm sure that you're going to have a lot of questions. So, while you are developing them, what do you recommend I order for dessert?"

"Try the fresh fruit compote with cream Brulé. You won't be disappointed."

Richard Percy ate his dessert in silence while Gen. Richard McNerney sipped Drambuie and contemplated just how he was going to handle this. He was still shocked at the magnitude of Interlink's plan, but when he thought about it, it made perfect sense. He understood military ordnance and strategy better than almost anyone alive. If Marcus's description of his technologies was accurate, it will take the detonation of a nuclear device within the confines of his compound to be effective. "Okay, you are asking me to stick my neck on the line. I need to know all the particulars. What things are going to happen, when they are going to happen, how they are going to happen, and who else is involved. Before I commit, I want to know everything. I am in substantial agreement that Marcus can't be allowed to continue, but before I answer, I want this question answered. What if I refuse? Now that I know what your plans are, I am a threat. What then Richard? And why me? We only have a casual acquaintance between us. It seems like an enormous leap of faith to me, that you would confide in me by asking my participation."

"Potomu chto my S toboy zemlyaki, Maykl Petrokov. Menya zovut Ivan Volkov." (Because we are countrymen Michael Petrokov. My name is Ivan Volkov.)

Maykl Petrokov, alias Major General Richard McNerney, sat in stunned silence. He marveled at the almost poetic subterfuge his countrymen were such masters of. Here he was, a Russian spy, an all-American athlete, West Point graduate and Maj. Gen. in the United States Army, only two steps below the joint Chiefs. Amazing! Sitting across from him was British royalty! He wondered what clever acts and incredible deceptions they had used to ferret their way into the family lineage of British royalty.

"How did you know of me? I have been incognito since I left the Soviet. That was well over 40 years ago. You are certainly not much older than me. My infiltration into American society was supposed to be known only by a few people, my trainers and the person planning foreign espionage operations. There were not supposed to be any files outside of the office of the director of espionage in the Kremlin. They were so secretive I was not even allowed to know their names."

"There were over 500 of us deployed as operatives that hold or held positions of authority in the West. Many were in the military, many were upper echelon of industry, especially avant-garde technology, and many hold political offices. I know all their names, Maykl. Some of them are deceased, especially the older ones."

"How do you know all this? Why have you been given this information, and I have been given none, not even the name of the director?"

"The original director, and your trainer, who died four years ago, was Boris Volkov. He was one of the originators of the KGB and the GRU. He was my father."

Maykl Petrokov leaned forward with his chin resting in the palm of his left hand, his right hand resting on the table holding a half-finished glass of Drambuie. He sat that way for almost 5 minutes thinking about his history, he thought about his adoptive parents. They had treated him well even though they were operatives themselves. He didn't remember his own parents. They were buried so far in the distant past, that his training and subsequent life in the United States dimmed the memories.

"Do you have any siblings, Ivan?"

"A sister, Natalia."

"Is she an operative also?"

"Nyet, she is dead... Pneumonia."

"I am sorry, Ivan." Even though he did not trust this man, he had a certain affinity for him. They had the same roots and similar lives of clandestine secrecy.

"Exactly what scripted part will I play in this proposed drama?"

"Certain people at Solex have been given a substantial amount of money to cooperate. They are helping us to conceal the device inside of a large fuel tank with an interior lining of lead. The device itself is not that large. It is also encapsulated with lead. The tank will be shipped to the Lightning Ranch launch facility along with several others. The tanks are built in Ohio at the Solex manufacturing facility."

"Why is the tank lead lined? "

"At Interlink, we played the broadcast from lightning Ranch with the President at least fifty times. Several of us analyzed every word spoken and made notes of everything directly described or insinuated. We also acquired all the data from the international space station. We came to the common conclusion that this technology certainly exists, and that it can detect a nuclear radioactive signature any place in the world."

"Go on. Where do I fit in?"

"You are to contact General Hammond. He is the highest ranking general, head of the joint chiefs. As a Major General, you have access to him without going through the chain of command and Lieutenant General Patterson. At your level, the chain of command is less relevant than with lower ranking officers. You must request an audience with President Sledge because you admire his leadership and want to meet him. I'm quite sure it can be arranged. The timing is unimportant. The operation can easily be tailored to your time constraints. It cannot and must not happen for at least three weeks."

"So, what else is involved in this, Ivan? You still didn't answer my question. Where do I fit in? I'm sure that you don't want me involved as a wall fixture. What is it you will actually be asking me to do?"

You are to tell Marcus Army intelligence has discovered a nuclear weapon will be smuggled into Lightning Ranch on a very specific day we will yet give you. He will believe you and expect a weapon."

"That's it? I am going to tell him about the weapon you are smuggling in? I am a shill then, am I not? Then what happens to me Ivan Volkov?"

"Yes Maykl, that is it. That is all you have to do. Along with your rank and credentials comes the efficacy of the claim. No one without your rank and privilege would have access to information like that. You are the perfect believable bearer of information. Marcus will be taken by surprise."

"Again, Ivan, you have not answered my question. What the hell is supposed to happen to me? Obviously, your weapon is not the actual tool you will use to destroy Marcus, or you would not have me tell him of such. I'm sure there will be another weapon since the first one will be a decoy. So, what plans have you got for me to extricate myself from being the victim of a nuclear blast?"

"Listen carefully to me Maykl. You will tell Marcus about the weapon soon after your arrival. The timing has to be perfect in this. The first and second weapons will be delivered 18 hours after you reveal this to Marcus. Then, you will arrange to leave the ranch to visit the nearby town. This gives you more than enough time to remove yourself from the blast periphery. You must be at least 30 miles away and traveling to outrun the blast and the radiation."

"That sounds a little iffy to me. What if I can't find anyone that will offer me that capability?"

"You do not have to worry. Your arrangements need only be an explanation to Marcus. We will arrange for your travel."

Richard McNerney did not like the sound of this. It sounded too pat to him. This was an Interlink plan. He will be the only person in harm's way. He wrestled with it for several minutes, deciding. He knew his military career was about to be terminated by the very man that Interlink wanted to destroy. He also knew that Interlink did not care about him one way or the other, and that included Ivan Volkov. Still, 20 million in gold was 20 million in gold. "So how is payment supposed to be made to me, Ivan Volkov. Before or after the explosion?"

"There is no need for sarcasm general. We will pay you up front. You must take a two-week leave from duty and travel to Switzerland. I will meet you there and we will open the account and deposit the gold in a safety deposit box. That should be done as soon as possible. Preferably within two weeks. There you will receive other briefings and encounter other members of Interlink. It is better if you hop on a military transport flight. It is also important you come alone."

Gen. Richard McNerney agreed with his sponsor but did not like this one bit. He didn't trust Richard Percy, alias, Ivan Volkov. He was Russian and duplicitous by nature. He would go along with it for now until he could shake the tree to see what fruit fell.

Gunther Lichtenberg leaned back in his leather chair in his office on the top floor of Bastion tower and relaxed with his feet on his desk, gazing at the city below, as Brussels awoke and launched a new day. He arrived early that morning expecting the return call from General Li Shen Rishi. Percy had returned from America after his successful meeting with General McNerney.

General Rishi and he had met in London in 2002 at the British annual diplomatic dinner in Buckingham palace. The general had finished his education at Oxford University 12 years before and was often a guest at diplomatic functions. General Rishi's command of the English language and familiarity with Western culture and aristocracy made him a valuable commodity to the Chinese hierarchy. He was second in command of the People's Liberation Army under the General Secretary of the CCP. The Chinese Communist Party was the ultimate authority over all things Chinese, and the PLA was its enforcement arm.

His intercom beeped while he was reading the Euronext stock reports. "Sir, I have general Rishi on our secure line," said Machinski.

"Excellent Machinski. Please put him through."

"Good morning General Rishi. How are you sir? I just switched over to my scrambled line. I trust you are on one also."

"Yes Gunther, my line is secure as well."

They spent a few minutes discussing the weather and other social amenities. Neither of these men trusted each other, even slightly. They were from different worlds with different philosophical underpinnings, different motives, and different allegiances. However, on this one item, they were both perfectly aligned and dedicated to accomplishing the destruction of Lightning Incorporated and all its members.

"So, what have you to tell me, Gen. Rishi? Good news I hope about my birthday presents."

"Yes Gunther. We have been good friends for so long I wouldn't miss this opportunity to give you gifts that would bring great joy to your birthday celebration. We are sending it by boat. All the arrangements have been made. You can expect to see it in 15 days. I will suggest that you do not open it until your birthday. I would hate to ruin your surprise before the party."

"Thank you, General. This means a great deal to us here in Brussels and I'm sure it means a great deal to you as well. We understand your instructions about transportation, and we will be there to meet it when it arrives. Thank you again so much."

"Not at all Gunther. Gratitude is unnecessary because of our friendship and association. I must go, duty calls. I will speak to you again in 12 to 13 days. Take care."

"Goodbye General."

Gunther Lichtenberg leaned back in his chair again with his feet on the desk, as he contemplated logistics. The Chinese were sending five, one-megaton nuclear weapons to them. The bombs were not of typical Chinese construction, especially one of them. Their weapons department took great pains to create weapons with a unique signature. None of the remaining evidence would indicate where the weapons originated. He wasn't concerned about that. So, what if the Americans thought the Chinese did this. It would even be better for Interlink that way. His concern was Richard Percy and his mission to complete logistics on the American end of this operation.

He reflected on his conversation with Amon Rothman, Richard Percy, and Vladimir Borenko the month before, as he considered the complexities of the new plot Borenko had devised to destroy Marcus and his organization. They all agreed whatever they did, at this point, was an act of desperation. Marcus had already changed the world. Nothing could be done about that, and the changes were going to become even more dramatic in the coming months. It had been publicized on American Media that Lightning Inc. was building distribution centers for the creation of food supplies with their new technology. It was reported as the only technology they would share with the world until such time as humanity would learn to use the other technology wisely, instead of aggressively towards each other.

Amon Rothman hesitated to accuse the Russian chess player of incompetence, even though he felt the Argentina plan was too simplistic, given the intellectual stature of their opponent. "We have one more opportunity gentleman. Whatever we do, it must be foolproof, or it will likely result in the end of Interlink and our demise. You heard Marcus's comments days ago. He threatened us with repercussions. Under normal circumstances, we would laugh at anyone who proposed such a thing... not with this man."

"Yes," said Percy "I have already said to you this man has the ability to kill us all. He has only threatened us with imprisonment, but that might as well be death. His technology will be insurmountable for us. That's why we attempted to obtain it by kidnapping his son. We cannot make the mistake of underestimating him again. I don't think he would murder us, but I don't think he will be merciful either. This man intends to be king of the world and that means we will be his subjects also. That will be intolerable for us, failure is not an option. What do you think, Comrade Borenko? "

Vladimir Borenko leaned back in his chair, hands clasped behind his head, quietly thinking as he listened. He finally interrupted, "I think you are both correct with everything you say. The only problem is, we do not understand enough about these people. We have been given excellent insight as to Marcus himself, and his daughter, by Crenshaw. There are other people of concern. His security chief must be dealt with somehow. He is one of the most competent and fearless men I have ever seen. That was demonstrated by that video over the Atlantic when he discovered and disabled our device. I made the incorrect assumption it was impossible for someone to traverse the wing and remove it from the jettison tube, during flight. And under almost any circumstances it would be. However, we must accept the fact all these people are leaps and bounds above average, and act accordingly."

"This plan will work. The irony is that we are using the same technology to destroy him, he claims to have eliminated. Have you made the arrangements with the general, Percy? "

"Yes, comrade. I believe he will do what we ask. He knows who I am and now he understands what is at stake."

"It has to be better than a belief, comrade," said Borenko. "The plan will hinge on this. He does not know that he is expendable, and he must not even think of the possibility. We are throwing away a very valuable Russian asset, in Maj. Gen. McNerney, to accomplish Interlink's goal. If this were the days of the KGB when I was planning for them, and the Kremlin was to find out, we would be hunted down and killed instantly, even though our actions might be in the interests of the Soviet as well. "

"McNerney has been told he is going to meet Marcus with the President as a distraction. He believes the transportation has been arranged for his early departure before the fuel tank and weapon arrive the following morning. It is crucial he believes and accepts this, and he must be at least 20 miles away from the ranch by a specific time or he will suspect something is amiss about our plan. We have convinced him he will not be suspected of involvement if he is in the vicinity. He does not expect the culmination of the plan because he fully intends to inform Marcus about the weapon. He must not suspect his duplicity is our intent. The first weapon is to be discovered, and his purpose being there is to make that possible without generating suspicion. If he is subliminally questioned Marcus and his security people will learn about his Russian, American duplicity. He has no knowledge, however, of the telepathic abilities of Marcus. None of it matters in the end. Everything we have told him is just to generate a calm plausible backdrop for the operation. "

Richard Percy and Amon Rothman looked at each other, both sharing the same skepticism. The plan seemed a good one, but so did the last one, and it had developed into a catastrophe for everyone except Marcus. "Amon and I understand the complexity of trying to execute something against a man like this, who has incredible mental abilities. I suppose taking advantage of that and utilizing those abilities is probably the only thing that will bring success. However, those kinds of things are beyond our understanding. We are hypothesizing what his abilities actually are, and then we are creating a plan to manipulate those abilities. That, gentleman, is fraught with uncertainties because there are so many variables possible. And then there is his daughter who apparently possesses a greater level of those capabilities than her father."

Vladimir Borenko replied. "That is precisely why I constructed this plan revolving around their psychic abilities. By utilizing and incorporating their abilities into this, they no longer become an extraneous factor that could act in opposition to the plan. By making their abilities a logical part of this, at least we have some say as to how they affect everything, and we considerably negate the consequences of their peripheral interference. You see, the general is going to betray Mother Russia. I'm sure enough of him to stake my life on the outcome. He will

tell Marcus the weapon is on its way. Marcus, of course, will intercept it and weapon number two then disarm them. Perhaps he will encapsulate and detonate them. That is irrelevant. It is likely there will be some telepathic contact with either Marcus or his daughter, and it may be discovered the General is actually a double agent. That will also be irrelevant because he knows nothing of weapon number three."

"Marcus and his daughter will inherently believe weapon number one is the primary device, and the general is warning them. Marcus will automatically expect two weapons and more than likely discover the 3rd. That's part of the plan. There is also a fourth weapon that is highly unlikely to be discovered. But, considering the possibilities of Marcus discovering the 4th or the intervention of coincidence, I have incorporated two other means of eliminating Marcus. I will keep those to myself. Then, it will be too late. The truck with the other 11 benign tanks and the second weapon will have entered the compound.

"And then?" Asked Amon Rothman.

"And then, President Sledge and our Good General McNerney will meet our nemesis, Ignatius Marcus and they will all be vaporized together."

"Why must we use the general?" Asked Amon Rothman. "Explain this to me again."

"The general is a skill. It is our understanding from our key people in the government President Sledge and his wife are traveling to Lightning Ranch for a unique medical procedure. Maj. Gen. McNerney is scheduled to meet William Sledge immediately beforehand, when he will request to escort the President and the first lady aboard Air Force One on their visit to Lightning Ranch, under the pretext he would like to meet Marcus, a perfectly logical request. The timing for this must be exact and our people at Solex must remain flexible. They are going to ship within ten hours of Air Force One's flight. That will put them at Lightning Ranch the day after the President's plane arrives."

"So, the General's participation is simple misdirection then?"

"Exactly." Replied Borenko. "We are hoping that the daughter will be directly involved but there is no way we can propagate that for certain."

"That's hoping for a lot, don't you think comrade? What if it doesn't happen exactly that way and Marcus doesn't question the general, vocally or subliminally?" asked Rothman.

"It doesn't really matter Amon Rothman. Whether Marcus discovers the inbound weapon telepathically, or the general abandons his indoctrination and tells Marcus, it amounts to the same thing. He will tell Marcus and then Marcus will neutralize the weapons, assuming they are Interlink's ultimate attempt to destroy him. The general is there for misdirection. Marcus is brilliant and must be distracted from the third weapon. The general will create that scenario. Once Marcus learns that there is a second weapon, there is a better than even chance he will find the third weapon. All of those possibilities are acceptable."

"The general is flying to Switzerland this week to meet Richard. He is going to make a deposit at UBS. Then, our indoctrination team will pick him up and work on him subliminally for an entire week. Hypnosis is a very powerful tool, and we will plant what is necessary in the mind of Gen. Richard McNerney. He will not even realize that it happened to him. Our techniques with hypnosis, low-frequency vibration and drugs are virtually undetectable and very thorough. The general will do as we require.

Richard Percy was smiling at the exchange. He and Borenko had discussed the plan for weeks. They considered all the loose ends and possible variations of what they expected to occur. Almost all of them fell within the logical confines of this being a successful operation. The general was going to know about the weapon. He was going to have the opportunity to meet Marcus. And then he was going to tell Marcus about the weapons concealed in a fuel tank and truck frame about to arrive at Lightning Ranch.

Richard McNerney didn't know it, but he was now more American than Russian. It had been too long. The General had lived a lifetime of responsibility in his job as a General for the government of the country that had blessed him with the liberty every American citizen enjoyed. His years of living within the confines of military propriety, replete with all the benefits of his rank, inspired a certain integrity and loyalty to the uniform he now wore, despite his origins and the purpose of his indoctrinators.

Vladimir Borenko had spent a month on a deep analysis of Makyk Petrokov, alias Maj. Gen. Richard McNerney. His first endeavor centered on the analysis of young Petrokov's records of indoctrination. Richard Percy, Ivan Volkov, still had his father's connections with the KGB remnants in the Kremlin. He called in a few favors from old friends of his father and put his hands on the espionage files. It wasn't difficult for Interlink to gather all the historical records of Richard McNerney's life from his childhood from 12 years-old to the present. They had all his psychological analysis profiles, performance reports and medical records dating from his high school graduation to the end of his West Point education. They had every record ever written as well as every medical record to the smallest nuance encompassing his military career to date.

Borenko's mission was to learn every facet of Richard McNerney's psychological profile. He studied every portion of McNerney's life including all the information available about his two sons and his wife. His need to know exactly what made McNerney 'tick' would be the information necessary to forge his strategy.



His conclusions accurately defined General Richard McNerney as a man loyal to the country he now served. Borenko, was not only a champion Chess Master and strategist, but he was also a superb authority on human nature, psychology, and the stimuli that drove both achievement, and fear.

There was no doubt in Vladimir Borenko's mind. Maj. Gen. Richard McNerney, even if this information was not gleaned from him subliminally by Marcus or his daughter, split loyalty would force him to tell Marcus the booby-trapped shipment of fuel tanks from Solex was about to arrive. He would tell Marcus a nuclear device was in one of the tanks, and he had learned of this through Army intelligence. He was more than sure Maykl Petrokov was no longer loyal to his country of birth and his warning would cause Marcus to intercept the tank with the weapon. He was also positive Marcus knew this was about to come his way and would expect it. Marcus was too intelligent to not know Interlink would attempt to destroy him, and it would be in this fashion with a nuclear weapon. The second weapon, much smaller, but more than enough to incinerate 22,000 acres, was cast into the frame of the trailer loaded with fuel tanks, then surrounded with 3 inches of lead shielding. The intricacy of its installation in the lead shielding would contribute to its believability, even though it was intended to be found. If for some reason it was not found, so much the better.

Richard McNerney had no idea there were more weapons. He was told that the shipment of tanks was to arrive the following day and then he was supposed to leave, sightseeing the locality until he traveled twenty-five miles from the ranch. Vladimir Borenko had planned for McNerney's duplicity, telling Marcus about the weapon. He also knew Marcus would then disarm it, precluding the general's need to leave the area. He also knew Marcus would discover 2nd weapon after a certain time, but it might not be on the property. That should be enough to allay everyone's suspicions. The 3rd weapon was the latest Chinese technology and would instantly detonate when cued. It was small and disguised as an auxiliary battery in the battery compartment of the tractor, separate from the booby-trapped trailer. Had this been anyone else, Borenko would be smiling in smug satisfaction at his own brilliance. This time, he would have his fingers crossed. Only Vladimir Borenko, and Richard Percy knew about the fourth weapon so cleverly hidden. Both men were Russians and had the same duplicitous mentality so indigenous to their countrymen.

The first weapon was a distraction, the 2nd one was a ploy and would more than likely be found. The third Weapon would more than likely be found as well. The fourth was a marvel of engineering, built directly into the block of the engine and lead shielded around. Still, Vladimir Borenko was obsessive with details. He left no avenues of escape for his opponent on the chessboard. This was far more critical than any chess game he had ever played. It had occurred to him mechanical failure of the truck would overturn the entire enterprise, and it could happen 5 miles from the entrance of Lightning Ranch. He needed another sword.

Borenko understood he was dealing with a superior intellect when he incorporated the additional weapons into the plan. He realized Marcus had intellectual capabilities exceeding his own. He also knew there was a strong possibility of success, but it was not 100%. He had tossed everything he could come up with into the mix. He had five separate weapons, the first one would be sacrificed along with the second and third. Hopefully the fourth and fifth would be resounding successes. He coupled it all with a VIP visit from the President of the United States and a celebrity general. These were distractions of the highest caliber possible. Hopefully, they would be enough. If they were successful, it would be the end of Marcus and the American President.

To the men and women of Interlink, this was all about their survival. Not to Borenko. This was a chess game, a war of wits. This was the ultimate glorification of his existence. He was challenging the most brilliant man who ever lived. Euphoric, he vibrated with the excitement of anticipation. This is what he lived for. Only before, the battle was on a board, with chess pieces between him and his opponent. This was real! It would be life or death! He knew this would be the triumphant culmination of his life, battling to the death with the worthiest opponent who had ever existed.

Vladimir Borenko, like everyone else in Interlink and most of the people around the world, had listened to Iggy Marcus's philosophical description of humanity and the motives of men on the day of the press conference with President Sledge. As with about 60% of the population, Marcus's words fell on deaf ears. Very few embraced the philosophical theme "never let anyone's opinions define your self-image. A true valid self-image can only come from within through mastery by achievement." Marcus had outlined how greed and envy had caused all the death and destruction over the centuries. It was not a concept too difficult to understand. It was a concept too difficult to embrace. They were people who would not abandon delusion, for reality. That was precisely what drove Vladimir Borenko. To validate his poor self-image, he always had to destroy the competition. Doffing his hat to an adversary was only acceptable across the chess board, then just barely. This battle for their existence made amicable checkmate out of the question. Vladimir Borenko decided to expand the war and attack from two fronts.

*In a useless life the fool doth play... When waste, not treasure fills the day...*

*We gather to us our just array...After the final act we collect our pay.*

Maykl Petrokov

## CHAPTER XI

### MID DAY

Melanie, Iggy, Gloria, and the twins relaxed on the veranda, shaded by the two giant shagbark hickories on either side of the backyard patio. They were quiet, sipping lemonade and thinking about what they had just experienced on Coletta Mountain. The twins were three, no longer toddlers. They hadn't been surprised over the appearance of the ETs. It was just another day in their lives as they sat there taunting each other on the chessboard.

The sun was still baking Coletta Mountain as Iggy stared at the giant jutting rock where they had parked a few short hours ago, talking to visitors who had come from the other side of the galaxy. Melanie laughed and Iggy turned and stared at the twins. Chess pieces were floating around as Lori moved them in the tactical war with her brother. Melanie continued laughing.

"What's so funny, sweetie?"

"Oh, I was just thinking back to when I was a child. My father was a harsh taskmaster. He was the real foundation of my education in music although mother taught me to sing. I got my morals from mother. I remember sitting on her lap one day when she spoke about my future. She said, Melanie, for some reason, and I can't tell why, I know you are going to have the most unusual life beyond anything you could possibly imagine. Well, here I am, my husband. I have just met 3 people from another world," she continued laughing, "I am married to Iggy Marcus, I have a 13-year-old telepath daughter, and I'm sitting here watching one of my twin children make chess pieces float around my backyard. My mother was right!"

Iggy laughed along with her. "Well, don't hold your breath. What I saw in their minds was something of my future. We have a lot to do here before we can leave mankind to its own devices. After that, we have quite a distance to travel, you and me. We are going to roam the galaxy together. I'm not sure of the particulars, but our visitors made it perfectly clear I am a tool and have a purpose. So, I guess you and I are going to get to see a few unusual places and things.

They sat for a while, silently watching the shadows of passing clouds sweep the rock ledges and forests surrounding the mountains. It was beautiful. Then suddenly, an explosion of color splashed the landscape and it seemed they were able to zero in on distant objects. One, perhaps two miles away, they watched two squirrels in an oak, squabbling over an acorn.

Gloria began laughing hysterically. Liam, what brought that on? Is this how it looks all the time for you? Sorry mother, father, Liam projected the image of those 2 squirrels. I had to share it with you. Look across the mountains, I will share what Liam sees."

They watched a cascade of color, splintered as if by a prism. The vision continued changing as it displayed landscape features in vibrant bursts of color.

Melanie closed her eyes to attenuate the vision. "I don't think I could watch the world all day like that. It would give me a headache. It's beautiful but it's too complex for my mind to process for long periods. Tell me more about us gallivanting the galaxy, Iggy."

"There isn't much to tell Melanie. Evidently, I will have a job to do, perhaps many. This is how existence, and the Universe operates, I believe. The Creator chooses its taskmasters, and they are given the choice to fulfill their destiny or abdicate. I don't think there are prizes or penalties for either."

"Will I be with you?"

" Iggy sensed the passion in her as well as the apprehension she might not be part of the Universe's divine plan.

"None of the Universe's inhabitants are victims of coercion. The Godhead doesn't operate that way. You are created with both autonomy and obligation, replete with choice, but it always remains yours to accept or reject. We are one. I will only accept obligation if you and I remain together."

I saw what you saw father. It wasn't clear to me, however. For some reason, I think I might be tagging along with you two.

I think for a time, at least. I hope it's a long time because I really appreciate your sense of humor. You have a way of taking the most serious of things and finding the lighter side. But in the end, my beautiful daughter, you will find your own destiny.

I always sensed that too, Father, just as I sense the population of the Universe has not been created to endure a finite end. We all have been created to share eternity together.

## THE AUTHOR

### ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

If I am sure of only one thing, I know we are not the product of a chaotic explosion of matter and energy that coincidentally assembled itself in an orderly enough fashion to create thinking, living entities, with the ability to experience the beauty of existence and then, create a preamble of morality to define our passage through it.

Life must always be subject to reality, the final arbiter in all things. It is never a matter of opinion because opinions vary and are subject to the mistakes of imperfect humans. Man has struggled with these concepts since he first stood erect, and we still struggle with them today. They are not complex when critical thought is applied. We have no choice but to think critically if we are to survive. Critical thought, arising from logic and submerged in morality is our only survival tool. From all outward appearances, we seem to be abandoning those principles.

This is my attempt to create as perfect a human being as possible, knowing that perfection cannot exist, it can only be pursued. That is our compelling mission if we are to survive the future in an age where everyone might be incinerated during twenty minutes of insanity by someone pressing a plastic button or perish slowly by poisoning our environment.

My hero, Iggy Marcus, defines man's attempt to attain perfection. His journey is etched by a lifetime of achievement as he attempts to lead humanity through millennium's gate. As I stated within, MILLENNIUM'S GATE, ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS is my attempt to resuscitate common sense and critical thought. The story continues "IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF GIANTS."