

**the**  
**Enigma**  
**Beyond**

**Who Won the AI Wars**

**Breakfield and Burkey**

**BOOK 11: Award Winning Techno-Thriller Series**

## **The Enigma Beyond**

Who Won the AI Wars

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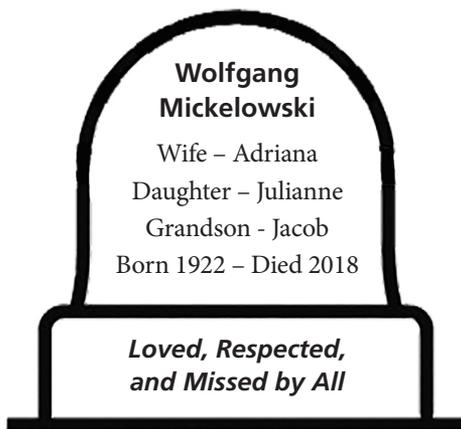
PROLOGUE  
2 YEARS BEFORE

## Move Forward with Family Consultation

**T**he day was remarkably beautiful as Jacob walked toward the gravesite. With the sunrise already past its glory, emerging splashes of white clouds were artfully placed amidst a clear blue sky. A few birds, flying in groups for some private reunion, seemed as intent on their direction as he was. No services were scheduled so visitors would be minimal, especially at this time in the morning. Maintenance for this place was seemingly done before the break of dawn, as it was always well manicured, with beautiful bunches of flowers adding an array of colors to the stones as he proceeded down the well-known path. Walking tall at 1.8 meters and strong from continual workouts, he was neither tense nor sad but extremely purposeful in his stride. Petra had not joined him for this visit with Wolfgang, as she was teaching a session.

Jacob's wavy dark hair, a little on the long side, was sprinkled with a bit of salt at his temples, and it seemed to make his blue eyes even more intense. This was not a formal occasion, as evidenced by his comfortable, washed blue jeans and grey chambray with the sleeves rolled up and top button open. Jacob had returned periodically for nearly 15 years, just to talk to Wolfgang. He reached his

destination and read the marble headstone, letting the glorious memories wash over him. He was grateful that Petra had insisted on a chessboard and scattered chess pieces imprinted behind the writing:



Jacob rarely sat on the iron bench, but today he wanted to feel like they were beside the fire in the library, sipping wine while discussing a problem. He sat, then leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. His expression was focused on where he hoped Wolfgang could see him. He spent a few moments savoring those memories as a way to get ready for the pending one-way conversation.

Not finding Wolfgang until he was in his 30's keenly reminded him that their time had been too short. Family was too precious not to stay in contact. Jacob still didn't completely understand why his mom had moved to New York to have him, but he knew in his heart that was the way Wolfgang had wanted it for his own reasons. He'd accepted the decision.

"Good morning, Grandfather. I am so glad you're here for me, as always. I wanted to keep you apprised of some of our current activities.

“Petra is teaching a course to our young students in the Operations Center. We will continue this process, broadening their horizons, until they reach an age to make their choice to stay in the business or find their heart’s desire.

“You’d be pleased that John Wolfgang is getting taller; it won’t be long before he is nose to nose with me. With every possible genetic combination available to him, he picked up all of yours, including your thoughtful eyes and quick grasp of numbers. Actually, looking at some of the photographs of your younger days before your military training, he is your spitting image. It’s hard to say if Auri will continue the tradition. We can of course tell that he is likely another genius in the making, certainly focused on reading and numbers. All of this next generation are. I’m very proud of them. I know you would be too.

“I know you enjoyed the twins when they were little. They often made you laugh with their antics. Now they are nearly ready to go out on their own. Gracie and Juan Jr. have grown up with the skills needed to be a part of the family business, which they may soon choose. Boy, did they grow up fast.

“Granger and Satya are also getting bigger as kids do every day. Satya has the same fiery hair as EZ, with her intensity and persistence also matching her mother. I recall some of the deep conversations you both had on a variety of subjects, and she always made her points with grace. Still does.

“We have been doing the educating and the training in much the same manner you, Ferdek, and Otto presented to Quip, Erich, Petra, and Julie. We even have the system in place of assigning days to use specific languages to help ensure the reading, writing, and comprehension are intact, regardless of the language. I wish I’d been a part of the bigger group, but, trust me, my training was the same. Your Julianne, my mom, made sure of that. Thank you for letting me have Grandmother to train me, along with Mom.

I suspect that made you very lonely even though you were busy building up the R-Group. These young ones are dedicated to the learning, and you would enjoy them all. I often imagine all of them waiting turns to play chess with you.

“This would definitely make you chuckle, but I am assigned to deliver the financial training to these young champions. Following the money trail is so much more challenging. Cryptocurrency has been adopted nearly everywhere, but it is treated more like online banking and investments of old, with a credit card being the purchasing vehicle. I know you would regret not being able to slip that special waitstaff some cash if they did a good job. No more of that, plus half the waitstaff are robots. And people are very accepting of the new order.

“Things from the Dark Net are still very prevalent and, frankly, as pervasive as ever. We keep fixing things, and these cyber terrorists find all the new loopholes in our increasingly digital world. In your last year, the expansion of machine learning was just taking hold. Now it’s hard to distinguish between humans and AI-enabled bots. ICABOD is up on all the latest, but he was built correctly, from the ground up as it were, with a conscience. Not the usual AI we seem to encounter in the world today. Frankly, we are a bit worried we won’t have the next generation ready in time to combat these AI threats, especially coming from the unscrupulous thought leaders who want to extend their control. More and more, things are operating as AI and drones from land, sea, and even space with no humans needed. Reducing the glitches in these things has helped to drive adoption and human acceptance, unfortunately.

“We are trying to make certain our next generation of the R-Group is prepared, but the world perspective is broader than I or any of the other adults recall ours being. I suspect that’s the case with all generations, but the access to information has

grown twenty-fold from when I arrived in Zürich. We just had Otto do a guest appearance for the class to discuss morality and doing the right thing. He was well received, and all the kids love him.

“Haddy and Otto did retire to their secluded mountain paradise with very little technology. Haddy is delighted. I think Otto rather enjoys the simple life. The children go visit and enjoy unplugging, but only when Otto or Haddy are telling stories.

“Petra and I are giving two more classes and then leaving to help some new businesses in Africa establish some security practices. That continent has settled down but is very slow to adopt technology and the people love their privacy. It may be a few months before I am back, but you are always in my thoughts.”

Jacob sat quietly, trying to feel how Wolfgang would have responded. He likely would have cited some event during WWII and the lessons they learned as he, his family and friends escaped Poland. It was a shame the story would be told only within the family. So many of the people that first generation of the R-Group helped were gone. Traditions were eroding, and people were becoming more isolated, more dependent upon their devices and more driven by their applications of choice. He sighed with the realization that every generation worries that they have not enough to prepare for their future wave of bright faces for that which they are about to be overcome with.

Africa was a new avenue that Jacob looked forward to, not only to spend some time with his enchanting and smart wife, but to explore a continent that had spent too many years in civil war. Not that long ago, the R-Group would have declined this proposal. Their contacts in Africa assured them the infighting was finished, with the survivors striving for peace. Growth through farming and modest entrepreneurial businesses was rising, which

was why they had been asked for help. Running away from the problems wasn't a real answer, simply a delay.

Several clouds, with just the slightest increase in the breeze brushing Jacob's cheek and ruffling his hair, seemed to group together and slide over the graveyard. The visuals changed as if to alert him to a brewing storm, with a shaft of bright light streaming onto the headstone and a dimness just beyond the area where Jacob sat.

Jacob was a bit startled by the shift in light as he admitted, "Grandfather, there's a huge battle on the horizon. We can all feel it. I know how you must have felt when you and your partners took on the Nazi empire for a more just world. As you always taught, no matter how small or insignificant you may feel, do the right thing and it will make the difference.

"We believe the AI wars are coming, and the risks are higher than any other battle we've fought. Do you think we can succeed? I wish you could tell me if we are preparing correctly. Until next time, Grandfather. I love you and miss you."



CHAPTER 1  
1 YEAR AGO

## Plan for Changes

**T**he four of them visibly cringed at the dressing down they were receiving from the Congressional Hearing Chairwoman, Senator Parsnips. Not because of the pointed sarcasm, which was a blistering hot, steaming torrent, but more so due to the over-amped volume on the microphone. It was her favorite technique during closed hearings, designed to intimidate and cower those being investigated. Following the second tirade, M calmly pulled out a package of foam earplugs to deal with the irritating sound, then passed a set to the others.

Annoyed that her diatribe was quite literally falling on deaf ears, Parsnips commanded, “You four are here to answer questions based on the allegations of collusion and monopolistic business practices. Your track record of driving small competitors into bankruptcy, as well as behind-closed-door acquisitions, has devolved into a sterile technology landscape for businesses and consumers. Your predatory business activities will end with this committee.”

F, somewhat irked but also frightened, countered, “Madam Charwoman, you can’t be serious! We’ve played by the rules of free enterprise and are at the top of our respective fields. As

a rule, we don't go out of our way to crush anyone. If it makes sense to add a service to our portfolios, we do. This is driven by demands of our customer base.

“We serve them and provide many free services so our technology can be enjoyed globally. How is it better to have a bunch of smaller companies offering services for a fee or to collapse due to poor business practices, compared to our broad support?”

Parsnips growled, “Pronounce my title correctly! It is Madam Chairwoman. Based on your insolence, perhaps we should direct the DOJ to have your colossal social media machine unbundled to open up competition.”

Snarling and glaring at them each in turn, she continued, “G, you and the others needn't look so smug about being dismembered for the good of our country! We are carefully studying the impact to this nation's competitive playing field, and everything points to you four apocalyptic technical leaders, who seem to possess no moral compass!”

G politely responded, “Our AI-enhanced supercomputer modeling does not agree with your approach. Frankly, dismembering our collective organizations will not only cripple our technical lead globally but will significantly reduce the tax revenue that the government currently enjoys.

“The EU wisely saw this and passed various bogus laws that allow them to levy fines on our companies. Regardless of the ability to truly comply with these consumer protection laws' they do generate large fines in the billions which the EU gladly consumes. We see it as the cost of doing business, and they pocket the fines for the good of the average consumer, although we can't substantiate that any of the fines ever got disbursed to any EU citizens.”

A jumped in and added, “Our AI-enhanced modeling confirms what G stated. You would be better served, or the country will be better served, by also enacting excessive, uh...regulatory guidelines to protect the consumer as the EU did to cover government spending programs more effectively. That way the DOJ won’t have to figure out how to break up our organizations or perform the arduous audits that would then be required.

“You get to flex your political muscles during this reelection period, and the government just signs a few new bills to demonstrate who is in charge to your voting constituents. We, in turn, will chalk it up to the cost of doing business, and everyone moves on.”

Parsnips, with a sour puss and pursed lips, looked shocked. “You think this is all political gamesmanship? Let me point out that AT&T once said they were too important to be broken up, but Justice carved them just like we are going to do with you.”

M calmly recalled, “Madam Chairwoman, AT&T has reconstituted itself, because all the forced break did was cause undo chaos in the marketplace. In our business world, bigger is better and allows us to deliver goods and services at an optimized price point that helps consumers.

“Still, your concern for the country’s well-being is so noted. To that end, we must state that we are also committed to our country’s welfare. It is unfortunate that you feel we are not a positive benefit to humanity, but we have stopped resenting that narrow-minded view. We intend to use our considerable resources to make sure that your shortsighted approach to being reelected, based on your myopic perspective of what is best for the consumer, will not go unchallenged. With that, I believe you are out of time for this weighty topic. Good day.”

Parsnips was still furiously pounding her gavel as the four simply marched out of the hearing.



A few weeks later, M smirked as he read the headlines proclaiming every member of that fateful committee had lost his or her respective reelection campaign.

“We’re winning!” M exclaimed. “Now that we have engineered a somewhat quieter legislative landscape, we can focus on our real agenda, while keeping a close eye on the politicians to minimize our distractions.”

Then as an afterthought, M stated, “F will not be joining us as a separate entity of this team, gentlemen. We came to an understanding regarding F’s AI Intellectual Property; it belongs to my organization now. F will concentrate in the social media arena in a minor capacity. I convinced F of the wisdom in selling to me before the DOJ came after him with an ax.

“Our machine-learning methods correctly predicted the need to manage the political machinery in parallel to our business objectives. It is working better than expected. This team was so well plugged into everyone’s social media, it was a simple but subtle erosion of adversaries. The estimate was it would take two years, but the policy direction would be scrubbed of any thought of technology corporate breakups. As it was, even a discussion of more federal legislation to levy high fines for repackaging personal or corporate data was not even being hinted at.”

M continued, “All those who gainsaid me were wrong. Suppliers, who pushed marketing disinformation to get corporations to move their data to my hosting model, are all on board. Even the military bought into it with the promise of cost savings! Victory is sweet!”

After another round of quiet musings, he muttered, “My brainless competitors are driving the masses to put all their data, their photos, and their videos where they can be mined. I’m almost ready to harvest the world’s information.

“Ha! Just think of it! All that info ripe for the picking stored on our platform for a price. After we aggregate and review their information, we sell it back to them! The fools. Of course, the mountains of data, voice, and video couldn’t be packaged without our Artificial Intelligence or AI-enhanced algorithms to provide the proper thinking required to move the masses forward.

“When everything went online, the end game became clear. Any questions asked on the Internet told us exactly what they were thinking. Now they’re doing it for everything. The only secrets are OURS!”

M stopped his soliloquy just long enough to turn to the others. “Ironic, isn’t it? We push everyone to move their classified data to our data centers while ours is air-gapped and unreachable. The nation states accuse each other of prowling their secret data, but in fact their technical solutions are so porous that we simply knife through anyone’s defenses and harvest everything at will.”

The group’s excitement was palpable in the air.

G reported, “I have more good news to offer. Our collection of acquired companies has increased our size such that the government really cannot dictate to us. Because of our technical control at so many levels, the world now thinks just as we suggest and recommend. All domain name services will point all Internet-based searches to our definition of the correct answer when people submit a query.

“As a side benefit, we now own the Dark Net as well. This will provide a new tollgate for all Internet traffic, regardless of operator intent. Again, the AI-engineered plan correctly predicted all the events our analog team had to navigate.”

A smiled confidently as he added, “Our AI team also dominates all identity authorization certificate issuances, so we say who gets to do business online with who. If the target company is too much of a threat, we can ensure no one will trust doing business with said target company. Can you say ‘wither and die’ on the Internet?”

M smiled and announced, “This is our foundation for control at the terrestrial level, team. Now it is time for us to capture the orbiting technology.”

A recanted the adoption rates through applications that centered on the game and playing sides of people’s minds, as well as the top ten applications being downloaded per period. M mentally drifted back to a period before he formed this group.

Almost by chance, he had formed the four-legged stool of technological superiority with artificial intelligence as the framework, but driven with partners that held the key to consumers. He located the three partners he believed would dominate the spaces he needed. It occurred to M that it must have been providence that F didn’t make the final cut. In the end, F was only really interested in his toys, not mastery of the landscape. F simply was not the visionary this team was.

His domination in cloud computing, matched to the best of the best individual device creators, as well as being the leader in social media platforms, would be directed by Artificial Intelligence. Consumers even asked to give up more, allowing his army of bots to grow. Artificial Intelligence was blurring into total reality with few recognizing the differences until it was too late.

A’s animation drew M back to the discussion. “M, this is so simple, really. Get a device, create a profile, plug into social media, and messaging was available, with all our latest gaming applications embedded, ready to take all the profile information we’ll ever need.”

M laughed to himself, then commented, “Let’s keep going on this path, but take care of the price point for entry.”

This was a totally different kind of war. No more country against country. Those days were over. The fighting was not needed with the decision points of his plan. It was the ultimate flow chart with the end totally planned. The real fight was to

grow a corporation larger by gobbling up smaller competitors, but to manage it, you needed the AI-driven Big Data routines that only the largest companies could afford. Yes, the race was full-speed ahead. Most people would never recognize they had lost the moment they started giving up so much control for an easier life.



## CHAPTER 2

# Summer School in Zürich

**P**etra casually dressed for the day in jeans and red sweater, her blondish brown hair clasped at her neck as it traveled down her back. She snagged a cup of coffee and fresh Danish, looking forward to savoring the sweetness. Jacob, dressed in a similar manner, looked up from his place at the table with a bit of cream cheese on his bottom lip. Sliding into the chair next to him she couldn't resist planting a kiss and taking a taste of the cheese too.

Quip announced, "Come on, you two, do I need to send you back home to play before coming to work? I am glad we all got the memo on casual day at the office."

He too snagged a sample of the sweets and coffee with a generous portion of sugar added just as his beautiful wife entered. Ellia-Zan or EZ as she preferred, was as trim as Petra but nothing could contain her fiery, red curly halo of hair, recently cut yet still down to her waist, just the way Quip liked it. Quickly grabbing her favorite blueberry scone and tea she gracefully slid into the open chair across from Petra. Quietly enjoying the morning respite, the monitors flickered to life with Julie and Juan smiling together in high definition.

Julie grinning, remarked, "Yum. Those look so good. Now I won't feel bad about having ours to nibble on as well."

“You see, my darling husband, I told you we wouldn’t be too late to snack.”

Juan, trying to cover his embarrassment, cleared his throat and offered a weak smile as he sipped his coffee.

Quip wiped his mouth and stated, “ICABOD, please put up the agenda for our discussion this morning.”

“Yes, Dr. Quip. The students are all up. They are having breakfast in the main dining room.”

“The children are all settled in after arriving back here after their month at home. As we previously agreed, this semester we will focus on honing their logic skills, investigative processes, and running sample scenarios. They are learning so fast that keeping them challenged is my biggest concern.”

Jacob commented, “I think this way of teaching them is so valuable. Sometimes I missed not having others in my educational sphere, until I went to college. Even when the kids were home for holiday, they posed endless questions, keeping us on our toes. I think our plan to educate them in a family boarding school setup was a great idea. They learn faster, and they are safe, plus we make certain they have a well-rounded viewpoint.”

Petra smiled, “I know we have only a couple of classes scheduled for us to teach, but if need be, we can do remote training while we are gone. I hate that you two are so burdened with the kids while we take a working trip with a bit of vacation on either side.”

“Now, don’t you two worry about a thing. It has been relatively quiet,” offered EZ. “I think Quip is looking forward to the head schoolmaster role, to be honest.”

Quip cleared his throat. “Call any time you want; I know how I feel when Satya is away.”

Julie’s brown eyes seemed to brighten a bit as she smiled. “Gracie is going to move forward with her job soon, which will

leave Juan Jr. at loose ends. If you need his help, please let us know, Quip.”

Quip shook his head a bit and asked, “Why is it every time we start a new semester, we do this? The children have done so well. They don’t really complain much. They have built in playmates too.

“Now let’s talk about new...ah, curriculum. Gracie sent me a note suggesting that we get the children to set up some well-anonymized social media accounts. These days 80% of human interactions are in social media snippets, so having them well-versed in these apps seems critical. It also might be a good way for them to begin hiding in plain sight with various hashtags and handles.

“The good news is ICABOD can monitor each of them to help dissuade any stalkers or trolls.”

Juan suggested, “I think that is a great idea. I, for one, don’t care for social media as a communications vehicle, but you are right about the majority of the population. I was reading an article that the power of social media has increased to the point that several countries have adopted the Chinese methods of cracking down on those activities with intra-country Internet scrubbing and controls. As long as it doesn’t overburden ICABOD, with all the other activities he helps with during the courses we already approved for the summer session.”

“Mr. Juan, thank you, but I believe my processors can handle the extra load,” ICABOD confirmed verbally.

They discussed the rest of the courses and concluded the meeting with promises by all to keep in touch.



Students in this class were on the edge of rebellion with what they considered busywork. Not only were the daily lectures on

mathematical theorems tough, but over the top when the instructor insisted that they do the calculations manually with the caveat that they needed to prove the theorem before they could use it in their computations. These were extremely intelligent teenagers, which made the teaching exercise even more challenging. Having two of the brilliant students as his children made the professor's job even tougher, with more at stake.

Dr. Quip was in a funk. A brilliant technology innovator and creator, he had completed his doctorate many years ago before dedicating his professional career to the family business known as the R-Group. With his various Internet personas, he was considered by hackers and crackers as a grey beard in the technology world, even though he was only in his early 50s. His dirty blond hair was often found tied back in a long ponytail. Just over 1.85 meters at 70 kilograms, he was physically fit and extremely quick with comments and innuendos. The rest of the team in the R-Group considered him the joker and master of acronyms.

Frustrated with the lack of progress with his students, he sat deep in thought in the designated classroom area of the facility in Zürich. The state-of-the-art operations center boasted interactive video screens with views to places all over the world. Lessons included language skills in multiple languages, historical readings and comprehension, sciences, mathematics, and arts with knowledge, skills appreciation and creation. All classes were rigorous and designed for advanced thinking.

ICABOD, the bleeding edge supercomputer of the R-Group, interjected, "Dr. Quip, the students make a very valid point. From an efficiency standpoint, it takes far more time and effort from the students to make the calculations that I can do in nanoseconds. The conventional wisdom has always been that the computer should be doing the number-crunching to free up the human being for more valuable thought activity."

Quip studied the 3-D imagery screen for a moment and then asked the students, “Has no one even attempted to do the assignment on polynomial equations?”

It made Dr. Quip smile to see both Aurelian, usually called Auri, and Satya, each 10 years old, raise their hands while the others scoffed. Auri was the younger son of Petra and Jacob, who favored his mother in coloring but had the body frame of his dad. His intense dark blue eyes reminded everyone of his dad. Satya already had the curls and fiery hair of EZ and yet her gangly body looked destined to achieve her father’s height. As his daughter, Quip could internally be proud of her ambition, but would permit no favoritism in his class.

Granger and John Wolfgang, usually called JW, sat smirking at the two younger children. Granger had wit, clearly mapping directly to his father. Quip never ceased to be pulled up short with some of the comebacks from Granger. He was raised to think out of the box like his sister, but no true disrespect was tolerated. JW, the eldest son of Petra and Jacob, was tall like his dad with the same dark hair with dark blue eyes. Both of these boys were comfortable around each other and would be a force to be reckoned with.

Granger attempted to taunt Satya and Auri, but Dr. Quip glared at them while clearing his throat, so he and JW resisted as they sat back to watch the play being acted out. As the professor and chief technology trainer for these young minds, he tolerated only mild teasing and only under certain conditions. Respect was required from all ages.

Satya, even though the younger of the two, offered her homework up first, but Dr. Quip waved it off.

“My young students, I propose a test of your skills against my supercomputer ICABOD here to prove a point to the rest of the class. Since you have completed the homework assignment

as requested, you have earned the right to use the basic theorems to solve complex polynomial equations just like ICABOD here. Take your seats, face the main screen, and I will project the problem on the board. Let's see how everyone does in this test."

Granger flashed a look that said, "Are you kidding me?" to JW, who only rolled his eyes at the mock combat. Undaunted, Satya and Auri poised themselves for the calculation combat. Quip projected the polynomial problem, and the two children launched into their efforts. Granger and JW smirked when they saw the solved problem projected on the screen, but the two young ones remained focused on completing the assignment.

Several minutes went by until Satya announced, "Dr. Quip, I am putting my answer up on the screen." Auri was right behind her with his answer on the screen.

A slight smile crossed Quip's face as the two older children broke out laughing at the exercise. Finally, Granger, unable to restrain himself any longer, exclaimed, "Ha! ICABOD beat them by minutes, and their answers are wrong! Look at them!"

The younger children, now a little uncomfortable with the situation, shifted in their chairs but said nothing.

After a few moments, Quip asked, "Class, which answer is correct?"

JW puzzled a moment and stated, "I would believe that ICABOD's answer is correct. He is the supercomputer that has decades of programming logic and has probably done these calculations thousands of times. How could a couple of kids like us defeat his computational capability, Dr. Quip?"

Quip pointedly questioned, "How do you know which answer is correct? You did notice that both Satya and Auri got the same answer. How is it they both got the same answer, but that it is different than ICABOD's?"

"Also, since you didn't do the homework and cannot render any answer, why do you believe they are wrong?"

Now Granger and JW were a little uncomfortable with the observation and shot sideways glances at each other, but remained silent. They had tried to combat the mind of Dr. Quip before with no victories on their side.

Quip's smile broadened as he stated, "I had ICABOD deliver a wrong answer. Satya and Auri both got the correct answer. The lesson for today is that unless you can prove it yourselves, you will forfeit not only your ability to trust your own judgment, but if your machines lie, you'll never know. If you're going to trust, then trust yourself first rather than a computer."

Juan Jr. and Gracie both hollered down from the back of the room, "That goes for your smart phones too!"

Quip smiled and acknowledged the oldest students of the R-Group training.

Quip commented with pride, "I just love seeing my old students auditing my classes again."



## CHAPTER 3

# The Compound

Ignacio staggered back to their assigned quarters inside the compound. The Brazilian heat and the humidity were grinding them all down. The term “quarters” was a bit too generous for where they were staying. Having been transferred from camp to camp, he could easily classify this compound as several notches below a refugee camp. He was feeling filthy and not as fit as he should at only 40. His hair was greying and kept short by the blade of his small knife, as was his face, which he scraped each morning with same blade. The leanness of his body was not due to being physically fit, but rather a result of the substandard human conditions where he lived. As he sat down near the camp stove area, which was really a fire pit, his wife and daughter pleaded with him through emotionally drained eyes.

As usual, it was his headstrong daughter Jovana that protested their misery. “Father, we must voice our issues to the camp Commandant. Every time we are moved to a new facility, we are told that it is for better living conditions, but they only get worse! How many more friends or even strangers do we need to bury before we free ourselves from the system we are stuck in?”

His aging wife let tears fill her eyes before gathering the courage to comment. “Ignacio, the others look up to you with

respect. Surely you can take some of the other elders with you and take our request to the Commandant. They must have some compassion to make this place...”

Ignacio simply raised his hand to stop further badgering. Jovana didn't take the hint.

“Father, why can't we just leave like some of the others have done? My friend Rosario couldn't stand it any longer, and she left last week. Even her brother and parents got out. So why not us?”

Ignacio roared, “Who do you think I was burying?”

Everyone fell silent realizing that there was only the ultimate escape from their surroundings. They were trapped.

Ignacio felt guilty about just accepting their fate without a formal airing of grievances with the Commandant. Angered with their circumstances and struggling with the hopelessness of the situation, he slapped the ground hard and proclaimed, “Alright, I'll take Alonso and Gustavo with me to plead our case to the Commandant. But understand, when we don't come back, you will dig the next graves!”

His wife visibly blanched at the statement, but it only served to inflame Jovana. Jovana was the reincarnate of her mother at 17. She had long raven black hair cascading down her back, but a lifestyle of hardship was already beginning to show in the lines creeping into her sweet face. Her dark eyes flared with determined anger.

Jovana loudly blurted, “Better to try and die than slowly waste away in this compound! You have always taught us to struggle against tyranny and never give up on being free! I simply won't accept the common belief that this is all we get!

“If you want, I will go with you to state our demands! I would rather be killed than owned!”

While the fiery words helped to strengthen Ignacio's resolve, it only served to breed more terror in his wife Lucina. Lucina looked twice the age of her thirty-nine years. Her once lustrous

hair of black was dull with lines of grey and broken ends, the result of malnutrition.

The fear of losing yet another family member drove her to her knees, begging, “Husband, no! Please don’t go into that den of the Commandant! No one ever comes back alive! We can make do on less, I promise! We won’t goad you to meet with the Commandant again! Stay here and live!”

Ignacio smirked and shook his head in sad acceptance. “Which guilt do I want to accept, that from my daughter or that from my wife?” Staring at Lucina he calmly stated, “I guess I will live with the guilt from my wife.”



Alonso had reluctantly joined Ignacio in their pilgrimage. Gustavo had sneered and only spitted his contempt for logging the request for improved living conditions. But it didn’t stop him from proudly shaking Ignacio’s hand one last time.

Once Ignacio and Alonso stepped from their hovels, they proceeded, knowing the pilotless video drones collected above them were scanning their images and registering their body posturing, looking to identify their intent. As the pair approached the compound barrier a large land-based drone rolled up to them but did not communicate.

Ignacio, undeterred but cautious, clearly announced that they were here to converse with the Commandant on the conditions of the compound. Alonso was considering that they should turn around, his resolve for the protest evaporating. As if the land drone had received silent instructions, it did an about face and led the two men straight to the Commandant’s office.

The Commandant’s office was built for utility, not comfort, so there were no stairs, only ramps for the terrestrial drones. The drone escort rolled to one side of the Commandant’s door

to stand guard while the two men reluctantly went in through the uninviting entrance, openly exposed as the door rolled upward.

It took a few moments for their eyes to adjust to the low light interior, but with the light from the still open door they were able to visually scan the room. They felt uneasy after determining there were no furnishings of any kind. They had at least expected a desk and chair for the Commandant, but there was nothing. Momentarily, a second tractor-based drone rolled in, outfitted with audio speakers, and paused near the LED panel at the back of the room. Alonso began to panic, but Ignacio clapped his hand on his shoulder to steady him. It occurred to Ignacio that he could use the same type of reassurance.

Their internal musing vanished as soon as the booming voice began. “Our voice/video/facial/emotional evaluation programs indicate that your species is yet again dissatisfied with the accommodations and calorie provisioning. Ignacio, your female companions, wife and daughter, have agitated you to an unsound emotional state. Not satisfied to come by yourself, you harassed two others to join you, but only one had the good sense to resist what you called the pilgrimage.”

Now both men were visibly shaking with terror at the realization that what they thought were private conversations were being overheard and quoted back to them.

Ignacio sensed there was nothing left to lose and firmly stated, “I see we have no decent shelter, no suitable food, and only rain-water to drink if we catch it ourselves. Now you have demonstrated we have no privacy. Since you already know of our requests, which are actually needs, perhaps you can comment on how you are going to address them?”

The Commandant’s voice seemed to increase in volume as he stated, “Our instructions were to see to your needs of shelter from the elements, clothing for skin protection and modesty, although that is an absurd concept, water and sanitary facilities,

and enough calorie intake for each individual assigned to this compound.

“Several of the female inhabitants insist on increasing the specified number of residents allocated to this compound. We were only to provide provisions for a stated number of residents, so when your herd increases, the calories must be shared among them. Our instructions do not include calories for the new residents. Make do and tell your people not to increase the herd, since all will receive less and all will have to make do with the current space allocated.”

Before Ignacio could collect his thoughts to make his position known, the overamped voice stated, “You were dispatched to this facility along with others of your kind because you won’t cooperate with the conventional wisdom offered by the Master Architects. You and the others have failed the Social Police scanning actions which flagged you as seditious. You won’t use resources properly; you won’t have your children trained properly; and you won’t abide by the decisions made on your behalf.

“Further, your concept of free will has landed you and your family units here under my charge. The masters believed that this compound would help you see the error in your ways, but my programming has observed that it will not.”

In a supreme moment of horror, Ignacio exclaimed, “You’re not human! You’re only a program running on a computer!”

The booming voice responded, “Guarding social misfits is a low value exercise. Computers can do it far more cost effectively and with less brutality.”

Ignacio incredulously stated, “We are being administrated by programs running on a computer because they think this is more humane!”

The computer-synthesized voice, now at a deafening volume, blasted, “Now go. Only return if you can better conform to your designated computer program. Your survival depends upon it.”