

# A CALIFORNIA COUP

Social Media's dream of a socialist paradise

A Silicon Valley Mystery  
by  
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The Silicon Valley Trilogy by Peter Mackeonis

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High Tech, Low Morals (1992)

ANNA'S GAME (2019)

A CALIFORNIA COUP (2020)

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*Only put your money on a horse that's in the race!*

## Forward

When Amrit Kahn, the down-and-out co-founder of ZEN, a Silicon Valley social media company, reenters society, he discovers that the US government has, in exchange for the marketing rights to the data that it scrapes, had financially assisted his ex-partner, Adam Eisenberg, in turning ZEN's OneWorld platform into a global eavesdropping organization. Owed back salary, and, as compensation for being unjustly fired, Amrit steals a billion dollars from ZEN, by transferring it to his own account in Bitcoin.

When Amrit contacts his old friend and freelance hacker, Roger de Courcey, and his ex-partner's wife, Anna Eisenberg, who also works for the company, he discovers that the White House, via Homeland Security chief, Colonel Richard Dauber, has instructed ZEN to take surveillance even further, by implementing '*Valhalla*,' the president's pet project to spy on the world's rich and powerful, for purposes of blackmail.

Anna, Amrit and Roger decide to expose *Valhalla*, and Amrit gives Roger access to the stolen bitcoin to fund whatever he needs to do, to bring down the project. Roger decides that the best way to defeat the project is for the hacker to go underground to dig up dirt on US politicians and then blackmail them. Roger hires, MissyZ, a trusted underground hacker, but she bails on the job when she discovers the depth of the corruption.

Adam learns that Amrit is secretly meeting with Anna, in a fit of jealousy and he anonymously denounces him as a terrorist, and Amrit is shot and badly wounded by a SWAT team. When the truth comes out about the shoot-

ing, Adam is arrested, and Colonel Dauber takes control of ZEN, as a 'national asset.' Anna, coming from an ancient Italian family that had advised the Popes since the Middle Ages, wrongly assumes that their lives are also in danger from Washington and decides that their only hope is to get to the Vatican where her family can protect her. She and Roger head for the Mexican border, taking the blackmail files with them, and they make their escape in a rental car with fake plates, managing to avoid camera detection by taking the coast road.

Heading south, Anna and Roger ditch their rental for a 60's VW when they take up with Angie, a Hollywood movie fan who works at the Esalen Health Spa and Roger, pretending to be a film producer, promises to include her in his next movie. The three spend the night at a Southern California film festival in Ojai, and feeling that Homeland Security is closing in, Roger makes a call to a billionaire ex-girlfriend, who owns a successful Mexican import/export company. She arranges for a helicopter to take them to LAX and then onward to Barbados and Angie decides to stay on in Ojai with a film troupe.

Upon arriving in Barbados, Roger rents a cottage on the quiet side of the island, but soon- after they settle in, awaken one night to find a burglar in the house. When the police are called, sergeant Braithwaite recognizes both Anna, from the media, and Roger, as a famous programmer.

Sergeant Braithwaite, who had been cheated out of his software business by his ex-partner, Derick Budge, blackmails Roger for half a million dollars and gives the order to financially destroy Budge. After some thought, Roger deposits a large sum of cash into Budge's account and then links the deposit to an international corruption case that the UK's MI5 are working on.

MI5 investigate Budge, and link him to Sergeant Braithwaite and to Lev Oblomov, the jeweler to the wealthy, who has homes in London and Barbados, and who is suspected by both the UK and the US of influencing elec-

tions. Because of the US election link, the president orders Colonel Dauber to travel to Barbados to interrogate both Braithwaite and Oblomov.

The colonel lunches with Sargent Braithwaite at an upscale island hotel and decides that the policeman had no involvement in any of the events. Braithwaite, who has had too much to drink, leaves the hotel bar and decides to visit Anna and Roger to warn them about the colonel's presence on the island and is accidentally struck and killed outside Anna and Roger's cottage.

As the local police are alerted later that night that someone of interest to the colonel has just been killed, Dauber rushes to the scene where he discovers fugitives, Anna and Roger. Feeling threatened and realizing that running is no longer an option, Anna agrees to hand over the stolen project files. She tricks the colonel into writing an email saying that she had been working for Homeland Security all along, only admitting that she had spoken of Valhalla to her brother, Piero, the Pope's adviser, but doesn't mention that she already copied the files to him.

Anna, having secured her own escape from the authorities, then convinces Roger to accompany her and the colonel to Rome, to negotiate her brother's silence. The meeting at the Vatican, with Piero, was quick and easy, as Piero admits that much of what had been uncovered by MissyZ involved the Catholic Church. The *Holy See* are quite happy to destroy the information, as long as the US government will do the same. At the end of the meeting, Roger seals his own fate as he brags that he has the only copy of MissyZ's report. It costs him his life, as his SUV explodes on the way to Rome Airport.

Anna then returns to the US to run ZEN Corporation. and so A CALIFORNIA COUP begins...

## Chapter I

### Playing Old Tapes

Unlike the epic tale of two civilizations, this was not the best of times, it was certainly not the age of wisdom and neither was it the season of light. And, as Colonel Richard Dauber sat at his desk, his eyes firmly fixed on the photograph of his wife and children, he was acutely aware that he had let them, his country and worst of all, himself, down.

Six months had passed since the Senate Ethics Committee published its inconclusive findings on what had been a typical Washington 'dog and pony show' of the Democrats attacking Republicans, and the Republicans defending in kind. Few Senators had listened, as Anna Eisenberg, recalled how she had resisted the Homeland Security's order for ZEN to data dive into the proclivities of the world's rich and famous, and the government responded that it had simply been a theoretical exercise that certainly was never to be actioned. And, if ZEN had been sent files, then they had been done so by a rogue element in Homeland Security, so there was no need to introduce the Vatican's assistance in the return of the said files, or the death in Rome, by a faulty gas main, of the late freelance hacker, Roger de Courcey.

There had, however, been short-lived moments of excitement, with some heated back and forth jibing, as Colonel Richard Dauber erroneously introduced the investigation of the suspected political influence peddler, Lev Oblomov, the death of the Barbados policeman, and the British Secret Service kidnapping and torturing of the Welsh hotelier. But, that interest soon evaporated and was not reignited even when the panel was made aware of the life imprisonment of the then ZEN CEO, Adam Eisenberg,

who finagled a SWAT team's assassination of his partner and co-founder, Amrit Kahn. The good colonel successfully explaining that the intervention showed Homeland Security had efficiently dealt with the potential disaster, and, even if Amrit not been a suicide bomber, he had, along with ZEN's now CEO, Anna Eisenberg and Roger de Courcey, distributed the erroneous, but Top Secret, VALHALLA project files, and, in his eyes, that made them all terrorists. As for Adam Eisenberg's prison term, it was just collateral damage.

However, even with his department exonerated, if there was one thing that still bothered the colonel those many months later, it was a loose end and he had two. He could possibly have dealt with one, as Amrit, being locked away in a military hospital, would eventually be available for questioning, but the murder of de Courcey still bothered him. Even though de Courcey had made the fatal mistake in claiming, rightly or wrongly, he was the sole possessor of the incriminating data collected by VALHALLA, he should not have been assassinated.

Had the Vatican moved to curtail another damning scandal brought on by the unsavory content collected by de Courcey's hired hackers, should the information be published?

Or, realizing that the program had become an embarrassment, had his own government acted?

Both were more than possible, but his money was on a third possibility.

It was on Anna, who, realizing that the game was over and that de Courcey was a loose cannon, had him stopped before he could somehow drag her and ZEN down. After all, with her husband in prison, she now controlled ZEN's billion-member strong social networking company, and, in front of the Senate Panel, she'd gone on to promise to

change the way that ZEN operated, so a program like VALHALLA would be impossible in the future.

Over the months since the hearing, Anna had gone on to make many of her promised changes, that was, if her PR was to be believed, and not least of all in the way that it collected data, on its billion or so of OneWorld members.

Dauber knew the mission that had ended those many months ago in Rome, had ended badly.

Anna had got the better of him and that still smarted.

He still needed to bring her to justice, and that very morning, as he sat feeling sorry for himself, while staring at his wife and children, opportunity rang in the form of a call from Walter Reed informing him that Amrit Khan had unexpectedly regained consciousness.

Now smiling and energized, as he replaced the receiver, it was time, one way or another, to bring Amrit back into the fold and to clip Anna's wings for good.

As the Marines flanking the colonel came out of the elevator of the fourth floor of Walter Reed, they were greeted by the barrels of the two M16 rifles, in the hands of two sentries stationed outside Amrit's room. Ordering them to stand down, Dauber entered the spartan accommodation. The gray walls matched the gray floor, which, in turn, matched the bedclothes. Three gray chairs were bolted to the floor, approximately four feet from the bed and two-inch diameter black iron bars on the window contributed the only other color in the room.

Amrit, propped up in an electronically folded bed, was quietly laughing at an article in "Wired Magazine" that was predicting the future usefulness of artificial intelligence in fast food restaurants.

As the Colonel showed his identification, having lowered his six foot three frame into the middle of the chairs directly facing the patient, the smile dropped from Amrit's face, as he went on the offensive.

"No grapes?" asked Amrit.

At first the colonel did not respond.

Then he said in a calm voice.

"Look around you, Dr. Kahn, this is not the W Hotel, or some other over-priced boutique accommodation that you're used to. And it's only one step away from solitary confinement in a federal prison."

Amrit, feeling the chill in the room, changed tack.

"Why did you try to kill me, and *why* am I being kept prisoner?" he asked, attempting to draw out, from his official visitor, any charges that might be brought against him.

"Where would you like to start Dr. Kahn? Treason? No, it can't be treasonous to steal Top Secret files from the government when you are not a citizen. So, it would have to be terrorism. That would get you a good twenty-five years in solitary after a swift trial that would have to be closed to the public, for security reasons. Then we have the not so small matter of the billion or two you stole from ZEN."

Amrit started to answer, "But that was for my founder's shares that I was cheated out of and my back salary and I..."

Dauber began to speak.

"Please do not interrupt me."

The colonel could tell from this weak objection that a stronger person would not have tried to explain, but just

kept silent. He believed that this suggested that Amrit was going to cooperate, so he continued in a less offensive tone.

"If you explain to me exactly what happened, I'll see how I can help *you* in return."

Amrit chose to play the sympathy card.

He told of his years being down and out, having been fired for a work-induced drug habit just before the IPO, of the company he founded, and how he'd only sobered after he'd been tazed for loitering. He spoke of his shock to find how commercial ZEN had become, and he'd only hacked into their servers to collect what was owed to him, and found the company he'd help to start had morphed into the intrusive data collection arm of the government. He told how he'd approached Anna, his ex-partner's wife, and, though initially she'd not believed that the company was spying on its people, she'd changed her mind when he, the colonel, sent her the instruction to implement the even more intrusive VALHALLA global blackmail program. And that was when he and Anna recruited, Roger de Courcey, to disconnect ZEN from the government.

When Amrit finished, he was exhausted, but relieved that he'd been allowed to tell his side of the story. He felt certain that now he'd explained how un-American the president had been, everything would be okay; that the good colonel would understand.

He was wrong.

"Would you tell a court what you just told me?"

"I'd happily tell the court about VALHALLA. I'm certain that the American people, that you all so often quote, and care so for much, not to mention the rest of the world, will be intrigued how your president, the Leader of the Free World, tried to implement a plan to blackmail the world's leaders using information found on their computers, cell

phones and every other piece of electronics they accessed..... "

He was stopped in midstream.

"No, Amrit, not everything. Just the part about Anna being fully supportive of your criminal actions, and that she was your source for the stolen files."

Amrit's face froze with a look of despair.

The colonel had given his endgame away, and, without a recording device. It was obvious that he needed Amrit's evidence, as he had no way of getting to her without it, and that meant he, Amrit, was now unsafe, that was, unless he turned state's evidence against his friend.

The colonel backtracked.

"You're still not well, Amrit, so this is enough for today. Let's speak in a day or so."

He extended his hand, as he lifted himself out of the chair and tried to appear conciliatory.

"Adam thought that you were having an affair with Anna, and that's why you were shot. He said that you were in position and ready to detonate a backpack by phone at the airport, and that's why you were shot through the window where you stood. But I'd still like to formally apologize to you, even if it wasn't our fault. You probably know it was just a miracle that your raising the phone to your ear at that specific moment deflected the bullet. Another millimeter, and we would not be here talking."

But his extended hand was not reciprocated. Amrit had already closed his eyes and was thinking of how to get free, and then even.

Back out in the hall, the colonel was not pleased with his

performance. He'd come on too strong and too fast, wrongly assuming that Amrit would cooperate to save his skin. His years of interrogating suspects had counted for nothing, overrun by the annoyance that he could not control. Annoyance at the run-around Anna and Roger de Courcey had given him, first in California and then when they escaped to the Caribbean. Annoyance at the way Anna had traded her get-out-of-jail card, for sharing the VALHALLA files, for nothing of particular value. And positively furious at her, for publicly blowing the whistle on ZEN's interaction with the government, throwing her security director, Don McKesson, to the media wolves and promising to end the intrusive data collection. All in all she made him the laughing stock of the agency, and it was only the president's personal support that had kept him in place, and the soldier in him needed vengeance, before he could move on.

The note, that damn 'get-out-of-jail free' card that Anna had him sign, as a condition of her helping to interview, Lev Oblomov, had allowed her to go free to create the company that surpassed the imagination of the most prolific empire that the world had ever known. He could only watch as ZEN had thrived, when, by an act of online self-immolation, it should have been destroyed.

She had written to every individual in ZEN's OneWorld, apologizing for Adam's aberrative behavior as co-founder of the company, literally quoting him as saying, 'What did these people expect? They should have realized there was no such thing as a free lunch.' She received well over a hundred million 'thank you' messages, and membership climbed at its fastest pace ever, to reach almost three billion.

A private club, with three billion members, that could be spoken to not only directly, but in nano seconds.

ZEN had become almost unstoppable, so he would have to lean on Amrit, and lean hard.

Recovery for Amrit, as his doctors described his very limited mobility, had not been a walk in the park. His survival itself had been nothing short of a miracle, having died in the apartment where the sniper shot him, and again on the operating table; he'd been in a coma for many months.

And, to make matters worse, he'd woken up in no-man's land.

The Indian Parliament, informed of his situation, initially showed compassion by offering to pay for a physiotherapist, once one was needed, but had voted to allow his adopted country to proceed with an espionage charge, as they had other interests that were more pressing - the cricket season was in full swing and that, as in neighboring Pakistan, generally took precedence over politics. And now, alone in his sterile room, with heavily armed guards, Amrit knew that he was not out of the woods, even when it came to prosecution. He surmised that, being alive might just be a sufficient embarrassment to save him, might just not be correct.

He needed to rethink his position.

Annaya, the physiotherapist assigned to Amrit had been pleasantly talkative, and he was amused by her recollections of the Senate Hearings. It seemed that Anna had given a good account for herself, but he felt she should have come down harder on the government. They would not have gotten off so lightly for shooting him, and killing Roger, had he been asked to testify.

Annaya recounted Anna's testimony.

"How could a security department, as funded and as extensive as Homeland Security not see that Oblomov was just a simple businessman?" she asked as she kept on with her criticism. "This government couldn't complete a jigsaw puzzle if it had the box lid. And, Don McKesson, the Company man you put in charge of ZEN's security, couldn't find the car that I was traveling in just fifty miles away from where he was sitting; no doubt with his feet up on what is now my desk."

Anna accepted the guffaws from the public gallery, and when her testimony was over, the applause from the room, though none came from the panel, was heard all over the building.

Through the weeks following his return to the conscious world, Annaya worked tirelessly to improve Amrit's mobility. And, as she did they shared their different experiences of America. He had not yet moved to America when 9/11 happened. She had been already qualified as a therapy nurse in the US, and after the attack, easily passing for a Middle Eastern native, had faced equal measures of unwarranted hostility from some and much appreciated sympathy from others.

While their conversations seemed easy and relaxed, Amrit expected that this was part of the therapy, and that their conversations would be recorded. He wondered if could get her to act on his behalf by speaking in a clipped native dialect, or by communicating by some other method. He felt sure that, if Anna knew that he was still alive, she'd help him avoid not only the multi-decade jail sentence, but a possible disappearance altogether.

Another month passed.

Then came the day when his frustration became too great and feeling that he had nothing to lose, he slipped Annaya a note, and, away from the camera's prying eyes

she surreptitiously read it and just smiled knowingly.

That was too easy, he thought, and he wondered if she was a Company employee, and, if she was, was Dauber to allow him to make his escape, so Anna could be implicated.

More weeks went by and still the colonel failed to return, and worse still, there was no word from Anna.

Had he expected too much from her?

Had he chosen the wrong side?

## Chapter II

### **Free At Last**

The sprinkler system sputtered into life as the operation began. The WiFi went dead disabling the floor's communication systems. As the sentries entered Amrit's room they found Annaya helping the prisoner onto a gurney. She quickly showed them a Homeland Security identity pass saying that her instructions were, should such an event take place, to move Amrit to a predetermined safe room, and that, as this was most likely a plan to free Amrit, they were to wait in place for the attackers to show themselves.

Moving the gurney quickly to the end of the corridor, Annaya touched the fingerprint reader to open the laundry elevator, and, as the doors closed with Amrit inside, she clipped the tracking device on his wrist and it dropped to the floor.

She then, without a word having been spoken, took a

black cloth hood from her uniform's pocket and placed over Amrit's head.

Thirty seconds later Amrit felt his wheelchair being pushed up a ramp and heard its wheels lock into place with two clicks.

The vehicle then moved slowly out of the facility.

Amrit terrified, sat in complete darkness.

A mile or so outside the compound, Annaya changed vehicles for her ongoing journey to College Park Municipal Airport. There, a chartered Piper Cub ferried Amrit's substitute captor, or accomplice, to Ronald Reagan International Airport for an onward flight to South America.

The ambulance that carried Amrit, having crossed over the Potomac, was discarded some twenty minutes later at Tyson's Corner, and an hour later, a Cadillac SUV carrying a now paranoid Amrit, pulled through the gates of the Aquia Harbor Yacht Club.

The raid had been carried out in complete silence, and, as the hood was removed and his eyes adjusted to the light, he caught sight of the name *ASPHALIA II* emblazoned on the side of the yacht. And, as the person at its bow, welcomed him to freedom, he was close to tears, as the magnitude of what he'd just been through caught up with him.

"After the conversation with Dauber, I was convinced that I was being renditioned."

"We couldn't risk getting a message to you," replied Anna, as she moved to hug him, unable to ignore that her friend had aged a good ten years in only eight months. Now, looking like he was in his late thirties, a deep scar over his right eye and a twisted smile, he seemed sadly eerie.

But he was smiling, as he congratulated her.

"I have no idea how you immobilized the secure wing of a military hospital, but I'm certainly impressed."

"Once we sourced the building's wiring diagram, and that was the difficult part, it was extremely simple," Anna said, continuing, "I only hope that our grid installations and power stations are better protected now that they are no longer using ZEN security software."

As Anna spoke, Amrit saw that she too had changed. Gone was the gentility and the self-questioning; now replaced by a coldness that showed in her response.

"How long are their systems down for?" he asked.

"Ten minutes. Just enough for you to clear the compound and never were any patients in danger. The critical area outage was pinpoint-accurate to your floor, and you were privileged to be their only customer. But it will take a while for anyone to work out who did what, and Annaya, in a simple wig and glasses carrying a suite of new identity papers, a trick taught Roger taught me, will be out of the country before anyone can catch up with her. And don't worry, she has been rewarded in such a way as she need never enter the US again."

"Where are we going?" Amrit asked, adding, "Not that I really care."

"Bermuda. And now that ZEN is free of government influence, we have plenty to talk about over the seven hundred miles of ocean. But first, what would you like to eat and drink? We're fully stocked, so whatever you like, we should have."

Amrit relaxed back in his wheelchair.

"Do I take it that I'm back in ZEN?"

"Yes, because I believe that together ZEN can help free

the world from illegal and unethical government activities."

Amrit cocked his face sideways. "I can see you're serious about this?" he half stated, half asked, adding, "But do you also understand that Dauber is not going to rest until he has captured me again so he can get to you?"

"Just let him try. He knows that ZEN is more powerful than ever. And, I suspect, deep down, he agrees that after the world came so close to VALHALLA being rolled out, we all deserve a genuine government of the people, not of certain gray forces that are immune to questioning or accountability."

Amrit was intrigued by the change in Anna. Obviously, eight months controlling ZEN had brought out her Montalbano family personality, the one that had advised the Vatican since the Middle Ages. And, interestingly enough she had reached the same conclusion that he had, during his stay at the government's pleasure.

"I couldn't agree more, Anna, but if you are serious, we need to address the lubrication that keeps our civilization moving. We need to address the financial world. The one privilege that my captors allowed was magazines, and from what I have read, to take on the financial community, we will need to create our own cybercurrency."

Anna thought for a moment.

"Are you sure you're up to this conversation?"

"Never more so," Amrit responded.

"Okay, but we can stop at any time, so can you to rest."

She paused to let Amrit comment, but he didn't.

"What would be the point of us having a cybercurrency? Surely only the greedy bought into the crypto scams because of the media coverage, and the major banks toy

with them because, even though they don't understand them because they don't want to miss out on an opportunity to make money. So why would ZEN want to become involved in something that can fluctuate thirty percent or more one afternoon?"

Amrit answered quickly and with a newly found energy.

"No one has done it right, yet. When Adam and I set out to create OneWorld, we almost did it for fun. So, imagine what would happen if just a quarter of them used *our* currency. It would make ZEN the largest global finance house. Think small purchases, like cups of coffee, and then think mortgages, all issued and run from our cloud-based servers. Just imagine gold and oil prices being quoted in our currency - we could call it the Libre, because it means free. Nice name don't you think? In no time at all it could make central banks redundant. Merchants would have no choice but to accept it, and we could dictate terms to anyone we did business with. The understanding that whoever controls the means of production, controls the world is a bygone adage, and, thanks to globalization, totally out of date. Only by controlling the means of finance can an entity now exercise that sort of control, and ZEN, through its OneWorld membership, using its independent currency, will be able to do just that. America's two hundred and fifty year old democratic experiment was good while it lasted, but it's seen the best of times, and now, as it can no longer take care of its people, it needs to be helped. And that is why a commercial partnership with someone like ZEN is needed. All the hungry children and the homeless need to be taken care of, and we can have the power not only to influence government, but to direct it."

Anna was taken aback by the strength and vehemence in Amrit's voice.

"But none of us know that world."

"We do not need to. We need to speak to an old friend of mine. An investment banker, turned industry facilitator. He made enough money not to need anyone, so he can be difficult to enlist, but call him and mention my name."

And having expended more energy than was good for him, he asked to be helped to his cabin, as the motion of the yacht setting out to sea made it more difficult for him to maneuver.

Douglas Wilde led a quiet life in a classic stone Corsier-sur-Vevey home, located on the banks of Lake Geneva. He'd led a regulated life; firstly at a minor public school in Dorset, followed by a spell in the Guards, then, working his way to becoming a partner in an investment bank, then a vice-president of technology for a Japanese conglomerate, and, finally, as founder of the exclusive technology investment advice firm of Wilde Enterprises.

Now in his mid-sixties, and a widower for the last five years, he was now retained by a small number of private clients and considered to be one of the world's finest technology investment advisers. Although Anna Eisenberg was not a client or friend, it was not a surprise to him when her caller ID appeared on his private cellphone.

He waited for the caller to speak first.

"Douglas?" he was asked, as if he were an old friend.

"Speaking," came the cautious reply, as spoofed telephone calls, now being as common as spoof email.

"It's Anna Eisenberg, and I would like some advice," came the request.

Though he had expected a little more finesse, even if Anna did head up ZEN Corp, the largest social media and data mining company on the planet. But none came as she

launched into the reason for calling.

"I'd like to ask you about..."

But he cut into her sentence, "Would you mind if, before we talk, I ask you how you have my direct line?"

"From Amrit Kahn."

So far so good, Douglas thought. Amrit had been a good friend, and he'd been saddened by the news of his death.

"And when was that?"

"Three days ago."

There was a long pause.

"Are you still there, Douglas?"

Douglas' tone hardened, "Amrit was killed by American security forces some months ago."

"We thought so, as well, but that was not the case. He's been recovering at Walter Reed."

"You have spoken to him?"

"Yes, he gave me your private number."

Another pause.

"Did he also tell you that my initial consultation fee is fifty thousand Swiss Francs?"

"No, but text me the details of where to send it, and I'll call you back in half an hour."

"This evening's not good for me, and, as you are in California, why don't we say the day after tomorrow at 5 pm, Swiss time, and if you give me an idea of what you would like to discuss, I can spend some time preparing."

This didn't sit well with the CEO of ZEN, who was used to people taking her calls, regardless of the time of day or night, and no one before had the audacity to ask a fee. She

almost put the phone down, but thought better of it. Amrit had better be right about this arrogant Brit being the best at what he did.

"Cyber-currencies, Douglas. I want your reasons why ZEN should not start one?" and Anna disconnected the call.

Anna Eisenberg was not a woman to take an insult lightly, even one that might have been unintended, and, as Douglas addressed the dial tone, to thank her for calling, she had already decided that she was going to visit him in person, just to see what gave this consultant the right to be so arrogant. It would also be a good opportunity to get Amrit out of the country.

It was exactly 1 pm local time when Anna's Gulfstream jet landed at Geneva's Cointrin airport, and, having cleared customs and immigration as a VIP, she was quickly en route to the Sacred Heart Sanitarium with her friend, Srinivasa Ramanujan, Amrit's new name borrowed from the ingenious Indian mathematician. And, having made sure that Amrit's accommodation was suitable, Anna was on schedule to arrive at Douglas's home at the appointed hour of 5 pm.

There was no, 'I hope that you do not think that I'm being highhanded just turning up,' offered to Douglas as he opened the door to his home. Quickly evaluating the man in front of her, Anna immediately understood that the research had been gathered far too quickly and was incomplete. He stood around five ten in his UGGs, cream linen trousers and beige silk shirt, and the whole picture was set off by a tightly pulled back pony tail. He was obviously an extremist and would have been at home in Silicon Valley launching a new cellphone, but he seemed out of place in conservative Switzerland.

She wondered if she'd paid a huckster, but as a consolation, she had managed to get Amrit safely out of the country and into good hands.

"Not at all. I far prefer face-to-face conversation," he answered, as he walked her into the lounge. Continuing, "Please come in. Would you like a *tisane* or something stronger?"

"I would like an espresso if you have one? Perhaps something stronger later, and I hope that your evening is clear, as I do intend to get my money's worth," answered Anna.

Douglas nodded the order for the espressos to his maid, and, used to CEO's and their highly elevated sense of worth, he responded, "So you should, and I shall do my utmost to deliver."

As Anna moved to a sofa, she took a small rectangular box from her bag and placed it on the coffee table.

"This is for your benefit, as well as mine," she said.

Douglas recognized the transmitter and cellphone blocker.

"And I have to admit that I was surprised to be asked to pay for a conversation." The statement was made to see if she could rattle the man who had the audacity to charge her. But then, as she followed Douglas into the lounge, she had recognized a Basquiat, and a de Kooning on the walls and knew that, if he was a huckster, he was a successful one.

Douglas responded to Anna's concern for privacy by reaching for his cellphone, and, in an almost unnecessarily flamboyant gesture, set it to both mute and aircraft mode. He then assured her that he was not in the habit of recording conversations, but that his clients often did. He did however wonder to himself what topics were to be

discussed that warranted the blocking of any recording, or was his guest another of the classic megalomaniacs that Silicon Valley managed to churn out almost annually? The only difference being that this time it was a woman.

As he further evaluated Anna's comment on his fee, which he'd tripled because of her high-handiness over the phone, he responded to her previous jibe.

"Now that does surprise me. Of all people, especially after your testimony in front of Congress, you should know that free lunches do not exist."

Anna ignored his dig.

"So let's get to the point. Tell me why I should not start a cybercurrency?"

As the coffee arrived with some homemade Bütschella, Douglas knew, however the meeting went, he was going to enjoy this consultation. All of his private clients were world-class executives, but no one in the history of the world had enjoyed the unique power of being able to instantly communicate directly to billions of people.

And here she was sitting on his overstuffed Harrod's sofa.

And, what's more, she was asking his advice.

He oped for a direct response.

"Simply because they are dangerous. While the concept of the block chain is fascinating, as a method of fault-proof accounting that can never be lost or corrupted, all the private tokens are destined for failure. The appendage of the word currency is a misnomer. They are nothing but a shell game, with the owner being in possession of something that might be worth something, but the something is undefined, until they decide to off-load it by selling it on, or spending it for tangible goods."

He paused, and took a bite of a roll, to let his words sink in.

"I assume you are asking because you plan to introduce one. If so, how would you support its swings in value? And, when, not if, it went wrong, you would decimate your reputation. How would your members feel when they purchased a cup of coffee for a ZENK, or whatever you plan to call it, that they discover costs one hundred dollars that just a week earlier they'd paid five for?"

"That wouldn't happen if we controlled it, and for arguments sake, let's call it a Libre, by establishing a support reserve, say with gold."

"Douglas allowed himself a smile and spoke, "Now you're describing a currency, not a cybocurrency. And that would be a far more logical idea."

As she considered Douglas' advice, she looked around the room at the man's obvious success. Had she too been caught up in Amrit's enthusiasm? If she were truthful, she wasn't so sure why they were so popular, but then, that was why she'd flown some six thousand miles to speak to the oracle.

"I agree with your description of what has happened to date, so how do we create the Libre?"

Douglas had stopped smiling, as his mind raced ahead to the concept of a new currency issued, not by a nation state or geographic area, or a banking system, but a company devoid of regulation, and, as such, its reach would be global, and have no overhead of coins, notes or physical presence of any kind.

"You do know if you are successful, the government *will* regulate you, and, again, you accept that if you are not successful, you will damage your reputation. Furthermore, you would need to have it accepted by the banking

community. And, why should merchants accept the Libre?"

Anna was ready with an answer, "If we get this right, the government won't be able to regulate us, and the Federal Reserve will have no say in our activities, as we will have too large a footprint. We won't need the banking community, other than initially, the card processors, And I don't see a major problem with bringing in merchants. After all, money, as such, doesn't exist anymore. Everything is simply an electronic transfer. And everyone wants to access our membership."

Now Douglas had difficulty holding back his enthusiasm, "Since the Breton Woods system collapsed in the early nineteen seventies, when it was disclosed that only a third of the gold existed that was supposed to support the dollars in circulation, you taking the ZEN to the gold standard, would be a huge, and I mean huge, publicity coup. And you could up-end the existing financial system by offering the merchants an override commission, say two to two and a half percent of the transaction."

Anna was rethinking Douglas's previous comment about regulation.

"So you really think that the regulators would try to block us issuing a currency?"

"One hundred and ten percent certain. As you said, you have a constituency of billions, and considering the amount of illegal activity currently going thorough the banking system, and the big banks like Deutsche Bank and Wells Fargo, not to mention the existing cybercurrencies, they would be crazy not to try to regulate you. And, remember what effect New York State regulating cybercurrencies had on the early exchanges? They all either ceased trading or were prosecuted."

He paused, to sip his espresso.

"I can see that you have your heart set on a currency. What if there's a way to create a stable financial system that does not look like a financial system, that doesn't need agencies, and best of all, does not need a support reserve?"

"You'll have to explain that."

"Your members purchase Libre 'tokens' that can then be used in your world, or by any company that will accept them. You peg the value of your token to the US dollar, and you have a system that is financial, but does not need regulating. Any currency would be accepted in exchange for Libre or bought back by ZEN at the one-for-one-dollar exchange, and keep the account records on ZEN's servers offshore, away from prying eyes. And, I think that 'Libre' would really be a fitting name."

Anna now knew that the fee she'd paid for this consultation was a bargain. Douglas was not the yes man she'd expected, and he was creative.

"And, I understand that that this is not my place to ask, but why do you want your own payment system? You have a perfectly viable business without one. "

Anna explained how when Adam and Amrit had first set up the ZEN's OneWorld, it was to be altruistic: it was to bring people together to share ideas, not to exploit their lives and their friends for marketing purposes. When Amrit had been fired because he'd become unreliable Adam lost ZEN's moral compass. He sold member's information to anyone who was prepared to pay. She hadn't realized that the government was ZEN's biggest customer, and she felt that the US government overreached itself. And that gave her the idea that if social media had the ability to influence political outcomes, as the government now said it had proven, and there were so many governments around the world that were completely dysfunctional, perhaps she should take ZEN back to its founding principles. And the

first step to utter independence was to build its own financial system.

"And your board agrees to you taking on the world?" Douglas, asked, understanding his act of impertinence.

Anna answered without a pause.

"I am the board. Adam and I held fifty one percent of ZEN's stock. When Adam was convicted of a felony, his shares became mine. I then cleaned house, and we are down to just three directors. Possibly four, if you are interested in joining us?"

"I'm naturally flattered, but let's delve a bit deeper, before I answer. How many of your shares are promised to your foundation and will that eventually water down your control?"

Again, Anna was ready for the question.

"Adam was generous, but also prudent, and he never intended to give up a controlling interest in ZEN. He only promised non-voting shares and even on those there was a condition in the Foundation bequest document that allowed us to cancel any gifting, if the stock dropped below a certain price. And, it did, when the government accused ZEN of aiding and abetting foreign interests, so I terminated the agreement, and we shall, when the time is right, restart our foundation in-house."

Douglas had been studying his visitor's body language to his suggestions. Her demeanor was older than her twenty-seven years, and, obviously used to giving orders, but she also had the ability to listen and that made her unique among his clients, most of which simply asked for their ideas to be endorsed."

"So will help build ZEN into a world influencer for good?"

Douglas was still not convinced.

"I'm flattered that you're interested in bringing me on board, but I have spent over four decades building my reputation, and, perhaps you could tell me about your brush with Washington. I read what made the papers, but that can't be the whole story."

He paused.

"I should also tell you that when I watched your performance in front of the Committee, because performance was what it was, you fluctuated between arrogance and stoicism, and even though the panel may have deserved it, that was disrespectful."

Anna should have been insulted at having to respond, as if it was she being interviewed, but she respected the request and answered in more detail than Douglas had expected.

"It wasn't with lack of respect, it was with contempt. And I should give you the back story. My family have been advisers to the Papal See since the Middle Ages. My brother Piero is still acting in that capacity today, but I decided to take a different path, and, after university in America, I joined ZEN as a researcher, and then I met and became friends with both Adam and Amrit. I married Adam, and this is where the story really begins."

Anna filled in the pieces that someone just listening to the Senate hearing would not have known about. She told how Adam had wrongly fired Amrit just before their IPO, and he'd become a drunk living in the Mission District. How when Amrit, having fought his way back discovered ZEN's government connection, and, just days after he'd told her about what he'd found, Amrit had been shot by a SWAT team. She explained how, feeling in danger, a friend of Amrit's, Roger de Courcey, had helped her escape from

California. They'd made it as far as Barbados, where Dauber caught up with them, and the unrelated suspicious death of a local policeman was laid at their door, complicating matters. When Dauber asked her to accompany him to the Vatican to retrieve 'insurance files' she'd sent her brother, she asked for and received a get-out-of-jail card. Dauber considered the visit to Rome successful, but Roger who was considered to be the only other person who'd had access to the files, died when the embassy car, taking him to his flight out of Rome, burst into flames.

"That sounds like a movie plot," was all Douglas could say, suspecting that there was more to come.

Anna continued, "The ironic thing is that I was unbelievably lucky that Dauber found me, as we were being blackmailed by the local police sergeant - the one who mysteriously died. Dauber was only on the island to interview Lev Oblomov, a jewelry dealer suspected of being a political-influence peddler. He'd arranged to sit next to Lev on the flight from Miami, and, because his cover was as a wealthy tourist, Lev had invited him to lunch.

I'd already accepted Dauber's immunity deal, and it was just as an afterthought that he invited me to join him and Lev for lunch. After all, as I was one of the world's wealthiest women, Lev would see us as two big fish to land and not notice that he was being evaluated by the US government. I agreed, and that's when, as an act of good faith, I asked Dauber, to send an email back home saying that I was, and had been from the start, working with the government. And that 's what I call my-get-out-of-jail-free card.

I found lunch to be entertaining, and found Lev to be as much of a spy as I was."

When Anna had finished venting, Douglas was tempted

to tell her that she actually was a spy, but thought better of it.

Douglas was surprised and spoke, "Now that truly is ironic. I have purchased a number of items from Lev's LobbyShop over the years, and have only found him to be an honest broker. He once told me that, even though most of his clients were in America, he never wanted to live there, because the government finds everyone suspicious, and, when it comes to the law, they're both judge and jury. Anyway, all that to one side, you ended up running ZEN, because Adam going to jail meant that you controlled his shares?"

"Exactly, and I've cut ties with the US government, rebuilt ZEN's reputation and over doubled its membership."

Anna was obviously proud of what she'd achieved, but Douglas still seemed concerned.

"You do realize that you have a target on your back? And, being the natural suspect, your freeing Amrit has only made the target larger."

"Of course," Anna said, as a matter of fact, continuing, "And that's why ZEN has to compete with the government, and not just the US government, but with all governments. I have the unheard of membership of billions in ZEN's OneWorld club. Can you imagine the power that could be unleashed on any given topic?"

Douglas wasn't sure if this twenty-something woman in front of him was crazy or crazy smart, so he just listened.

"Think of the social issues that we could correct? Think of the decent people that we could have elected? The policies that we could change? From the small annoying issues, like roads that don't break up whenever it rains, because they are made of recycled tires, to international

catastrophes, such as famine relief, or the removal of foreign dictators."

Anna read the frown playing across her audience's face.

"All through the ballot box, all through democratic means, of course, ZEN will create the online voting system that will incorporate instant referenda. The peoples of the world will finally get the voice that they have been waiting for since they left the cave and first made fire. Politicians will become simply the managers of the wishes of the people and not their masters."

"So you would like to get rid of anyone who disagrees with you?"

"No, *that* disagrees with the people. The actual people. After all, aren't our politicians always quoting 'what the people think,' or 'what the people want.' Well I believe that I can have the people really speak for themselves."

Douglas just sat quietly, letting the ideas wash over him, until Anna again broke the silence.

"Now, how about that drink?"

And the rest of the evening was spent swapping war stories of how to survive in, and with, the world of technology, and how each one had reached their privileged positions.

Douglas told of how he'd dealt with the dishonest and the unscrupulous most of his commercial career, which after his wife died, he could deal with no longer, and so he'd semi-retired and just kept a couple of low impact clients. Anna wished for a world where cellphones were sold that did not damage the brains of the young, and Douglas saw a world where drones delivered medical supplies and not pizza. It amused Anna to hear that Douglas had purchased his artwork early on and for relative pennies, and that her fifty thousand Swiss Francs

was earmarked to pay for a new roof.

As evening came, and it was time for his guest to leave, Douglas had not fully decided if he would be part of the most ambitious program that the world had ever seen, and Anna did not push him to say. Douglas called for a taxi to take Anna to the Trois Couronnes, and the two arranged to visit Amrit the next morning.

Douglas had to admit, as he closed the door, that he was intrigued by the offer to be part of ZEN. He had worked before for self-proclaimed meritocratic elite, but none who'd wanted to save the world. Except, as it generally transpired, for themselves.

By the time that Anna reached the hotel, she'd parsed the evening's conversations and knew that Douglas was not only who she needed to run the project, but that he was fully on board.

### Chapter III

#### **Who's Afraid of The Drunken Sailor?**

As Richard Dauber recalled the way that he'd tried to muscle Amrit into turning on Anna, the regret he felt was almost to the point of schizophrenia. There was a time when he could read body language, like it was an open book; not just the involuntary eye movements, or twitches, or inflections in the voice, but all three simultaneously. But now having misread Anna Eisenberg's naivety and innocence and alienating Amrit ,to the point where neither could trust each other again, he was truly on his back foot.

Now his only option was to let Amrit just lay there isolated and lonely and think about his decision not to cooperate. After all, he was not going anywhere, and, meanwhile, there were other projects that needed his attention. ZEN, having failed to renew their contracts with Washington had created gaping holes in the country's security, and his department's immediate task was to establish a section to recreate the systems in-house. And, he had a genuine fear that he had taken on a monumental task that was simply not capable of being achieved.

ZEN's initial appointment had been before his time with the agency, and he was astounded at the breadth and depth of the system that they'd come up with. And, the integration was all but perfect; FISA requests and additions, to the non-public do-not-fly list, were automatically triggered by scanning text and email messages, with warrants automatically approved by return email. They later added DNA and fingerprint matches, followed by individuals photographed at a suspect location, then suspect individuals at any location. The same went for anyone seen with 'persons on interest.'

The system worked more or less flawlessly, until he'd been instructed by the president to order ZEN to implement VALHALLA, at which point they just took back their marbles.

As ZEN disengaged, Anna claimed, and a court agreed, that everything, but everything, regardless if purchased with government grants, or not, was the company's proprietary information. Anna refused all requests for help with technical assistance, system blueprints, or anything remotely useful that would have rendered Homeland Security's task easier.

Dauber and his people would have to not only recreate the wheel, but create it while the vehicle was in motion.

And potentially worse events were to follow.

When the signal came through that Amrit Kahn, terrorist and co-founder of ZEN, had been abducted from custody, the news made Colonel Dauber's day. His immediate thought was, if this could be proven to be the work of Anna, then he has her. He then would expect her to do serious time, and the next CEO of ZEN would be convinced to reinstate the previous security contracts, under threat of their company being broken up for the 'good of the country.'

This was the opportunity that he'd been waiting for.

The colonel called his teams together for their first real-time investigation. And it would also be a test of how he'd relate to the societal renegades and high school dropouts that the agency had hired to patch the holes in their basic surveillance system at the Las Vegas DefCon hackers conference.

As the meeting convened, the colonel felt uneasy, as he faced the monolithic mass. Used to addressing a room of men in ties and short-sleeved shirts, this motley group in their t-shirts and backward-facing baseball caps, were disquieting from the moment he'd opened the meeting. It didn't get any more comforting as all the system architects, as well as some of the grunts of the country's new surveillance services, proceeded to unpack what they knew and what their systems had picked up.

They noisily discussed who had access to the hospital's facility's network, wiring and building plans, but no one had obtained a definitive list.

The adjacent street cams and local airport footage was requested, but these had been hacked to static by whoever had organized the escape.

The nurse's background was not available, and it was

not known if she'd gone on with Amrit.

There was literally nothing to go on.

So where to start?

And this is when the lack of the wheel illustrated just how useful ZEN had been.

The more distant street cams would have to be manually analyzed, up to a fifty-mile radius, and, if necessary up to a hundred miles, of the hospital, though the chances were that the perpetrators hacked these also. Then, if anything could be gleaned from the footage, a list of possible suspects would be drawn up, their GPS phone records assessed and their movements plotted.

An engineer in a t-shirt that displayed a sexually impossible message, asked why Amrit had not been chipped while he was under arrest, and the room went quiet.

Another suggested that the ambulance movements be plotted.

A third asked why ZEN could not be forced to assist with the search on the grounds that their system could be co-opted on national security reasons.

No answer was forthcoming, until a boy with pink hair volunteered, "Remember when that smart phone maker refused to help us break into the terrorist's phone. They delayed for weeks, and we don't have weeks."

The colonel, distraught that someone in the room had asked the obvious question, after a hesitation, felt the impulse to respond as to why they could not force ZEN to help.

"Because," he paused, "I suspect that ZEN are the people that we are looking for, because it is most likely that they freed Amrit Kahn."

"So, let's get this right," came back the engineer who'd first suggested that ZEN be enlisted. "Not only are ZEN's engineers no longer helping the government, so tracking has to be redeveloped, but the OneWorld profile that could help the police in everything from traffic stops to who visited the hospital, are the same systems that helped Amrit escape."

"Possibly?" responded the colonel, who could not openly show he shared the frustration that had built in the room.

Uncomfortable questions followed, and the colonel answered in as short a form as he could.

"Does the government own the hardware?"

"Only under license.

"The software?"

"Also under license."

"So cancel ZEN's access to the sidewalks and roads where the equipment is installed and then cover them, until they agree to help. " The suggestion came from what looked like a homeless man.

"Apart from the fact that government departments aren't supposed to vandalize private property, they have a two-hundred-fifty year service-access lease on the locations"

A voice from the back of the room that had been silently observing, spoke.

"So let's get *this* right. As in the late seventies, when IBM built Microsoft and lost control of one of what became a trillion dollar company, because it failed to tie up the rights to the PC's operating system, the US government failed to secure any, yes any, proprietary rights, so it is having to compete against the system it not only paid for, but propagated.

She paused in a manner that showed complete incredulity,

"*And*, the system in question ran the nation's security?"

"In essence," responded a deflated Dauber.

"Do we have schematics and copies of the software?"

"Yes. of course. We're not that naive. We have most of everything in escrow in case ZEN failed and stopped trading."

"So, find a way to break the contract, or break ZEN and reverse engineer the algorithms and be done with it," she responded.

"It's not that easy Maria," the colonel responded, to the girl, who everyone in the room, other than the colonel, knew as MissyZ.

MissyZ was readying to continue her attack when the room was silenced by a hacker who'd been steadily working while the chaos reigned.

"We found out that all the ambulance trips were all accounted for except one, and that was traced to a local airport."

The hunt was on.

It was discovered that there were only two flights that afternoon from College Park, and the chartered Piper Cub to Reagan International seemed too much of a gift, but that's exactly the reason behind splitting the party so early; Annaya being the rabbit, while Amrit was their real prey.

Searching the hospital's HR data files, agents discovered that Annaya's profile, including her photograph and immigration documents, had been wiped, so there was only Amrit's photograph to show the gate agents at Ronald Reagan International; one of the nation's busiest airports.

Assessing the situation, or lack of one so far, and the antagonism towards ZEN that his team now shared with Dauber, the group turned to why would the CEO of ZEN be involved with the freeing of Amrit. She must know that he is the country's most wanted man and could no longer be of any use to the company.

At the end of the highly animated discussion, nothing was decided, and it would be some days before a breakthrough came.

The hospital's inventory department reported the RFID chip on the wheelchair was still active and had been traced to Aquia Creek in Virginia, but it was too late to be of any real value.

As the colonel dismissed the group, he had all but lost his enthusiasm for the chase. He was seriously considering employing the 'Alexander the Great's Gordian Knot' solution of breaking ZEN that Maria had suggested. After all why should a corporation have such power? Had *he* negotiated the contracts, he'd have tied the ownership of the technology down. Sure the company would naturally benefit, but the American people would be both in control and be the ultimate beneficiaries. What would be wrong in looking over the ZEN agreement again, as surely they'd have broken one clause that could be used to pry the system away from them, or at the every least force a sharing of it?

He may have given their CEO a pass, but not the company itself?

Hadn't Adam committed some heinous corporate act when he'd called Amrit in as a terrorist?

How likely was it that ZEN's attorneys would have been able to make the agreement so watertight, that it could not

be broken. After all, at the time, ZEN had been a start-up and the government must have had better, sharper attorneys. Before he'd joined the department, his experience had been purely military, and, although he'd seen gross over payment of supplies, he'd never seen any ownership questioned.

Whatever it was that had made ZEN so special, had exposed a weakness in Homeland Security that was going to be hard to fix, and it was reasonable to assume that his letting Anna off the hook those months ago was to make his job harder. As a foreign national, *had* she been found liable for distributing the VALHALLA papers, she *would* have been jailed and then deported to her native Italy. Adam was already in prison for his part in Amrit's shooting, and that would have left their agency man, Don Mckesson, in the driving seat. Don could have revised the contract, and Homeland Security would not be in the mess that they were in now.

So does he ask the GAO to pull the contract out of the drawer and find clauses that will break ZEN's hold.? Could they actually find a way to restrict ZEN's access to roadways and sidewalks, or subpoena the escrow copies of everything ZEN built in the interest of national security? None of these acts would be in time to trace Amrit, but it would be a game changer for the future, as well as, save the department years of man hours and hundreds of millions of dollars.

The downside, of course, would be the push-back would be fast and furious, as soon as, ZEN got wind of anything untoward, they would start acting like drunken sailors, throwing millions of dollars into the pockets of politicians and their committees.

The Homeland Security chief had long thought that the safety of the American people was more in danger from

lobbyists than just about anything else other than nuclear war. He'd sat in committee meetings where huge slices of freedoms were traded for votes. He'd watched the FCC dismantle the neutrality of the Internet to the companies that had demanded that they could add faster lanes and slower lanes; where phone companies bought mergers, but the one that he found most egregious was, when overnight, over-the-air television signals were changed to a digital format that forced every American to purchase a digital converter box. That taught him that corporations could not be told 'no.'

And he knew just how many members of Congress did not find their way, into 'friendly' corporations after their terms had ended.

He'd long thought that, when it came to important societal changes, referenda was a good way to take the pulse of the voter, that was, until he saw what happened in the UK, with their 2016 BREXIT referendum that voted to remove the island from the European Union. The world had watched as the UK politicians stalled for years by playing politics, showing him that, when push came to shove, the people had absolutely zero control, because neither the UK nor the European politicians wanted the break. In an unusual show of naked force, the corporations, or possibly a billionaires club had flexed their muscles to defeat the democratic vote in the world's oldest democracy.

But, in spite of all this, the gentleman soldier, turned protector of the people, would again take on ZEN.

Chapter IV  
**CALIFORNIA 20/20**

Amrit Kahn woke to the rustle of the crisp linen uniform of the nurse that was standing over him.

"Good morning Dr. Ramanujan, I hope you slept well after your long flight."

Groggy from a narcotic-induced sleep, it took Amrit a moment to adjust to his new identity, to recall the previous day's journey and from his American incarceration.

Looking around the room at his surroundings and then at his nurse, he responded, "Thank you, I slept extremely well."

His words were returned with a smile.

Although still a little groggy, his immediate assessment of the nurse was that she was in her early thirties, and from her accent she was not Swiss. She seemed cheerful, and her auburn hair tied back in a bun under a starched cap completed her perfectly arranged appearance. Her name tag read Magda, which was confirmed by a typed notice that sat upright on his bedside table. Thankfully, Amrit thought, she did not engage in small talk, but simply pointed out the call button on the bedside table, should he need anything, then she drew back the curtains and excused herself from the room.

Amrit had not expected to have escaped from America so soon, if at all. And he greatly admired Anna's choice of a hideout that included antique French furniture and a picture window overlooking a lake. She'd pulled off quite a miracle, but then, recent events had raised his level of cynicism to wonder if the powers that be might have wanted him rescued, so they would not have to deal with him. After all, according to the news reports, he was a dead man, and dead

men can do no harm.

How wrong could they be, he thought, as he slipped back into a twilight sleep.

When Magda returned some hours later to check on Amrit, he was smiling at piece in the that morning's *International Herald Tribune's* 'OVERHEARD' column.

## **CALIFORNIA 20/20**

### A New Vision For A New Decade

A source familiar with Sacramento has told us that the governor is preparing a bill to increase taxes to fund free health, state-of-the-art housing and entertainment services to the state's homeless, the unemployed and the undocumented immigrants. The governor is quoted as saying, 'How could a state with three trillion-dollar companies and hundreds of billionaires not support this initiative?'

"I also saw that article, and it sounded strangely familiar," Magda volunteered as she arranged fresh flowers on his bedside table, continuing, "Last year there was a gathering of international businessmen in town. One of them suffered a mild heart attack, and he was brought here for treatment. His name was an obvious alias, though I do not remember it, as were those who visited him, and no one was allowed on this floor without special permission. A private nurse was flown in from somewhere, and that seldom happens. Anyway, his alarm was triggered the second day he was here, and, as his own nurse was nowhere to be found, I took the decision to go to his room.

He seemed not to be in danger, just flustered and disoriented, so I sat and chatted with him for a while. He asked me, what I liked most about living in a progressive socialist country? When he saw that I found the question amusing, he made a number of oblique references to the Kennedy brothers and Cuba; references that I knew to be far in the past, suggesting to me that he had a break with reality.

Then, when he realized that I did understand what he was talking about, he reached into his briefcase and took a well-worn document out of a folder.

'THIS, this is what I'm talking about, and he all but pushed a document at me.

*The Revised Constitution of the United States of America  
Life, Liberty and Pursuit of Happiness,*

It made for such bizarre reading, I assumed that he was a movie producer, so I sat for a few minutes and read it just to be polite. It had the basic premise that robot workers and high birth rates would call for society to be deconstructed and then reconstructed along strict guidelines according to usefulness.

It outlined the two-generation gestation period, with the initial step of allowing the education system to devolve, into those who wished to learn and those who did not, or would not. This allowed society to naturally stream itself over time, with only the naturally intelligent rising. Social challenges would also be introduced to stream people, with food and drinks made to be unhealthy and addictive, again allowing the intelligent to stream themselves into healthier patterns. Previously considered dangerous drugs would be legalized; first marijuana, then mushrooms and then finally heroin, again sorting the strong from the weak. Then, as robots began to dominate the workplace, as they'd have been developing through the decades, unemployment and

homelessness would rise, and millions of units of totally free social housing would have been slowly commissioned to house those incapable of contributing to society. The wealthy would be highly taxed, as would the residual workforce, for the benefit of those unemployed. The robots would produce goods for next to nothing, which would maintain the albeit, reduced consumer society. Leisure and the pursuit of happiness would be the order of the day."

Amrit, now smiling, found it difficult to contain his amusement, "But where was the support for this insane proposal?"

"No names were mentioned, but California had been chosen as the pilot location," Magda replied, and she continued, "He told me that this was seen as the only way to give the people that were sensible, but still had nothing to offer society, the chance to enjoy life. The free corporate-funded social housing would be more economic than companies employing people that were not needed, and the state would no longer need to pay commercial landlords. And free access to drugs would decimate the illegal drug business and overall the State would be happier."

"So where's the catch and how is all this to be paid for?" asked Amrit, intrigued by this bizarre variation of government.

"No catch. The state was to purchase what the people needed, with the taxes that the companies paid, and there would be enough income for free services and even a stipend to live on. As the technology developed, the corporations were to monitor the behavior of those being taken care of, almost wards of the state, and constant surveys would be carried out to help improve their lives and the products they used. The idea was to maintain a stable consumer market, to validate and maintain profitable production.

"And they thought that the people would be free to pursue

happiness," Amrit said with sarcasm.

"Exactly. Although to me it sounded worse than the old Soviet Union, as I would have thought that the reality would more likely be that those with little drive, and even less education, would spend most of their time in their apartments drinking and watching television."

Amrit thought for a moment.

"So it's Edward Bernays' hyper-consumerism taken to its logical conclusion: produce to consume, to consume to produce?"

"Who?" Asked Magda.

Amrit smiled as he went into teaching mode.

"Bernays was a nephew of Sigmund Freud, the psychologist, and he was considered the father of consumerism. He originated the concept of people wanting, not needing, to create a stronger economy. You should read up on him, as he explains that for a manufacturing society to exist it needs consumers, as well as, producers. And the more the society produces, the more the consumers are needed; add in credit cards, like the banks did in 1950 and a huge portion of society becomes hamsters on wheels. And, with electronic banking, people never see cash anymore, so they get used to carrying debt."

Magda wasn't sure that the hamster analogy was accurate and surprised Amrit with her comeback.

"From what I've read online, that man's group hasn't been the only one with ideas on how to manipulate the future, because there's a conspiracy website that predicts that California, because of massive unemployment and uncontrolled immigration, is to become America's first socialist state.

Amrit was taken aback by the way this provincial thirty-

something nurse calmly, and in perfect English, expressed what in a way, it all made perfect sense. It was the logical extension of California blindly just benefiting the few. His head was bursting, and he wasn't sure how much more he could listen to, when he was saved by a knock on the door that preceded Anna and Douglas bearing flowers and chocolates.

Magda knew to leave, but she left with the words, "I know that Californian politicians are crazy, but this is extreme, even for them. Thank God Switzerland is so balanced."

"What was all that about?" asked Anna.

"Thank God you're here," Amrit replied, also invoking of the mighty one. "I have just had the craziest conversation with my nurse. It seems that back in the 60's, maniacal businessmen and politicians wanted to use California as a massive petrie dish, to install a socialist paradise. But what really disturbed me was having that conversation having just read this. And he pointed down at 'CALIFORNIA 20/20.'"

Douglas laughed, "That's some welcome, Amrit," and Anna added, "It's good to see that you're not only alive, but as opinionated as ever. You had everyone worried."

But Amrit was not laughing, and he all but repeated Magda's performance, ending with, "She didn't know I was one of those crazy Californians - if only a transplant. But from the conversation, and what I just read about CALIFORNIA 20/20, I really think we've reached the next level of Man; *Homus Insignificus*."

Anna looked unnerved by Amrit's comments and even more so by the fear that he was expressing. Had the head wound changed his personality, she wondered. Was he to be of any use to ZEN if he'd lost his sense of reality?

"Well, started Douglas, who took a different, more balanced reproach to Amrit's anxiety. "I would like to think

that society has developed organically, and not been instigated. But..."

Amrit cut into Douglas' comment .

"So, we can put down to coincidence: the FDA allowing known poisons to be sprayed on crops; the carcinogenic substitutes for sugar; the crimes that seem to originate or hide in California's sanctuary cities; the extensive section-eight housing projects and mandatory low income housing development rules; pot-holed roads and crumbling infrastructure and the increase in robotics?"

As Anna regained her equilibrium, she took up Amrit's side. "I think that it's possible that the Democrats in California have a plan to change society, Douglas. But I've seen nothing online about CALIFORNIA 20/20, but the IHT often gets stories first, because everyone else is either president-bashing or reading about the Kardashians, so we might need to look closely at what it's aims are. But really, who in their right mind can see California as a socialist state? It's the technology engine of the world. It feeds nations, it's the world's number two tourist destination, and you see all this going socialist? If this crazy nurse and an even crazier patient are right, it would kill the goose that consistently lays the golden eggs."

Once again Douglas, ever the pragmatist, was not completely convinced this crazy plan had ever existed, except in someone's imagination, and even less convinced that it had lived on to become CALIFORNIA 20/20. He very much doubted that a plan of this magnitude could have been in the works long enough to be even partially implemented, without their being some leaks.

"What, if we look at this from the other end of the telescope. What if their proposed actions *do* come from a good place? What if, now that we have all this technology, California's current plans are simply to make them a leader

in their people's health and welfare? After all, solar power for all, social housing for the hundreds of thousands of homeless, taking care of those who've become unemployed through mechanization are not all bad ideas, and sanctuary cities do also protect the innocent who are here by accident and not just gang members."

Anna looked appalled, "Here speaks a man who lives in a small Swiss palace, full of fabulous antiques and art. Have you any idea what psychological damage would take place to those 'wards of the comfort state' as you obviously regard them, if society gives them a free ride?"

"Douglas felt insulted and it showed in his tone.

"Now listen Anna, I'm thinking about what will become an unstoppable tide of millions of unemployed whose only hope *will* be to become wards-of-state, as you call them. Some remedy will have to be found, as their numbers will eventually bring the state and then the whole country down. And, if its going to take controlled socialism, then isn't that better than the complete breakdown of society?"

Anna had no more to say, and Amrit who preferred to hear both sides of a discussion, before further adding his thoughts, now joined in.

"Perhaps we *are* looking this all wrong. What if we, ZEN, that is, instead of viewing this from outside, assists in the program? We could support California by installing our tracking and analysis software into new buildings, and refitting it into old housing, as well as, interfacing with the relevant government departments. And this is where it could get interesting. What if we use this as the opportunity to launch the libre by making it the sole transaction currency?"

Douglas knew instantly that Amrit's logical mind would go to the heart of the matter, so they just waited for him to continue.

"We insist, as a condition of the work, that we use our internal currency to ring-fence off the transactions for analysis."

"Why should they agree," asked Anna, and the question was answered by Douglas.

"My guess is the governor has, for his own reasons, been overly-premature in his announcement. Not only would ZEN's lobbyists, and I assume that you still employ the best, have been in the know already and yet ZEN has not been approached. The governor must know that ZEN is the only company capable of handling the advanced tracking and communication technologies needed in such an all encompassing project."

Anna's frown turned to a knowing smile, as she turned in her chair to address Douglas.

"Now I know that you're both crazy. You are going to have to walk me through this."

But even without a detailed plan, something told her that they were right. Adam had taught her that only the crazy change the world. And, if they were right, not only would the project launch the currency, but develop software that could be employed nationally and then globally, and, as authors, they would maintain the project's social welfare values. Could this really be the project to end all projects, she wondered; the project to help the world regain some sanity? And, ironically, if it did, she'd be using many of the systems developed and paid for by the US taxpayer to spy on themselves.

But Anna also knew that ZEN would have to find extra revenue from somewhere, if they were to guide the project and not just be general contractors.

Douglas brought the conversation to a close, suggesting that the president himself might encourage California to go

ahead, if ZEN's contribution to the project reduced the government's subsidies to the too-often rebellious state.

Anna's flight was ready for her return to California to start preparing for the challenge, and Douglas had a appointment with Geneva's Mayor who, he'd often given financial advice to, in exchange for one of the best lunches in a town.

As his friends left, Amrit was left to consider not if, but how, ZEN could drive such a social experiment. After all, he thought, wasn't he best placed out of the three to actually have an understanding of what was needed. Anna came from an influential Italian family, who, she'd mentioned often, so she was unlikely to know what it was like to go hungry, and Douglas, well Douglas, didn't exactly give the impression that he'd ever stood hungry and penniless outside a bakery, hungrily feasting on the smell of fresh bread.

Amrit had known both sides of the street, and, as he lay there, comfortable in his Swiss confinement, the anger welled up in him. He recalled the times that he'd traded self-decency for a drink, and it was little comfort that he'd had the strength to rescue himself.

He'd known limousines and banquets, and he'd known urine-soaked alleyways and empty pockets. He'd known five-star hotels and he'd known bed bugs. Thanks to his partner at ZEN who'd engineered his firing, his trip from the boardroom to the gutter had been as rapid as it had been complete. And when the INS questioned his status, as he was no longer employed, and his wife, who he seldom saw because of the crazy hours that he'd worked, called it a day and left him. He understood how powerless Mrs. Banerjee must have felt when she opened the Notice to Quit, as the city block that housed her corner store was to become a high rise for the techno-wealthy. Her part of San Francisco, the part that no one wanted until five years ago, was now where the software programmers, the hardware gurus and the

marketing professionals that kept designing, building and selling a better mousetrap wanted to live.

Now, it was time to make a better world.

Before, when he'd traveled to ZEN's London, or their Hangzhou office in China, he'd not appreciated that lives had been uprooted for the office blocks and the luxury high rise apartments that the tech titans and their wealthy acolytes would need to live in to be close to their work. He'd not cared that one by one, city streets that had for centuries been people's neighborhoods, were simply put to the wrecking ball, not in the name of progress, but so cities could pay for their running expenses and pensions, by selling off the people's land to the domestic and foreign invaders. Sure, public meetings were held to discuss viability and traffic, and how ecologically sound the buildings needed to be, and what to do with the displaced, should the plans, which had already been agreed in a smoke-filled room, go ahead. But no concern was ever given to the lives of the uprooted, whose generations had walked the street and alleys and shopped in the crowded markets. As a salve, a small public park, or the saving of a group of trees, or a barn owl nesting place would be added to the development plans, and then everyone would smile at the benevolence shown to the community, as the gavel would come down and peoples' homes would follow.

Amrit knew that the dust of the demolished homes was on his hands more than most. After all, hadn't he, with Adam, created the world's largest and most influential technology corporation. Hadn't ZEN played its part in the destructive creation of offices and residences that had been welcomed, with tax and other incentives, by cities across the planet.

But it was thanks to his forced sojourn in San Francisco's Mission District that he now had a first hand taste of what

*his* people did, and, if he was to be able to keep his promise to his friend and savior Mrs. Banerjee, this opportunity would come from his involvement with CALIFORNIA 20/20.

CALIFORNIA 20/20 would strike a blow for the forgotten, for the dirty and the confused who, from morning to night, clutched their paper bags, sat on the sidewalk, or leaned against walls. He would fight for the disheveled and bleary eyed street-corner prostitutes that looked like they'd been brought from Central Casting for a 70's Blaxploitation Film. And he would teach a lesson to the self-righteous, those *normal* people, who would be less embarrassed not to have to look at what society had begot, as they drove through the underbelly of the wealthiest city in the world's third largest economy.

But he would have to guide Anna, who wanted, in her way, to help the world, as well as her king maker, Douglas, to give California back to the people.

But with it in place, he would have access to Douglas' finesse and Anna's wealth, and that would make him unstoppable.

Drained and exhausted, by the conversation, Amrit drifted off again remembering when he left his only friend and employer, to return to society, he'd promised her that one day he would make amends for the havoc that technology had wreaked on her life. He would rise phoenix-like in honor of Mrs. Banerjee's simple shop that had serviced a population that no one wanted to know.

## Chapter V

### **Cars and Chocolate**

Nine months had passed since Anna Eisenberg had taken the reigns at ZEN. Now, with Amrit back from the dead, and having recruited Douglas, the time was right to begin to fulfill its destiny. And she did not underestimate the inherent dangers in what she was about to do, as should it go wrong, everything that she and Amrit had worked for would be destroyed.

As Anna walked to the podium, she knew that she was doing God's work. Flanked by two large video screens, she introduced, Douglas, from Switzerland and the now-bearded Dr. Ramanujan, the new head of Technology. She paused for a moment to look out at the select staffers that were to bring in the next iteration of ZEN.

Anna had cleaned house when she took control of the house that Adam had built and one hundred percent of her audience were new to their positions. The selection process had been a series of questionnaires, sent out to all forty thousand staff members. The first was very general, asking each employee regardless of position what they thought of such things as the canteen food, parking, recreational activities and work hours.

A second questionnaire, elicited, general responses on organized religion, political party affiliation and other highly intrusive issues, which were all multi-choice answers and probably illegal.

The third and final email, its circulation, having been reduced by some ninety five percent, contained the probing, binary questions that directly addressed Anna's quest for her social Holy Grail.

'Does ZEN owe its OneWorld any obligations? '

'Is advertising the only way that the company can serve its OneWorld members?'

'Does our current political system work?'

'Are you pleased with the way the country is currently run?'

'Should Congress be allowed to make laws that govern social media companies?'

"Would online voting, through a centralized voting system be better than polling stations?'

And, the distilled and qualified list of the email respondents, sitting in front of Anna, were the new department heads ready to shape the future.

Anna tapped the podium to cease the chatter in the room.

"I know that most of you here have never held a managerial position before, and that may be just because your talents have not been previously recognized, but today, in this room, as ZEN's new and permanent sales, marketing, business development, programming and security team, that's a plus."

Anna was right about the nature of the people in front of her. Many had been lonely geeks through high school and few had bothered to go on to university. Some just went through the motions at work for a paycheck and after hours hacked for fun, few did so for profit and only one in the room did so for destruction.

Anna had their attention.

"As you will all be aware, ZEN's business model of surviving on advertising alone has changed. We had become pernicious, spreading like a worm through society,

targeting and exploiting narcissists, seldom delivering anything of value and simply trawling for cash, for ourselves and our investors."

She paused.

"It was evil."

She paused again, this time for comments, but none came.

Had she lost the room, or they were waiting for more?

"I would now like ZEN to be run by those of you who believe that the Great American Dream has not only run its course, but that the nations around the world that are attempting to emulate this phenomenon will have even less success in doing so, as it was simply a dream."

The room quietly accepted what, to those not within the citadel, would have sounded like a call to revolution, so Anna continued.

"WE have the ability to directly communicate with billions of people across the globe, but all we have been interested in, to date, is to increase our stock price by betraying their trust; selling their personal data and that of their friends and relatives, to advertisers."

Those in front of her would not have understood ZEN's previous government connections, so she left that part of history out.

"Now this *was* a very viable business model, but I have decided to stop this practice."

There were still no comments.

"It's probable that not that high a percentage of OneWorld members even cared about what we were doing. And those who did, will quickly forget, as long as they can continue to post birthday party and wedding photos. But,

in these times of financial and social turmoil, would we have been morally right to have continued simply exploiting their faith in us?"

She paused to let the question sink in, and ,realizing that she might be rambling, went to the point of the meeting.

"So, NOW this is why you are all here. We need a way to go forward in a way that would both be socially conscious and maintain a healthy revenue stream. And, as our revenues topped twenty-five billion dollars so far this year, can anyone suggest a business model that can generate anywhere near the same."

Something told Anna that this was neither the time or the place to introduce CALIFORNIA 20/20 and just hoped that her unorthodox staff would generate something of value to the project.

A girl in her early twenties spoke up, "We've been talking among ourselves since you called the meeting and have guessed where all this is going." Continuing, "And we think that not selling data in the way that it was sold, is the right thing to do, but stopping it completely might not be necessary, if it was more useful data."

"But any data is a breach of privacy," Anna responded.

"Not if we ask permission first."

Then Douglas spoke from six thousand miles away.

"And you are?"

"I'm Nikki. The new head of Business Development."

"So tell us Nikki, how that would work?"

"We become a true social network. A network that looks after its society. It may not be simple to implement, and it may be ahead of its time as an idea, but ZEN already has most of the connections in place to sell data that benefits

society. We have data links to the DMV, the insurance companies and hospitals. So let's say, Tom crashes his car and ends up in the hospital. We tell the insurance company that he was texting while he was driving, so they react by loading his premium for bad behavior and they advise the car manufacturer to install software which disables the ability of drivers to text while their vehicle is in motion. What if...."

"We get the picture," interrupted Anna. "So we'd feed information that was of genuine use, and not just text Tom a coupon for a Big Mac and fries just because he is approaching a McDonald's."

"You don't think that this could be seen as even more invasive?" Asked Douglas.

"Not really. When an area like Yosemite has seen a selfie death, we could text every cellphone in the area to be careful near cliff edges. When someone posts a death in the family, the friends and family of the bereaved could be gently encouraged to communicate with each other."

"That's a possibility, Nikki," replied Anna, having, some years ago, warmed to the concept of a 'true' social network. But her mind had shuddered at the probability of the misuse, should such a system be implemented by the wrong people, and there was no doubt, *unless* ZEN became involved, that that was exactly where the technology was heading.

"Let's you and I speak again later, Nikki. Now does anyone else have a contribution?"

"I believe that my team and I have the ultimate way to let go of advertisers - deliver OneWorld for free and grow exponentially."

Douglas spoke again.

"So tell us? And you are?"

The girl stood and walked to an electronic wall board and started to draw.

"I'm Danielle, and it would better if we showed you. She invited two of her co-workers to join her at the front of the bunker.

She wrote the name of the market-leading computer games company, 'VeritasVR,' in the center of the board and underlined it twice. Moving to the left, leaving a space, she wrote the word ADVENTURE and underlined that twice. She then vertically listed the categories of items that players purchased to enhance their games.

Next to the categories she added dollar signs.

Her co-worker created another column headed SPORTS and also underlined that word twice, and in her column she wrote Boxing, Tennis, Football, Basketball, Track, Wrestling.

Jaime created a third column headed EVENTS and the words Stadium and Home and Other.

"Danielle then turned to Anna and Douglas and asked what they knew of Veritas, and they responded that they knew little, other than it was the world's largest game's company.

Danielle turned back to the board.

"These are their last quarter profits, annualized for the year," and she wrote dollar values by each of the first column categories, drew a line under the values and totaled the column to show just under five billion dollars.

"This is where it becomes more interesting," she explained, as she addressed the GAMES column.

"We estimate that if these categories were sold virtual goods in an environment that allowed real time and gamer-programmed results; that its winners and losers created by

the mass audience taking part in these virtual events..."

She paused,

"...would generate," and she wrote numbers with nine zeros by the sides of each event.

"And, taking into account the creation of virtual game stadiums, 'live' game playing as a sport, these numbers should be possible." And she wrote the final set of numbers on the board.

She then totaled the numbers to show an estimated annual profit of just under forty billion dollars.

The silence could be cut with a knife, until Douglas started to clap.

"How the hell did you get those figures, and I take it that some of these ideas, came from *Veritas'* forward plans?"

Danielle smiled.

"I was Marec Winger's girlfriend. That was until last month, when I came home too early one day and ..... I'll leave it up to you to fill in the blanks. Anyway, the first column of figures are accurate, the next two are our own estimates based on market analysis, and I've just sent you the supporting data." And she tapped into her phone to send the email with the data.

Both Douglas and Anna knew Marec Winger's reputation for business being war. He'd built Virtual from scratch, so his personality pretty much matched Adam's.

"Have any of these ideas been patented? Anna asked.

"I wouldn't think so," Danielle replied. Continuing, "Marec's paranoid when it comes to his ideas and he believes the best way to tell the world what you're doing next is to patent it."

"Douglas asked, "So how do we benefit from knowing

this?"

It was Anna who spoke with the obvious answer.

"We take him over. He was twenty when he started *Veritas*, and, from what I see in the papers about his partying, my guess is that having dominated the industry, for almost a decade, he's become tired of it. Perhaps he wants to move on to start other businesses. Maybe he's thinking of space travel, ocean bed mining or other ways not just to make money, but to have more fun. He's probably also unnerved by the number of CEO's being let go, because they can't keep their hands off their staff. Not that he's one of the worst, but there's a lot of intelligent and beautiful girls in tech these days, and he's not above getting a little too close to some, and he knows that one day its going to explode in his face."

Anna smiled as she thought that Adam may have been a bastard when it came to business, but at least he could keep his hands off *those* particular ZEN assets.

Douglas picked up the conversation.

"If you are serious, then how do you suggest we approach him?"

Danielle was ready for the question.

"He obviously doesn't need money, so I'd suggest with ZEN stock and a platform to feed his need for self-publicity. He'd kill to speak directly to three billion people, so we could offer him the power to speak to OneWorld, as some form of ZEN Director of VentureScape." And then added laughingly, "If that fails, we poach his best staff."

"Send me your analysis Danielle, and you and I will talk again tomorrow," said Anna, who'd just looked at her watch. She knew that, for her, the first fifteen minutes of any meeting were the most productive and that time was up.

She stood to leave.

But the session wasn't quite over, as finally Amrit spoke up.

"I think that we are all overlooking something."

Yes, Dr. Ramanujan. What might that be?" Asked Douglas.

"When we do away with advertising and selling data, it will be a gift to GO Corp, as they already have twice our revenue, and that will make them the only viable advertising platform on the internet. No one will be able to resist a rate hike from them, and we would be responsible for making them even stronger."

"Can that be helped?" Douglas asked, as a follow-up.

"Yes, and this is where it gets interesting. What's the most annoying aspect of GO's search engine?"

"Easy," answered a voice. "It's the fact that it's rigged for advertisers and also their own products. Not to mention that if I click on an image of something I want to see, it will generally take me to a whole page of items that might not even be related, but are sold by the same website. Or, I could be buying a bicycle and the page will tell me that people that bought this bicycle also bought this brand of chocolate."

"Anything else?"

Another volunteered, "If I look at Coach handbags, for the next month or so, I see Coach handbag ads no matter what site I go to."

Anna was ahead as usual.

"So we build a search engine that simply lists responses to queries. No fooling, no advertising and no tracking. Just simple returns to queries based on their relevance?"

"Well, wasn't what the internet was supposed to be? Wasn't it built to be an information system?" answered a serious Amrit.

"Can we do it? Is it possible and how much would it cost?" asked Douglas?

Amrit answered, "Yes, and because we can run it off the cloud, data space and processing power are not an issue, and, the cost, once we can convince the merchants to upload the new clean data files, will be minimal."

"Why should the merchants cooperate?" Asked Douglas hesitantly.

"Because we are ZEN," responded Amrit.

The sounds of approval coming from the room suggested everyone agreed, and Anna herself couldn't hold back a smile, as she thought that she could create a technology that would disrupt one of the internet's largest industries disrupters.

"Add it to the list," Anna said as she made for the door, "And I know that many say this, but I actually mean it. My door is always open and feel free to text and email me night or day if anyone has an idea that they wish to develop. In the meanwhile, I'm now going to leave you with Dr. Ramanujan to discuss how we would roll out what we've just discussed, if we were to go ahead."

As Amrit took control of the meeting, he was fully aware that the bullet that should have rightly killed him had left its mark in more ways than one. He was not as quick as he'd been. Before, he was able to manage many thoughts simultaneously, and now that was simply not the case, and if he was to change the internet, he must rise to the occasion. Especially, as he was now facing questions from some of the industry's brightest people.

Outside the auditorium Anna dialed Douglas.

"Tell me honestly, Douglas, am I about to turn the company into being more clever, but a similarly voracious entity, that I'd despised Adam for?"

"Not at all," responded Douglas, continuing, "Think of what CALIFORNIA 20/20 will add to people's lives by giving them a world within a world that has some value."

Anna countered, "But do you really think that millions of people will be content to do nothing except buy consumer goods and sightseeing in free autonomous cars. Those who don't go insane will eventually revolt. The project will fail and billions of dollars later, we'll be back to square one."

"We won't, the government will. The point is that we could have the future of California in our hands, and, if we do not act, we will always know that we had a chance to morph society in a beneficial way."

Anna was still not convinced.

"You mean reduce millions of people into goggle-wearing cabbages, watching unreal events unfold, because they have been replaced by robots? Would you want that for your children, Douglas?"

"I understand what you are saying, Anna, but the Industrial Revolution did worse to many. Agrarian folk that were happy living off the land ended up in soulless noisy factories. Now, here at ZEN, we have the ability to divert a far worse social catastrophe. We have the ability to add, not detract, from people's lives."

"Your approach is very clinical, Douglas,. These are real people that we area taking about. Not just numbers in a budget."

"You're wrong, Anna. They *are* just numbers, because

that is what the human race has become. If you can't eat, you're allowed to starve. If you're not educated, if you're over-educated, if your parents fought, if they drank too much or did drugs and your world is a terrible, then why not take to a high building with a rifle? Or worse, take a grievance to a primary school and wipe out a couple of classrooms. That's today's world."

Anna thought for a moment.

"You really equate what we want to do with saving civilization?"

"Yes. And yes again. Mankind is in the greatest peril ever. It is in the process of outdoing itself when it comes to making itself redundant. In another decade or so, the streets will be built and maintained by and for robots; food will be delivered by drones, robots or autonomous vans. Some brick-and-mortar stores might exist in specialist areas, but then only for the few that might want to see the actual goods before they buy them. The world that we knew is disappearing fast and will soon be gone. We owe it to the people who will be displaced, because they will need a new reality or a powerful, but beneficial opiate, and we will give them both in one. "

"So, actual skiing, cycling, golfing, surfing, mountain climbing and the rest of the activities that people enjoy will be there only for the useful, employed in society? All others will have the experience come to them in wondrous technicolor through the internet?"

"Pretty much, though the way you put it, sounds rather harsh. And, don't you think that it's that way now, but with advertisements every few minutes? Perhaps you do not live in the areas where food vans already support families, or where children only have one good meal a day and that's only weekdays at school. Ask yourself what's going to happen to the field workers when robots pick crops, like

they already pick product at warehouses?"

Anna was beginning to wonder if she'd made a terrible mistake. Was Douglas, the wealthy banker, channeling Marx? And she wasn't thinking Groucho?

"You don't think that everyone wants a purpose in life? A reason to get up in the morning?"

"I used to, but now I am not so sure. Look around you at what Western society has become. What we intelligentsia have allowed it to morph into; armies of homeless, millions of unemployed and many more unemployable. The Western educational system teaches only those who wish to learn, even America's famed, One Country Under God, has become thousands of pockets of nationalistic immigrants who, refusing to become part of the collective spirit envisaged by their Forefathers, fiercely maintain their own cultures. And, as do many of those who displaced the original natives those centuries ago, I see no way of putting the genie back in the bottle. I am not a fascist and I do not believe in eugenics. I just think that an alternative reality is already needed, for so many, and that we just may be able to provide it. And, if caring people such as us can, then perhaps we could limit the damage that would be intentionally caused by uncaring others."

Anna wasn't convinced that Douglas was morally correct, but she knew how unlikely the world was to turn backwards, and the train of automation and immense joblessness *was* destined to devour society.

"In which case, Douglas, our CALIFORNIA 20/20 trajectory will be funded by what we have heard today."

## Chapter VI

### **The Burghers of Berkeley**

Adam Eisenberg had built the classic modern American company. With its registered office marked only by a simple brass plaque, outside a provincial Irish solicitor's office, and its international tax obligations calculated by the best accountants that money could buy, the whole machine, for that's what it was, kept well oiled by lobbyists and charitable contributions, maintained *the* ultimate global internet powerhouse. In essence, it was a culture of success, with a paucity of morals; a socially bankrupt environment that Anna had started to change the first day that she had become its CEO, and she was to bring those changes to her presentation to the fledgling *ad hoc* steering committee of CALIFORNIA 20/20.

As Anna and Douglas were led through Berkeley's Rodin garden, into the meeting room, even they couldn't help but sense the power of the institution that were to influence. Nevertheless, as they sat in front of what seemed to be an interview panel, which in many ways it was, they were more than prepared for the task. After all, Douglas amused himself by thinking, what could be worse, as they'd just passed Rodin's 'Gates of Hell.'

"Firstly, let me thank you both for coming, Anna, and although both of you know most of us," started the Chair, who happened to be the second-term California governor, "I'd like to introduce you to the some you may not," and he introduced the two Stanford economists, the California heads of HUD and the FDA.

"Now, down to the reason we are all here. Firstly, and I

know that this is unnecessary, but I cannot stress enough that this meeting, and the document that I shared with you all, must never be spoken of outside this room."

He paused to let the statement sink in.

And then he turned to Douglas.

"I see from the correspondence that your overall plan is to eventually address, in round terms, one million Californians. And that is California's approximate seven hundred thousand unemployed and another two hundred thousand or so homeless. And, so I must ask if you are quite convinced that you have the capacity to build and maintain the appropriate software systems?"

Anna spoke first.

"Certainly. And as this is such an amazing project, I thought that I, as CEO, should be present at our initial presentation, but I shall say very little, as Douglas, as most of you know, has the relevant financial and organizational expertise and speaks for ZEN."

And with that Douglas took the stage.

"I'd like to thank the panel for choosing ZEN, even though you may not have done so at this stage, as I believe that not only can ZEN handle this momentous project, but that we can turn it into an earth shattering event that will be adopted not only by the rest of America, but by the world."

The first to speak was the Berkeley economist, who had spent his life studying the work of John Maynard Keynes, the British economist whose ideas fundamentally changed the theory and practice of macroeconomics and the economic policies of governments.

"We are not interested in how you can improve our plan, which, by the way has been decades in gestation, we are simply interested in whether or not you can follow the

brief."

"Let's not be so abrasive, Gerald," requested the governor. "After all, as academics, surely you'd be interested in hearing any advantageous developments that could be added to the plan. That is, your plan. Think Nobel! After all, your involvement in a better plan could well help Berkeley keep its lead against Stanford, as California's top Nobel winners?"

The tenured professor was not prepared to be amiable.

"So tell us. How would you improve on the plan to socially house these unfortunate Californians in the age of robotic jobs, with many many more coming down the pike?"

He looked over his glasses at Anna, "Would you sell their private and personal data to the highest bidder, like you were caught doing before?"

The others in the room were prepared to see ZEN shrink back from this obvious attack from an unexpected source. The governor attacking their cost structure was one one thing, but an economist who was little more than a theoretician, with no real world experience, was quite another.

"Yes, exactly that," answered an enthusiastic and all but cocky Douglas. "You obviously cannot imagine what companies would pay for such real-time data for their trials. And just think of the usefulness of such a system."

"How so? Such as?" The economist was not giving up so easily.

"I can't think of a company that would not pay for such data. And this time it would genuinely be only metadata; split into age and interest tranches, everyone from cars, electronics, games, clothes, TV, movies, food. The list is endless. Just think about the impact that such sampling

could have on health? That is, if the results could be monitored?"

"Surely that is a slip of the tongue. You mean monetized?" sniped the economist. But no one carried up the insult further.

The FDA chief sat up and took notice. To that point, he'd wondered why he'd been invited to a seminar on public housing, and only accepted so he could visit friends in San Francisco on his department's dime..

"And just how would you monitor, say, alcohol or soda intake ?"

"Well, Scott. In simple terms we'd monitor purchases, usage and vital signs for food and drug consumption, or any other usage you'd care to add to an already obvious list."

"How, so?" The professor asked, now in a more reasonable tone. "How would this be achieved without infringing privacy rights?"

Douglas asked the professor for his full name and home address. He tapped the data into his phone, and then asked the professor if he'd bought gas that morning, at the Chevron on College Avenue? Had he bought a chocolate doughnut and an eclair, probably against his doctors orders, as his smart watch suggested that his blood sugar was elevated. He finished with that perhaps the professor was possibly a few pounds overweight."

"But how....?" The professor started to ask, to the amusement of his fellow economist, who had preferred not to ask questions, until the end of the presentation.

"We already have access to your credit card data, and your watch sends your health data to our cloud, and, before you ask, the agreement that you signed electronically, like everyone else, without reading it, gave us access to your

data in case of emergency."

"Emergency?"

Douglas continued, allowing himself some levity, "In case, one morning, you overdose on doughnuts."

The FDA Director picked up the ball at this point. "And you could do this simultaneously for a hundreds of thousands of people by monitoring your subjects' vital signs?"

"We have the technology in place now. It was part of the system that we used to sell data to advertisers. Part of the system was dismantled, by order of Congress, for being too intrusive. But, under CALIFORNIA 20/20, not only could we use this system, but through issuing and insuring that the participants wear smart-watch-like devices, we could tell how individuals react to whatever they inject or take part in."

"How much would this cost us?" Asked Scott.

"It would save both the Federal government and the State money."

"Now you've lost us." The governor answered for everyone

"Let's say California currently pays out around one hundred billion dollars a year in combined unemployment, housing and other benefits. What if ZEN helped reduce that figure by, say, ten percent, or more?"

"You're telling us that ZEN could do that by selling the data collected from these people, to the food and drug companies, to produce better, safer products?"

"Yes, and the same for general goods and supplies also. Let me ask you, what is the largest threat to the people of California, and you can discount earthquakes."

There was silence, so Douglas continued.

"We all know the answer is going to be unemployment, because of robots, but there is an even larger threat coming. Of course, some people can be retrained. But as what? We all know that there will be no real substitution. The vast majority of jobs are at stake, and that includes yours, Professor."

Douglas paused.

"Being both a democracy and a consumer society, we have to produce and consume to survive, let alone progress. But we've dug ourselves into a hole, by both sending jobs overseas and allowing corporations to introduce more and more robotics, which has caused large scale unemployment and millions struggling to make ends meet, by needing to work more than one job. Well, for the system to function efficiently these people should be consumers, but they can't be, because they don't have the money. So how do we enable them to consume again?"

Again, no one spoke.

Douglas continued, "I'll tell you how. We have robots produce goods, and then we give them away to the consumers, that is our struggling socially housed consumers, for their feedback. That way companies stay in business, shareholders are happy, and some people are still employed?"

"You're crazy, responded the room almost in one voice."

"Are we? It's just giving a stipend, but with goods, not cash. The companies won't have to employ people that it doesn't need, and the state can cut down on unemployment payments, as they will not be needed.

"Yes, exactly that. How much would Medicare and Medical save, if the obese were no longer obese; if cancers were stopped, not cured, by identifying the chemicals that

create the problems and no longer allow them in the foods?"

"You are proposing a series of social experiments?" Commented the economist.

"Eugenics?" Was whispered.

"No, not experiments, but the gathering of information by creating a DNA database, but not for the purpose of social cleansing."

There was an amount of uneasy shuffling among the academics. Anna, knowing that DNA collection was the third rail of democracy, took this as the opportunity to seal the deal, before the conversation became bogged down with ethics.

"So," she addressed the panel, "would you be prepared to give us a Letter of Comfort, subject to our submitting our detailed plans?"

"And the plans would include information on how California would save on the benefits we currently pay at the tune of some one billion dollars or more a year?" The governor responded.

"Yes, and how the FDA would benefit from the data collected" confirmed Anna.

"I think that I can answer for California, with a definitive yes!" said the governor, as did Scott, for the FDA.

But the Chairman of HUD, who'd been totally silent during the meeting, now made a statement.

"But there would be penalties if you fell short of your promises."

"That's to be understood. There is, however, one condition," Douglas decided to add, as the mood was so positive, "We will be controlling the project using our own

transactional system to receive and make payments. This is necessary for us to separate participants from our regular activities."

"How would it work?" asked Gerald, the economist.

"It would be a token-based system. And these tokens will be accepted anywhere the participants wish to spend them."

"You would expect retailers to accept your tokens for goods?" Queried the still dubious Gerald.

That question spurred the second economist, who'd been quiet up til then, to speak.

"So you are creating a new currency?"

"Yes, of sorts, but more as an internal accounting mechanism," Douglas replied, "And, the token is to be called the *Libre*."

The governor, who relished the idea of reducing California's massive overhead, and possibly going down in history as the father of modern society, spoke to get ahead of any obvious objections.

"That seems to be an agreement in principle. I thank everyone for coming, and I look forward to an exchange of paperwork over the coming weeks."

When the obligatory handshaking and the polite disengaging conversations stopped, Anna and Douglas found themselves back in the Rodin Garden sitting by the *Burghers of Calais*.

Douglas laughed, "Sitting with this group of bronzes is pretty appropriate. They represent the city leaders meeting, during the siege of their city, and we've just been discussing how to deal with the siege of California by

robots, and it will last a lot longer than their Hundred Years' War."

"I think we have a deal," said Anna, continuing, "The economists might be dubious, but those in the FDA and HUD who have to deal with the real world are scared witless by the chaos that massive unemployment is going to cause. If they think it's fractured by inequality now, ten or twenty more years of the same is going to be cataclysmic, and deep down they know it. They will try anything that will cut costs and ease social tensions, and ZEN is all that is on the horizon."

Douglas thought for a moment.

"I agree, but I felt a frisson of nervousness when a new currency was mentioned. They envisioned cybocurrency, and that's why the governor called the meeting to a close. We need to convince everyone that the *Libre* will not just be another blockchain fiasco. And that's where next week's meeting with the money men comes in."

Douglas was right when it came to reading people's reactions. He'd been doing so for all his working life, and the four decades of experience told him that the governor's concern would be ZEN's inability to successfully negotiate the other side of the deal; the side that would enable ZEN to make a profit, otherwise, the project would simply fall over and trash his already unsteady legacy.

The media did not look kindly on this governor, often suggesting that, under his stewardship, California had become a nightmare state. Complaints about taxes being too high were all too common, and, in reality, many that could, had, and continued to flee, for the more welcoming and better organized states such as Texas and Florida. California, no longer 'the Sunshine State,' now had potholed roads and clogged freeways, with regulations and legislation penalized the entrepreneur, and the legalization

of previously forbidden drugs added treachery to the freeways that were already made dangerous by those on prescription drugs, and those without licenses or insurance. Social housing was an enforced part of any development, regardless of the impact on local communities; sanctuary cities protected members of notoriously vicious gangs, such as MS13, as well as small-time criminals, and services to illegal immigrants continually bankrupted hospitals and added to the State's ballooning expenses. The latest attack on civil liberty was, instead of planning to capture rainwater during the wet years, the governor quietly introduced and rushed through a bill to ration domestic water, to fifty gallons a day per person, and that was after he announced that the drought was officially over.

In short, on any given day, he was either a futurist masquerading as a socialist, or a socialist masquerading as a futurist, and no one could work out which applied that day. The only known, was that he, as the other elected politicians in Sacramento, pandered to the majority immigrant party, as that was where the votes were. And that's what had turned California from being a Red state to Blue.

Of course there were those who loved the governor, but they were mainly those who'd made billions of dollars before he'd arrived and could be magnanimous, if they could make a profit from what he was implementing, and there were the poor and the newly arrived and undocumented, who simply saw him as welcoming, and California infinitely better than where they had come from.

And, with his social budget well passed the hundred billion dollar mark, and having backed himself into a financial cul-de-sac, he need a savior or a miracle. And, for as much as he continually penalized California businesses, with more stringent reporting, regulations and higher

taxes, he needed a business to bail him out.

He needed ZEN.

## Chapter VII

### **In, or Out**

When the design of ZEN's new headquarters was first published, it had been acclaimed as *the* millennium masterpiece by the architectural world, and it was lauded even more so when the building was completed. Emulating a Douglas Adams' *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* Vogon constructor ship, this mile and a quarter circumference steel and glass doughnut could be seen from the space station. The five floors in height provided four million square feet of working space, and a massive central grassy area provided the play space. The architect, in a nod to another great architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, custom designed everything from the door knobs to the toilet seats, to create the right, but certainly not Wright, zeitgeist.

It was massive and it was awe inspiring.

The very size scared all, but the people that worked under its green and privileged roof.

Tucked away in one of the basement areas, ZEN's small auditorium was a brutalist, bunker-like cement construction, with contrasting soft leather padded arm chairs, facing a simple podium. It was swept for listening devices daily, and sensors scanned the visitors before and after their cell phones were deposited at a drop box for collection at the end of the event. And, surprisingly, for the

most networked company in the world, there were no screens in the room.

No one was exempt from the cellphone ban or body scans; politicians and the world's most influential business people acquiesced, or they were not let in.

It had not been an overly difficult process to assemble the country's leading off-and-online retail and finance companies that day. Having passed the three billion membership mark, the online retailers and credit card processors understood that their cooperation could be a make-or-break issue for them. Anna came in the room accompanied by Douglas.

"Thank you all for coming," Anna started, as if it were a birthday party, which in a way it was.

"I'm sure that many of you here know, Douglas."

There were many knowing smiles in the audience.

"But before we start, and I'm sure that everyone is keen to know more about ZEN's new venture, there is the formality of the NDAs that you received, as you handed in your cellphones. As soon as we have those in place we can begin."

As the pages were turned and initialed and finally signed, the joint responsibility of the signer, being for themselves, in addition to their company, was deemed to be atypical and unnecessary, and there was a mild muttering.

And then Douglas spoke.

"How many of us in this room are prepared to endorse, or even understand, cryptocurrencies?"

There was not much of a response, as it seemed as if

there was more to follow, so Douglas asked again.

"How many here would endorse a cryptocurrency if it became mainstream?"

The first comment suggested that it could never happen.

A retailer asked who could trust a currency that could gain or lose fifty percent overnight?

"I doubt whether any of us here, or the merchants that sell through us, could risk the swings in value," said the largest credit card processor.

"Why are you asking?" inquired a partner in one of the Valley's oldest Venture Capital firms. "And please don't tell us that you're going to launch one, and you want us to support you. I know, as everyone here does, that since you took over from Adam, you've made a real go of ZEN, but it would simply not be a good idea."

Anna answered a little coolly, "I wouldn't call adding two billion members making a go of it,' George. And, if you think so little of my leadership, please feel free to leave now and enjoy the refreshments outside."

She continued, "As you will all know from the Senate hearings, Adam almost destroyed ZEN. He let greed and avarice and stupidity lead him into doing a deal with Washington, in exchange for having something to sell to unscrupulous marketing companies. And, at this point, I could ask the bankers and brokers in the room where they were when my testimony caused our share price to drop seventy percent? It was my shaming Washington and then cleaning house of people like the government's Homeland Security spy, not to mention cleaning up our members' doubts, that not only saved, but grew ZEN into the unbeatable pan-global venture that it is today."

She paused.

"So, if anyone else shares George's hesitations, the champagne outside is on ice and the prime rib is ready."

Nobody stirred.

She turned to Douglas.

"Please continue, Douglas. I think your audience is ready."

"You can all relax," he started. "Anna was just getting your juices flowing. We *are* going to roll out a payment method, but it will *not* be a cybercurrency. True, it *might* be a blockchain currency that only exists virtually, so no coins or paper, but it will be pegged to the US Dollar."

The questions came cautiously, as no one was overly enthusiastic to be labeled a dissenter. That way, if they survived this Q&A session, and the venture fell flat, they'd still be part of ZEN's favored nation.

The response to the first question was, "it's to be called the libre."

"Why have your own currency?" asked the finance director of the largest online merchant, who wished he'd done it first.

Another asked, "How do you intend to propagate it?"

"That's where you guys comes in." Replied Douglas.

"Why should we contribute to the founding of your 'libre' or whatever you want to call it?"

"Because we can influence our three billion members. They can come to you door, or we could consider sending them elsewhere."

Reading the eyes of the audience, Anna quickly added, "Just think of the good that we could do with such power." And Anna went on to explain ZEN's involvement in CALIFORNIA 20/20, and how those in the room could

benefit financially by doing good for once. She did not mention how ZEN, once established as a global powerhouse in the financial markets, could influence political leaders and the societal and trade policies that could make the world a far, far better place.

She did not need to.

The Masters of the Universe, who called the shots from Texas, Washington State and Oregon, whose personal jets were lined up at San Jose's Mineta Airport, were deathly silent.

At this point Anna left the room with the words, "I will leave you with Douglas to answer questions on the mechanics of how this will work."

And, as she left, the food started to arrive.

The room relaxed, Anna having left, and taken the school mistress attitude with her, the questions were more forthcoming.

"We have known each other for twenty years, Douglas, and I have some serious reservations," stated the partner from the largest international financiers in the room. "Can this really work?"

"Yes, it can!" Douglas responded emphatically, "The libre is not going to be just another disastrous cybersystem, but a token system that is exchangeable for US Dollars, or any other national currency at the prevailing US dollar exchange rate."

But the question was repeated.

He paused and then continued.

"Because, by being an online token, that will not exist in the physical realm it won't seem like a currency, it will just seem like an internal payment system. Which in reality is exactly what it will be."

Some in the room immediately understood and others looked puzzled.

Douglas continued, "Meaning, just as game companies sell virtual goods, such as a sword or a shield to fight with, we sell real goods, or you do, with virtual money. Your customer will have used libre in exchange for dollars, pounds or the euro, in their transactions."

"Would the libre be covered by FDIC?"

"No. It won't be necessary, as these will be token accounts, not bank accounts, and we will maintain a US dollar reserve that is fifty percent in excess of the published tokens," came Douglas' reply.

"Are you suggesting that the Federal Reserve and the Government will not, and cannot, exercise any oversight?" Asked a retailer that had a market share equal to twice the largest American department store chain.

"None" responded Douglas confidently.

The room was quiet again. No one really wanted to challenge the internet's largest entity.

Then, an almost desperate voice asked, "But really, Douglas. A token? Who's really going to want to use a token to buy anything?"

"It's just a matter of how the libre is to be perceived. And that is why you have been invited today. Do you really think that any currency in the world is anything other *than* a token? How much physical money does anyone in this room see? And if you do, you accept that it's value goes up and down with inflation and against other currencies."

"What about the back office and settlements. How would we get paid?" The director of the smallest credit card transactors asked.

"The same way you do now. You can either keep libre on

your books, as an asset, or cash it for any other currency."

A gratifying cool-headed CEO, one of world's original card processors spoke up, "We already process government EBT and SNAP benefit cards, so we know that the addition of another method of payment is simply a coding issue. And, with no physical cards being issued, the charges being either online, or just phones swiped in bricks and mortar stores, our terminals will not have to be changed. So, I say we look into it further."

"Thank you, Jim," said Douglas, "Finally the voice of reason."

"Not so fast," came the voice of a twenty something online-banker in jeans and t-shirt. "What is our override commission on the Libre? After all, if you are not going to have physical money, you'll need us."

He'd completely missed the danger in his implied threat under the guise of a question. And more than one of those in the room wrote notes to himself to buy ZEN stock. And it was this comment, from the mouth of the naive, overly under-dressed banker, that convinced the doubters that they were far from the only game in town.

He'd just pointed out the elephant in the bunker.

Those fully engaged in the discussion realized that an international token, while initially pegged to the US dollar, living on ZEN's servers and controlled only by ZEN, could, once established, drop the dollar and stand on its own.

It would be the first truly global currency, with an unlimited upside.

In time, if successful, it could make redundant, petrodollars, and reserve currencies and establish itself as the benchmark pricing for everything commercial, from precious metals and commodities to stocks and bonds. In other words, ZEN, could not only control the financial

world, it would *be* the financial world.

The more intrusive and thoughtful questions that flowed over drinks and steaks did so for almost an hour, after which time, everyone in the room, including George, signed a second document, a Letter of Comfort to handle the libre.

## Chapter VIII

### **Short, But Not Sweet**

With their commercial partners having been strong-armed into place, Douglas and Anna had overcome the first major obstacle to deliver to the governor on their offer. The next important group to bring on board was the USDA, and Federal Civil Servants were never gung-ho for anything and especially not change.

A dusting of snow had settled over Washington D.C., and, as a consequence, the city had all but ground to a halt. As Anna and Douglas, in one of the few cars to brave the weather, drove past the White House, the Lincoln Memorial, the Capital Building and the other magnificent structures that caused the Senators and members of Congress to be so removed from their constituents: they were Senators in ancient Rome.

Passing quickly through the security barrier of the imposing stately portico of the Department of Agriculture headquarters, on Maryland Avenue, Douglas and Anna were whisked up to the 10th floor meeting room where anxious staff, concerned that they were to be made redundant in

droves, were ready to cause as much disruption as possible.

As the Senior Department Head had outlined, and, strictly on a need-to-know basis, select aspects of the far-reaching plan to his supervisors, all were stunned by the social experiment that was suggested. Then, as the penny dropped, and it became obvious that the plan was going ahead regardless of any of their objections, it was decided that their only salvation lay in querying the implementation of the token system.

After the preliminary welcome and the room settled down, the first question asked was squarely aimed at the crux of their issue. "Why can't we use the current system to pay people? Everyone's data will already be on file."

"Because," started Anna, somewhat surprised, as she'd expected the benefits to the people to be the major issue, "the data collection will be far more extensive and will also have to interface with ZEN's main databases and its proprietary information."

"So, what other data will be collected?" a suspicious voice asked.

"Medical needs and consumer tastes," responded Anna

"So this is not really *our* issue," spoke a man whose annoyance clearly showed in his voice. "Have you even bothered to find out what the USDA does? We look after the health of the American farmers, forests and more importantly the American people. We were founded in 1862 by Abraham Lincoln, and we have well over one-hundred thousand employees and an annual budget of over one-hundred and fifty billion. Every few years some clever activist Senator or president attempts to weaken us by cutting our budget for the poor and needy. Most think that the poor should get off their butts and work for their benefits and that many people take unnecessarily from the USDA's

food program. Of course, it's the children who suffer, as a few million have their last meal at school on Friday and their next at lunchtime Monday. Now, you people, with the most audacious plan to date, *you* want to take the most populous state in the nation away from our control for some pie-in-the-sky research project."

The senior department head, who'd been briefed privately, tried to calm his co-workers. "If we could all relax a little, I think that it will make more sense. ZEN have come here today to explain our contribution to this revolutionary system. The real time analysis will make us more competent in the governance of food and drugs. And isn't that our aim? Our guests today understand that it's our colleagues, the FDA's responsibility for testing and authorizing food and drugs, and we maintain the distribution process. But just imagine if we could allocate to our recipients, food that benefited them and not just fed them; a sort of personalized food pyramid for every individual." He thought for a moment, and remembering a PBS program he'd recently seen and quickly added, "Imagine food as medicine."

"But they haven't really explained anything," came a terse reply. "And 'revolutionary' is the right word, as it sounds more like we're losing something, and a large something, more than contributing, and there's no mention of what we will receive in return."

"I think that the plan is ridiculous," snapped a senior supervisor returning the conversation to the mechanics of the proposal. "And you're not talking tokens, you're talking about a new currency, probably some form of crypto nonsense. No one will want to use a new currency - especially one that's directly tied to the world's largest social media company."

Anna, having recognized which way the wind was blowing, ignored the jibe, and calmly addressed the senior

department head. "But that's exactly why we need your help. Food is medicine, and personalized medicine means personalized food - just think of ZEN helping your department. The token is simply for accounting. After all isn't the end game to help the people?"

Looking up from his newspaper, the quietest man in the room, spoke, "What if the retailers don't agree, and I bet you my next years salary that the credit card processors won't go anywhere near it. They won't want to, they simply won't be interested."

It was time for Douglas to join the conversation, as it was obvious that the department head was not going to control his people.

"We already have their cooperation. They have already agreed to accept the libre as a payment system, or call it what you will, currency."

"I don't see why they would. What's in it for them?" came the counter.

"Have you ever heard of Edward Bernais?"

"Vaguely. Some sort of sauce recipe isn't it?" asked a junior, who'd been working in the room before the meeting started, and, uninvited, had just stayed.

"Not quite, that's Bernaise with an E. But in some way you're correct, because we have all been under his influence of his secret recipe for many decades. He's responsible for what we call the consumer society. He ...."

Before Douglas could continue, an imposing well-dressed man at the back, stood and addressed the room. "I'm sorry, Douglas and Anna, and I know that you've come all the way from California just to talk to us, but frankly this was not worth us even braving the snow for. I see this as a union issue and think that we should stop here." And he closed his notebook and stood to leave.

"But thank you for coming. I am sorry that your idea did not receive a better reception, but perhaps it's before its time."

"That went well," Douglas said to Anna, as they were escorted back through the main doors that they had entered less than an hour earlier.

But Anna was unfazed.

"As I'd expected," Anna replied. "They see a weakening of their power and responsibilities, which means layoffs, and no one likes that. We tried to reason with them, and now we will have to have them instructed to cooperate."

"How so?"

"Do you know how much we pay lobbyists in this town?"

Douglas did not know, and, frankly, he didn't want to know. But he was impressed to see first-hand how this woman thought.

"And, really, all we need is their current benefit files, as, once the project is off the ground, we're going to replace both them and the FDA in California, with our own system, and they know it."

"No wonder they're not interested in assisting us. Pulling California out of the Federal system will take a huge chunk out of it."

"Not only that Douglas, in time we can sell them our research data. With an ongoing, real-time study of a hundreds of thousands of people, there's not a company or a government department that won't have an interest in the data model that we will generate."

As the social pioneers traveled to Ronald Reagan National Airport, the roads were as deserted, as when they arrived. Their reception may have been as cold as ice, but the game itself was heating up.

## Chapter IX

### **Power Behind the Throne**

The First Lady was sitting up in bed in the White House master suite reading, while waiting for "FRONTLINE" to start on television. Advertised as 'Brexit: Good for Europe?' the program started with an unusual ten second countdown, then followed by the headline 'CALIFORNIA 20/20 - Masterful or Mayhem?' as the camera zoomed up to the California State House and into the office of the governor.

As the governor sat at his desk, with his hands clasped, his demeanor seemed almost spiritual. The interviewer, although a Democrat and not known for his support of California-style Democrats, started with the casual prompt of, "Ready when you are, governor."

"I'd like to start by thanking you and the team for coming today, as I know in this current climate this interview could be seen as being partisan," started the governor, followed by, "and I assume that this will be edited out."

"You just leave that to us, Sir. We are always fair and balanced," the interviewer joked.

"Let me move to the first question, and again, let me assure you that the edit will be as smooth as silk."

"You are on record as saying that California is in crisis, and you recently shared with us the highlights of a revolutionary plan to improve the lot of the Californians. Could you please explain to our viewers how this will work?"

"First off, I'd like to make it clear that the program

'California 20/20,' refers to our clear vision of the future of California and not to the upcoming general election."

"I have to admit, governor," the interviewer interjected, "I had wondered, as the election is expected to be pretty tight. The rumor mill seems to see California turning from a red state to blue."

"That's our whole thrust, Mike. The Golden State is in crisis, along with the rest of our country, and drastic measures with a clear vision are called for. It's true that the two hundred billion dollar budget that I signed yesterday shows that we have a reserve of some twenty billion dollars but, that is just for this year and, we anticipate the strong headwinds that will be caused by Washington, that could easily wipe out that reserve."

"But that's not really why we are talking, is it, governor."

"Well, Mike, you drove here today from San Francisco. What did you think of the state of the roads and the homeless camps?"

"And, you think that this will be improved by a ten billion bullet train and water rationing for your citizens, while giving a price break to farmers?"

"The train will help tourism, which as you know is a major contributor to our budget."

"But don't most tourists enjoy taking the Coast Road? All the ads show a happy couple in a convertible Mustang driving Highway One or the freeways."

The governor looked decidedly uneasy and started to tap the table, with a pen he'd picked up from the desk.

He covered his microphone with his hand, and, for a moment, it looked like he was about to remove it.

"I thought this was to be a friendly interview, Mike. I was going to explain how 'California 20/20' will mean free

housing and health services and more to the homeless and unemployed. We will be the first state in the nation to have free services for the underprivileged."

"Don't worry, governor, this will be edited. It's just for background."

"I should hope so, I wouldn't want people to get the wrong impression."

"You mean the voters?"

"Of course."

"Mike just smiled, not wanting to openly react."

"Your past views, and the details of your '2020 plan' that you shared with us, are, to say the least, extreme. Do you see California succeeding from the Union?"

The governor's face twitched.

"No, but we can see the future and it's California," said the governor in a way that even sounded hackneyed to his ears.

"What will pay for this extraordinary amount of homes, for the homeless, unemployed and undocumented that you plan to build? Especially, while corporations like Disney, pay just a fraction of the tax they should. And while others bathe in state subsidies. The taxpayer's can only stand so much. Are you going to make Finnish, or Danish the official language?" He ended with a note of levity.

"We have a plan that will cover *all* the costs *and* deliver surplus."

The interviewer pushed forward, "What about the ten-thousand or so refugees coming over your Southern border each month?"

"Do you have a problem with Mexicans, Mike?"

The governor was becoming uncomfortable and it started to show.

"I think most of the people are from Guatemala, Nicaragua and Honduras, governor."

Now the governor was distinctly uncomfortable at this forced error, and he tried to take back control.

"We welcome everybody who cannot take care of themselves. It is both the Christian and the California way."

"I won't bring up your Muslim or Jewish citizens, but what would you say to the suggestion that the Anglo Saxon population birth rate is lower, because of streaming TV series and sterility because of drug use. The invasion from the South was planned long ago, as was the plot to bring down America, by taking its production to Mexico, while bringing the poor and ignorant into California from the troubled Southern countries."

The governor laughed.

"How can you bring such nonsense up, Mike."

But his eyes showed more fear than humor.

The governor stood and extended his hand to his interviewer.

"I think that this interview is over, Mike," said the governor, as he removed the earpiece and microphone."

Mike, not prepared to let the governor off the hook, continued.

"Let's get this clear, Sir, you are okay with perpetual yard sales and parking on lawns and five families and ten cars to a house, and you'd like to see more of this, because *that* is the future of California?"

"If you don't wipe this tape, you will never work again, and "FRONTLINE" will be forever banned from any US broadcast system."

"If you recall, Sir, before we started, you signed a release.

So, I'm not sure you have the power to do that." And with the camera still rolling, and the governor storming out of his office, the journalist quickly fired off his parting volley

"Do you plan to succeed from the Union? Is your next step a UDI? Is 'California 20/20' to create the Socialist state of the future?"

And, with the governor no longer in the room, the stoic journalist ended with, "This is Mike Pincher from the office of the California Governor, saying 'goodnight and good luck'."

The screen flickered, and, as the program switched to the originally scheduled program, the next words were spoken by Gerald de Beauvoir, Senior Council to the president of the European Union, as he complained about the number of Bulgarians in tents along the banks of the Seine in Paris.

As the president stirred awake, he'd had a long day discussing NATO commitments, with the Secretary General of the UN, he told the First Lady about the awful dream he'd had about California.

"That was no dream, unless I was in it too," The First Lady replied. "We both just heard the governor of our largest state pretty much declare a UDI."

The president looked puzzled.

"A Unilateral Declaration of Independence," qualified the First Lady. Then asking with humor, "Do we need to do something, Mr. president."

"What the...." started the president, but without completing the sentence, as he reached for the phone and speed-dialed his Director of Communications.

"Julia, I want you to call PBS and ask them for a copy of the interview with the governor of California that was just

broadcast."

Thirty minutes later, the president was told that the tape was run in error and that a copy was not available.

"That's not good enough, Julia. It *will* be on my laptop by morning or there will be Hell to pay! "

And, Julia could tell that he meant it. She called in favors, and, at the expense of the first questions at the Presidents next three press conferences, later that night, the program was uploaded to her cloud account and then down to the White House.

As the president watched the interview, he initially doubted the sanity of the man, and then he began to doubt what he was watching. It was a direct attack on Washington, and, in particular, his policies.

The Republican president related to the Democratic governor's hundred dollar haircut and the two thousand dollar suit, but not to the man's politics. The man was a neo-socialist in Democrat's clothing and obviously with a dangerous agenda. Either, he thinks that America should be a sanctuary nation, and a refuge for the world's huddled masses, paid for, by the producing, but not ruling, class, or he wants to be the ruler of the independent nation of California.

And, no way in Hell, was either of those events going to happen.

As Jim McMurtry scurried out of the abortive interview, he found Alexa waiting for him in the vestibule.

And she was angry.

"That shit interviewer sure turned. Wasn't he supposed to be on our side? Why didn't he give you time to expand on all the great things that we'll be doing for California?"

"Perhaps, I left too soon. Do you think I left too soon?"

The governor's confidence had been shaken by the lack of respect he'd been shown, and by the lack of interest in how he was to save California.

"If this is how the liberal media is going to treat us, we stand no chance of the bill passing," said Alexa. Her voice was not that of a defeatist and ardently resolute.

She thought for a moment before continuing, "The question about leaving the Union, and not trying to strengthen it, was particularly stupid. I just don't get it." Her voice was strong, aimed at bolstering up the governor's bruised ego.

But the governor had already recovered his composure, and it was his turn to do the comforting.

He started, "We have access to the world's greatest influence machine, if we are prepared to sell our soul to the devil and..."

"You don't mean ZEN?" Alexa asked. Her voice sounding as if she were horrified, but it was more a case that she never dreamt that such a capitalist corporation could be enlisted to fight the good fight.

"Why not? I believe Anna Eisenberg to be a good person. When we met she seemed to understand, and, if at any time she doesn't, we can control ZEN through legislation and the contract terms. And, he stressed, AND, they are the only game in town when it comes to actually building what is needed."

"You met with her and didn't tell me, AND you really think that those money grabbing bastards are even one percent altruistic?" she commented, feigning indignation to protect her socialist standing.

"I have known Anna for some years, and she was the

honest part of the Adam and Anna power couple."

"But didn't you see her performance in front of the Congressional Committee? I thought that she was just an arrogant bitch?"

And here, Alexa was being genuine, as Anna had come off as 'Ms. High and Mighty.'

"If you'd been through what she had, you'd probably have been a damn sight worse."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, firstly, when she tried to whistle blow on Washington wanting to systematically infiltrate global leaders' private information, she was chased and almost killed by our government, and then her friend was assassinated by God knows who, but possibly our people. Secondly your culture isn't exactly known for its self-control."

And before the last words left his mouth, he knew what was to come, or at least he thought he did.

But Alexa laughed, "so you think that all of us Hispanics are members of MS13? You'd better be careful then when you're alone with me."

And the moment passed, but James McMurtry was thinking more about being alone with his protege, and less about the danger it might hold.

The governor's fantasy moment passed as Alexa continued, "Okay, James, I agree. Let's get ZEN on board. But I warn you, that's some nettle you're about to grasp. Anna didn't get to where she is now by being nice. Also, before we confirm with ZEN, I'd like to take our ideas to one of our cultural hot spots. One of the state's first Sanctuary Cities. And, if they resist as much as you suspect they are going to, and we need help, then I'm all for bringing in ZEN."

Democratic governor James McMurtry, the last of the California political dynasty, was approaching the end of his second term in office. And, through water shortages, massively destructive fires and teacher strikes, he'd overseen the downfall of the state, while grandstanding at news conferences. He knew that if he was not to go down in history as the man who rubbed the gold off the Golden State, he needed at least one spectacular event, and his last chance was to bring home 'California 20/20,' and for it to be labeled as his genius. And, it could not be known as the work of the firebrand that had brought it to him, and who shared the name of the Conquistador who had earlier brought change to the continent.

The firebrand was Alejandra 'Alexa' Betina Cortes, Venezuelan by descent, Mexican by birth, and in America by permission. Having traveled, aged seven, to *el norte* by way of the Rio Grande, with her *indocumentado* family, and later, courtesy of false papers, she successfully studied Political Science at the University of the Pacific, followed by two terms at the London School of Economics, and, finally a Masters in Psychology at the university at her adopted home town of Santa Cruz, California.

Her current, and temporary legal status in the US, was courtesy of a previous president's temporary amnesty..

Ms. Cortes, a devout follower of Marx, only deviated from her hero's ideals when it came to controlling the means of production. She understood that ethereal self-interest groups, not factories, nor governments, currently controlled the world. Why else, she reasoned, would they pay billions of dollars to lobbyists? She also understood, and this had been the subject of her thesis, 'A 2020 Vision Of Socialism,' the inevitable overarching destiny of social media. That, in simple terms, while the means of production for social good,

and that included housing, as well as welfare, could not be effectively mandated, whereas, the other end of the pipeline, that is, the consumption, via housing permits and other processes, could be.

Her thesis had been so well received, in extreme left-wing circles that, while still basking in the glory of her notoriety, she'd been encouraged and financed to be an activist blogger. And it was just six months later that, by chance, she'd been selected, as an up-and-coming political blogger, to meet with the progressive, but lame duck, governor.

The timing could not have been better for either of them.

Always elegant, the five foot seven inches of beauty, brains with driving ambition and a force of nature, had the governor entranced both mentally and emotionally. He desperately needed to make an historical mark before he left office and took to her radical ideas like a duck takes to water. When she told him that she couldn't understand how any politician could sleep at night when even one person was homeless, he knew that he had found his political soulmate. There she was, a Socialist in Victoria Secret's underwear, probably not the part-time mistress of the governor of California as some suspected, but definitely a one-time mistress of the posthumously disgraced Venezuelan dictator, Hugo Chavez.

And, she had the ear, and possibly more, of the man who could dictate to the world's forth largest economy.

She was in an an enviable position, as any blow-back from a failed 'California 20/20' would be all his, and, if it succeeded, the original document was still in her cloud account.

Either way, with the noise the plan would make, her name recognition was assured. And, as the lame-duck governor, James McMurtry, rode off to join the letterhead of a global

green agra-company, she would be well-placed to carry on the good work.

And, now, she thought, with Anna Eisenberg involved, who knows what might be possible.

## Chapter X

### **Surf's Up**

The surfing paradise of Santa Cruz, California, once a vanguard for social change, enjoyed visits from the top celebrities of the women's suffrage movement, including town-founder Elihu Anthony's relative, Susan B. Anthony. These days, the University of California, Santa Cruz hosts the annual *Cesar Chavez* Convocation honoring the Hispanic activist's achievements, commitment to social justice and civil rights. Its population at the time of the first event was around five thousand, and has since mushroomed to seventy thousand, with its colleges having some thirty thousand students and many, many thousands of migrant agricultural workers.

Alexa Cortes expected it to have remained a place for change; a place for the disruptive.

As Alexa entered the chamber, the three council members that bothered to show up were already seated, and none looked as if they wanted to be there. The mayor of Santa Cruz, who was clutching a cup of Starbucks coffee, and looking a little bleary-eyed from the previous night's rock concert at the Catalyst, addressed Alexa first, saying,

"We are here at the unusual request of the governor. His message asked that, as a personal favor, we privately preview a bill that Sacramento was considering passing.

Then, swapping the coffee for a bottle of mineral water, Mayor Meg Bastin gave a short description of the bill, to which she appended her doubts as to the sanity of what she'd been presented with. She then added that it was to her amazement that a politician such as the vaunted, James McMurtry would even suggest that such a document be considered in her chamber. As she regarded it as the height of political and fiscal insanity.

She then declared the meeting open and invited the guest to present her case.

A girl in a black leather pencil skirt and red silk blouse raised herself to her full height, and, with complete disrespect started her address with, "We all know the importance of social housing and the establishment of permanent housing for the unfortunate in our society, and especially those from overseas fleeing poverty and violence, it is an absolute must. And, it is our first step to breaking California away from the racist Mother Ship, of Washington D.C."

The mayor showed no emotion as she responded, saying, "That is all well and good, but your rhetoric, and from what I've heard, possibly other things, may inspire the governor, but here in Santa Cruz we are not so easily influenced. You are suggesting that we somehow find the land and the resources to build tens of thousands of homes for the homeless, most of which will be your *desafortunado*.

"Exactly!" Alexa said, having no intention of falling at the first hurdle. Continuing, "But as *this* is America, let's call them *unhoused*, not homeless."

"*That*," the mayor spat, trying to contain her anger, "Is the sort of crap that the liberal media would love to hear, because that does not sound like social progress. That sounds like revolution, *and* it sounds like the return of California to Mexico. So, I suggest that you calm down and we all discuss this rationally."

"With respect, Lady Mayor," responded the firebrand, as she was about to show none, "It would not hurt California to become more immigrant friendly. My parents really believed that they were bringing me to a *better* place, but all they they found were two rooms and prejudice. And, fifteen years later, when I applied for a driver's license, because I had no paperwork, I didn't exist. So don't tell me and the millions of others in my position that I need to calm down. For decades this country has had the best of my people, only to deny them the decency of citizenship. And now, thanks to this racist crook of a president, we walk in fear of being forcibly sent to a country that none of us know or care for. A country that is probably full of murderers and rapists and poverty. You have to understand that there is a movement, like no other in your country's history. Your Civil War will seem like a walk in the park, if we don't do something soon. You see those trucks with the Mexican flags? Well, for every truck you see there are tens of thousands of flags in yards that you don't see. My people built this state with their blood and sweat in the fields, and now they are going to take it back. We tried with our people becoming mayors and governors and even running for president, but white guys have a stranglehold, and what they don't control, a fractured group of do-gooders do. I didn't get my Masters to become a pawn in the system. I demand change. I demand succession from the USA, and I demand it now."

It had not been her best speech, but she was young and ambitious.

"We get it, Ms. Cortes," responded the mayor, ignoring the tone of her rant, "But you have to think about practicalities. The housing units that you want us to create will cost billions, and that sum is simply ridiculous. This is not the Gordian knot and you're not Alexander the Great." And she took a moment to explain to the glazed eyes in front of her who Alexander the Great was."

But the Alexa had not come that day to fail.

Alexa smiled, as she started to speak, "We have a socially-minded corporation ready to absorb most, if not all of the costs."

But this declaration was not as well received, as had been expected.

"So you are telling us that a private company, no doubt itself backed by corporate raiders, is prepared to bankroll hundreds of millions, if not billions of dollars, for social housing. So, they will join the toll-road companies and the water companies that keep picking pieces off of what used to be the state's responsibility. Perhaps California could sell off their city councils and be done with it?"

Seeing that she had made a wrong move, Alexa attempted to soften the conversation saying, "Please call me Alexa. We all want the same...."

But she was halted mid-sentence by the mayor, "That is not the case Ms. Cortes. Santa Cruz might seem like a Marxist town, but there's way too much money here for that to be true. We all have our own agendas. Darren here," She gestured to the man on her right, his Hawaiian shirt so bright that it offended her eyes that morning. He owns a string of chiropractic shops in town and his *Oceanis 60* in the harbor is called '*Crick and Crack*.' He never wanted insurance companies to cover chiropractic care, as it damaged his bottom line."

Darren smiled without comment.

"And Martha here," the mayor continued, as she motioned at the stocky short-gray-haired woman the other side of her, "She fought tooth and nail to defeat the Rent Control proposition, because she has a string of rentals."

Martha, saying nothing, feigned shock and also allowed the mayor to continue unchallenged.

"So, while our building regulations protect the banana slug and the three-toed salamander, modest building continues, only because nobody really gives a damn about overcrowding and social housing, as long as there's a profit in it for the builders and developers and permit money for the city. But, your extreme scale of building would never get past the Santa Cruz Preservation Society, so why don't you take your Marxist ideas and go back to Mexico, or wherever you came from, and help develop that country, because while you might get permission to present this socialist crap to the city, no one's going to take it seriously."

She paused again from her semi-apoplectic outburst.

"And, I wonder what your real motives are? A future in politics? Washington, perhaps?"

The governor's emissary was not fazed by the similar show of contempt that she'd encountered often before.

Alexa came back with steel, in her softly spoken words.

"People make laws, *not* politicians. Agriculture in Santa Cruz generates one and a half billion dollars a year to the local community, and it employs about ten percent of Santa Cruz County. Those ten percent have relatives, many relatives, and if they all vote of a same mind, they *will* not only influence policy, but the selection of people such as yourselves, who implement their will. Now will you allow me to speak to the whole chamber, or do you want

me to start a campaign without your support?"

All three inquisitors were visibly shocked; this time for real. They'd been accosted before by personal lobbyists, with a cause, but nothing like this. This was naked aggression. A miniature Nazi in a leather skirt and boots.

The mayor added Ms. Cortes to the following week's chamber's calendar, saying, "Don't be surprised if you get laughed at. You might be able to threaten us in a private session, and get away with it, but let's see how you do with the Council. Now please leave, as we are all rather busy people and this meeting has been a complete waste of our collective time.

As Alexa left the chamber, her head high at having given these *petit bourgeoise* a glimpse of the future, she'd already decided that she had no intention of returning to deal with the Council. She'd asked the governor if she could share her ideas with some of Santa Cruz's leaders and that was what she'd done. She just wanted the press to hear about the program, and she knew that that Mayor Bastin was going to promote her, by damming her.

It had been many years since Douglas had been in 'The City By The Bay.' And, as much as he'd enjoyed the old-world charm of the city, he'd stopped visiting. Silicon Valley had been the reasons for the visits, and he'd tired of the brilliant, but dubious people that created it. He'd wearied of the traffic and the constant roadworks clogging roads that used to be more than adequate. Then, when the recession hit, caused by the exporting of labor overseas and to other states, and then to China, it had become a wasteland.

That was until the Internet came along,

The Valley's second, or possibly third act, began by ushering in smartphones. Then came the megalithic search

engines, cell phone and peripheral manufacturers, and lately, the cloud developers. So, there he was, back again, and he had no idea what to expect; that is other than thousands of millionaire latte-drinking Tesla-drivers, crazy rents, and multi-multi million dollar houses, that, a decade earlier, were just simple middle-class homes.

As the plane circled for landing, the familiar colored salt pools of San Francisco came into view, as did the once defining, but now almost insignificant landmark TransAmerica building. Then came the SOMA developments, and, for a moment, Douglas felt like he was landing in China. The apartment blocks and new ball-park seemed to stretch from the lower reaches of Market Street all the way to the Bay. The Moscone Center, once the single impressive building in the wasteland of cheap housing and pawn shops, was now dwarfed by the multitude of chrome and glass high-rises that he knew to house the Valley's cyber-intelligensia. This was in stark contrast with the chicken coops of the Chinese workers in places like Guangzhou, but California was not socialist - and could never be.

Clearing customs and immigration in record time, thanks to a call from ZEN's VIP office, Douglas grabbed a yellow cab outside the terminal for the short ride to Anna's office.

As the cab pulled away to take the ramp to the freeway, the driver spoke first.

"Your first trip? We don't get many Swiss visitors," he asked, having noticed the luggage tags.

"No, just the first since the 90's. What's happened to SOMA? I expected some changes, but that side of town seems larger than the business district."

"Mission and the Tenderloin are both going the same

way. All the flop houses and drunks are being moved out to make way for apartments for the tech folk. San Francisco is now a developer's paradise. Tear down a couple of run-down houses and put up a block of fifty or more one-bedroom apartments that rent out for five grand a month makes for easy money. Take the Castro, where no one but gays lived: the old bathhouses are now straight and coining it like ever before. It's funny though, because beggars and homeless still roam the streets, but now in the decent areas; the tourist areas. And, they're not panhandlers like the old days, these're aggressive. You sure don't want to pass a doorway boxed in with cardboard, 'cos you never know if someone's going to leap out at you, and they could have a knife, or worse. And that's during the day, not just at night. Sure the city's trying to do something, but they can't, 'cos the problem's too big, so they keep it quiet 'cos it would hurt tourism."

He almost laughed, as he said, "Not that the twenty dollars an hour parking doesn't already put people off."

But then he was serious again, as he added, "I have to tell you, it's got real crazy and anyone who lives here knows it's only going to get worse."

He was on a roll and hardly paused for breath.

"And driving a yellow cab used to be a great job, but most of the techies use BART or take the river boat to work, and bicycle and electric scooter rentals have taken away what Uber and Lyft left us. It won't be long before I takes the family out of state like my mates have. Trust me pal, your 90's were the golden days here, and they ain't coming back, The sooner you get back to your land of cuckoo clocks and cheese, the safer you'll be."

As the cab continued south, the cabbie continued to lambaste the city fathers for allowing it to sink into the mire. Douglas, had no interest in commenting, it had been

along flight from Switzerland, so he just let his captor vent. But he had read articles on how San Francisco had changed, and Los Angeles too, for that matter, but it was interesting to hear a cab driver's opinion. And, discounting it for the fact that most cabbies in the world seem to like to moan about their income, this did seem more real. He over-tipped the driver with a twenty dollar bill, and, as he took his bag from the trunk, he thanked him for the warning.

As the driver started to move away, he stopped and pointed up at ZEN's impressive, but to him, ridiculously massive headquarters.

"I didn't recognize the address when you gave it to me. So, it looks like I've been talking to one of the vandals. I can tell from your bags that you got money. So why destroy a city that so many love? Jesus, of all companies, you had to be with this one. The one that worked with the government and sold us all out to the highest bidder. You pay no taxes, because you just reinvest your profits - even the one's you bring in from abroad, and you build a stupid building like this, while the people live in doorways. Aren't you ashamed of what you do? How do you sleep at night knowing that you cause so much misery just so you can make a buck?" And he threw back the twenty-dollar tip Douglas had given him with, "I don't need your kind of money."

Douglas looked down at the driver, and saw that they were about the same age. He was tidily dressed in jeans and a leather vest; a little overweight, sporting an old-fashioned gold-rimmed badge holder, which held his cabbie's license.

"That's it, you take my name and report me. I couldn't give a damn. Here, take my card. That'll make it easier for you."

There was more resignation than anger in the voice, Douglas thought, as he accepted the dogeared piece of paper. And he could just muster the words, "I'm sorry," but

he did so to the back of the cab, as it moved back towards the parkway.

As Douglas waited in reception, to be escorted to Anna's office, the cab driver's comments started to make him think. Were things really that bad? Surely, he was exaggerating? Was the city no longer a place for sane people? That can't be. Rampant homelessness? Throngs of aggressive panhandlers? Unwitting tourists' cars towed in the middle of the afternoon only to incur hundreds of dollars in fines. This wasn't Douglas' San Francisco, but then he hadn't been there for almost twenty years.

Anna's secretary finally appeared, and escorted him to what was once Adam's office.

"Quite a view," he said looking out towards the mountains many miles over the South Bay.

"Not quite as good as yours," Anna countered, "But it'll do. How was your flight?"

"It was good, and thanks for offering your own plane, but until we're formally in business together, I think it prudent that I keep some semblance of distance."

"As you wish, Douglas, but I think you'll find that we are of like mind, you and I, and we can do more good if we work together. And, if we pass up the opportunity of working with the State of California, we'll regret it forever."

Douglas was quiet for a moment.

"How often do you get into the city, Anna?"

"Seldom, really; the occasional ballet, or function. Why?"

Douglas relayed his conversation, with the cab driver, and, when he'd completed his colorful picture of 'The City by The Bay,' he waited for Anna to push back.

She didn't, or perhaps couldn't. Not at first, anyway, but then she tried.

"I agree that this needs to change. Yes, of course it does. But ZEN and the other tech companies need housing for their workers. And this is why we need to work with the governor. We need to relocate those who can't afford the city and do so at the State's cost.

"But isn't it their city, as well, Anna?"

Yes. Well, not really, not anymore. Time's change and people have to accommodate the change. Go back seventy-five years, and the Fillmore was almost totally African American, but then it became upscale when that community was forced out. Haight Ashbury was just a regular middle class area near the park, before it became a drug-infested slum, thanks to the Summer of 69', and fifty years on it's becoming one of the most upscale areas. And that's nothing to do with tech buying in. It's just general affluence, Douglas. If you want to help, you should work with us, to build places outside the city for the homeless, the unemployed, and anyone else that can't cut it. And, just think how that will clean up the city for those who *can* afford it."

Douglas wondered if Anna had drunk the Kool Aid, but he was hoping that there was more to her plans than the misguided social welfare she was expressing.

"But what if these people don't want to leave; *these people* being the disenfranchised?"

"You remember how the governor expressed the way he just wanted to help people. Well, ZEN can go a lot further. I would like to totally curate people's lives by providing housing, utilities, food and entertainment. A complete package, all run by ZEN and all paid for by corporations that need product feedback or have image

problems."

Douglas involuntarily pulled his head back and smiled.

"A sort of Cadbury Village? A Ford Utopia in the Amazon? But those, and all the other similar experiments, failed."

"Nothing as primitive. I'm talking, *carte blanche*, where whatever people want they can have, and it's all free. That is as long as it's good for them."

"So you want to create massive prison-like complexes? I've heard some crazy ideas, but ..."

He thought better of what he was going to say and changed tack.

"I knew that there had to be a catch. You're talking about incarcerating what you regard, as the surplus population, not to mention the impossibility of funding such an outlandish idea."

Douglas was beginning to feel frustrated that he'd flown almost six thousand miles to have an insane conversation.

Anna called her secretary for lunch to be brought up from the restaurant.

"You'll enjoy this Douglas. We stole the chef from a two-star Michelin bistro in the city. And, while we wait for the food, let me tell you more about my plans. Then, you can tell me if you think I'm evil or crazy.

When the meal had been consumed, Douglas had to confess that Anna was perhaps not quite so crazy, *if*, but only *if* the necessary companies would play ball.

"So let me get this right. Alexa wants Socialism for California and for the state to house and pay for everything,

and the governor agrees. You want to use the people as guinea pigs for health and mental studies, and for ZEN's Libre to be used as a tracking currency, before taking the currency global. And, fenced-off smartphones issued by the state will monitor and allow, or disallow, purchases based on the individual's real time health or mental status and situation?"

Anna didn't react, so Douglas continued his abrasive assessment.

"Fenced-off meaning restricted to what can be seen? The technology the Chinese use to create their Great Fire Wall?"

"Exactly," said Anna, asking further. "What do you want us to do, Douglas?"

"To be honest, I don't know. Before today, I was quite prepared to let society morph whichever way it was going to. Now, I see that it's not going to morph, it's going to *be* morphed, and that's a tricky one for me. I've always chosen for myself. And, to be honest, I really felt for the cabbie. I saw the East End of London go under the developer's wrecking ball, and I know that most of the over-priced apartments are empty a lot of the time; just waiting for staff to come in for short stays. And, that's decimated the communities more than the Luftwaffe."

"I understand your ambivalence, Douglas. I really do. All I ask is that you think about it and think hard, because tomorrow I'd like you to go down to Santa Cruz to lunch with Alexa, to discuss how ZEN can help her. Now, I have a car waiting to take to you the Stanford Court."

"How did you know I was staying there?"

"We are ZEN Douglas, it's what we do. You like a room facing away from California Street and prefer an eighth floor suite. Would you like me to tell you what you'll be

having for breakfast ?"

Douglas stood, thanked Anna for lunch, and said that he'd be ready to be picked up tomorrow around eleven.

The cab driver's words dominated Douglas' thoughts, as he was driven along the crowded freeway into the city, and, later, as he tossed and turned the night away, he came up with the answer to Anna's last question. How could he *not* take part in a project that could change mankind?

The next day he would simply have to find the words to convince the rising Socialist star, Alexa, that ZEN was her savior. And, at the same time, skirt around Anna's social experiment scenario, and then tweak Anna's plans, so that her social experiment implementation delivered humanity, as well as data.

## Chapter XI

### **Back In The USSR**

Lev Oblomov was live-streaming the lunchtime performance of Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* from St. Petersburg's Mariinsky Theatre, in his new Knightsbridge London home, when the one-word text displayed on his vintage burner phone.

He immediately typed back 'when' and was answered 'Albert Memorial noon.'

It wasn't every day that he was called on, and since he'd been interviewed by Richard Dauber, not to mention his

house being raided by Special Branch, he was surprised that was happening at all. But now it would seem that he was needed again, and ,although he was happier leading his life as a genuine antique dealer, he knew that there was no permanent escape from his original paymasters.

Arriving early for his appointment and dressed as an English gentleman from the 1950's in a dark suit and tailored topcoat, he sat at the outer edge of the tables around the open cafe and waited for his contact to take an adjacent seat. There was an irony meeting by the great man's memorial, as he too had been a man of the people, who'd helped his Queen, Victoria, recognize that the people were suffering and needed change. And by doing so, he'd helped Britain stave off the revolution that was to eventually flow through Europe, sweeping away the monarchies in its path. His own country had not been so lucky, and, instead of change, they received decades of tyranny dressed as enlightenment.

But that was then, and this was now, and although the social rivalry of East versus West still remained, their systems had never been closer. If only, he thought, the West would tilt just a little into Socialism and the East veer towards a genuine democracy.

And that was where he hoped to come in.

"Tovarish, Tovarish!" started his contact, as if he was meeting his long lost uncle. "What have you been up to these last few years? Making money I trust, as not having heard from you, we have had no reason to deposit ill gotten gains into your account."

Lev did not recognize the man, but he knew how often, and sometimes quite brutally, personnel changes occurred, so he accepted his somewhat dowdy and down-at-heel appearance. He also accepted that his visitor looked like he'd just walked off a James Bond movie set, though he

was concerned as to why there was a a trailing odor of vodka, as the man spoke.

"Mainly I've been keeping my head down and especially since Barbados," came the reply. Referring to the gentle grilling he'd received at the hands of Colonel Dauber and the more likable, Anna. "I really thought that they had me cold. But then, as Anna started to accept me, as just another high class salesman, I realized that I was safe. And I am a careful man, so the receipts from all my sales and purchases that were found when my London home was raided, simply confirmed that to the English spymasters. So I have been reading, taking walks, listening to opera and generally regrouping after my many years of, shall we say, waiting to assist my government."

"Well, Tovarish," the visitor started, but Lev interrupted him. "I know you think that calling me that is humorous, but I may still be under surveillance, and they will not see the humor in it."

"I am sorry, Lev, old ways die hard. But now the reason why we are meeting. And, you will be pleased to hear that it will include the opportunity to continue your friendship with Anna Montalbano. But, you look cold, let me get you a coffee and a bacon and pomme-frit sandwich - this place is famous for this unusual English delicacy."

And some minutes later, Lev, while his appetite had been lessened by hearing that he was to be a field officer again, sipped his coffee, while staring at the delicacy that was oozing grease onto the plate.

As the handler, who seemed to be in no hurry that morning, tipped the liquid from his hip flask into his espresso and took a sip, a brass band struck the opening chords to the *Marseillaise*, to celebrate Bastille Day.

He then smiled and said, "You know I always loved this

tune. Why *we* could not have something more melodic, less drab, I cannot understand. But then, perhaps that is the nature of our people. At least those without their money stashed in sunny Malta, or invested in Premier League football clubs. But I digress. What to you know about California 20/20?"

Lev's expression was blank.

"That's what I thought," said the handler, as he handed Lev a thumb drive. "This is the full picture, but in simple terms, it seems that California is to implement a plan that was first suggested decades ago. That was when we had influence with a number of senators and congressmen, not to mention movie producers and scriptwriters in the nineteen fifties right up to the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis when everything fell apart. Our leaders saw a change coming to the industrialized world. It would only be a matter of time before America would cease to be *the* producer of the world's goods. While most of the world had been flattened by two World Wars, America was the last man standing and that gave it a massive advantage to create the ideal producer-consumer society. But with Germany and the Japanese rebuilding faster than anyone expected, thanks to the Marshall Plan, it would only be a matter of time before America's preeminence was challenged. And, that was before the the Chinese powerhouse was even dreamed of. So, our leaders put a flea in America's ear; the idea of massive social housing projects to take care of the many millions of redundant workers that were on their long term horizon. And now, somehow, the governor of California has come up with an almost identical scheme, but to also track and influence the inhabitants' activities and habits, in such detail, as to make even our great founding leaders rotate in their graves."

Lev was incredulous. What was this man saying? He had to be crazy?

He allowed the lunatic to continue

"Zen Corporation is to co-produce this grand plan, and Anna Montalbano is personally heading the project. We need to know where and how the project is to work, and, as Anna is a collector of fine antiques, and you are a purveyor of such fine objects, you are to involve yourself in how she may build a collection from her ill-gotten gains, to display in her captive tenant camps."

The handler, leaned over and took the roll from Lev's plate.

"This poor-man's caviar blini should not go to waste," he said, as he took a large bite.

"So, what do you think?"

Lev didn't have to think. "He'd liked Anna, not because she'd inadvertently saved him, but because she understood what the finer things in life were. And, why shouldn't the unemployed and the unemployable have great art to look at. He would propose a ZEN Peoples' Gallery in each housing development, like Andrew Carnegie did with libraries. She was the wealthiest person on the planet, and such a collection would make her more so. He would curate a list of works and pieces that he knew would interest her, and then he would send her some images; a taster of the exotic wares that he could access, for his proposed ZEN Galleries.

"So, what are my instructions?"

"Are you familiar with the video game's company, *Veritas*?"

"Of course, I have sold many a piece to Marec. Why?"

"ZEN has decided to purchase a controlling interest in *Veritas*."

"I understood the founder to have fifty-one percent, and

he's not likely to give it up. But how does that feature in our conversation?"

"Maybe that is not so, Tovarish. And it features, because ZEN has great plans for *Veritas*."

"It is already a great company - it generates billions of dollars."

"Yes, but it could be ready for a fall. We would like you to make Marec an offer for an option on his shares. You will ask him for a thirty-day option to purchase his fifty-one percent holding, at today's market value, and you will pay one-dollar for the option."

"But that would be insane."

"Perhaps not."

And, Lev was handed another thumb drive.

"Give him this and wait for his reaction."

"Is it likely to be violent?"

"I very much doubt it, as you will be meeting him in a restaurant."

"When?"

Lev wasn't too sure about this, but he'd committed himself too many years ago.

"In about an hour. He's staying at the Four Seasons, and if you walk across the park slowly, you will be just in time. This is the option document."

He handed Lev a large envelope.

"As you will see, it is just one page, one simple page, and look for a man with a yellow carnation in his buttonhole, because he is our notary. Have both sign the document and stroll back here, where I shall be enjoying the sunshine and probably a light lunch."

"That's a bit cloak and dagger."

"That's because that's who we are. I suggest that now would be a good time for you to leave, as we have spent far too much time together."

As Lev strolled through the largest park in London, towards his quarry, a number of Household Cavalry officers from Kensington Barracks trotted past, to remind him of how civilized he'd felt since moving to London. His cover as an antique dealer and provisioner of exclusive baubles and gifts, for the global wealthy, through LobbyShop had fit him like a glove, and his independence from his masters these many years had caused him to forget that his front of respectability was simply that - a front.

Reaching the Four Seasons in just over an hour, Lev went straight to the bar for a resolve stiffener. He nursed a large vodka, until he saw Marec, a bright blue zPad in his hand, walk past the lounge entrance. He'd known Marec for some years, but they'd not met for some time, as the man's gifts to himself, and his friends, had become more pharmaceutical in nature, and he was not surprised how the man's once finely chiseled Slavic features were gone, replaced by the wear and tear of an overly extravagant and debauched lifestyle.

It was as if he was meeting John Belushi, toward the end of his life.

As he joined the Silicon Valley billionaire, who'd taken advantage of bypassing the hotel's notoriously slow bar service, by bringing his own full wine glass from his room, Lev became aware of the perspiration on his own hands and used his silk handkerchief to wipe them before he extended one to his prey.

"What are you doing here, Lev? Don't tell me that you are somehow involved in this investment deal? I thought that you were just a luxury toy salesman."

Lev, wasn't amused at this characterization from this uncultured sozzled oaf, who'd been brash and lucky enough to start and grow the world's most successful video games' company. Would this make his task easier? He wondered to himself.

"Well, yes, but as an intermediary. I just happened to be in London and available."

"If the banker's needed to reschedule, they could have just texted me. That works for me anyway, as I didn't get in until five AM this morning."

Lev noticed that Marec was also perspiring, so it was unlikely a business meeting had kept him from his bed."

"That's not quite the case Marec. I'm here, on behalf of my partners to make you an offer for your Founder's Stock."

Even with a God-awful hangover, the Silicon Valley titan could raise a laugh.

"You what? What the hell are you saying? Your people want to buy me out?"

The anger in his voice penetrated the room like a lightning strike. Well, you and your partners can just fuck off." And he stretched his legs, as if to get up.

"Not exactly buy you out. Well, not today anyway. We would just like an option to buy you out at a later date. I understand that you may be in for a fall. And you just might want to cash out now, while you're at the top. Spend more time with your family, perhaps. Greener pastures? Another start-up? That kind of thing. You choose."

Lev had found the voice that he'd hope to have left

behind back in the Soviet Union.

He handed Marec the thumb drive. He had guessed that it could only contain one thing, and he was right.

When Marec's zPad came to life, a movie shot in the glow of a half-darkened room showed a number of figures on a bed, but too dark to see what they were doing.

Marec laughed. "I don't understand. Why are you showing me this? What does it mean?"

"My partners have the better lit version, and if I said that it was taken at a house in Woodside on New Year's Eve last year, would....."

Marec sobered up with a jolt.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"The option." Lev was smiling as he spoke, for the benefit of the others in the room."

Marec leaned in towards his guest, and the blue of his eyes were liquid fire.

"Sure, this would be embarrassing, but not fatal for *Veritas*, so do your worst, you scum. And you're finished."

Lev knew the temperament of Marec's people. They were street-fighters and became more dangerous when cornered, and he understood that his life had just been threatened.

He had to think fast.

"We're not just talking about shaming you. This content is embedded in your latest game, and all we have to do is leak the keystrokes to bring it up."

Marec glared at Lev, "You're a dead man."

"If that happens, *Veritas* stock dies with me. Now, I'd like you to sign this option." And, handing over the manila

envelope containing the single sheet of paper, he motioned to the man wearing the yellow carnation to join them.

As Lev crossed Park Lane to return to his handler in the park, he still wasn't sure where his bluff about the embedded code came from. He didn't even know what was in the video - and didn't want to know. All he knew was that quick thinking had probably saved both the project *and* his life.

His handler had been sloppy in underestimating Marec. They had treated him like a soft Westerner, and not the Eastern European thug that he was. And his handler laughed nervously when he told the story, and he thanked Lev for his improvement on the original game.

"Now we wait for ZEN to file their intention to take over *Veritas* and then we step in."

"Can I ask why?"

"You can ask."

The handler smiled as he got up and left with the words, "A good day's work Tovarish. Welcome home. We'll be in touch."

And, that may have been what the handler felt, but home did not feel like home anymore to his tovarish.

## Chapter XII

### **This is Your Santa Cruz**

Anna slept fitfully, wondering whether she was losing Douglas' interest, as she reflected on their previous day's

conversation. She knew that California had lost some of its luster, but that was why the 2020 project was so crucial and that was why, at 4 AM, she texted Douglas' driver to take the long way to Santa Cruz. He was to take State Route 92, with its views of the Hawaiian-style semi-tropical vegetation and join Pacific Coast Highway at Half Moon Bay, past the magnificent coast views, to Surf City.

It had been decades since Douglas had taken the coast road, and he'd quite forgotten how rugged the coast line was. It was the scenery that a million tourists a year came specifically to view, and he suspected that he was en route to negotiate with a Socialist that wanted to pave it over and declare it a people's paradise.

Arriving at the Chaminade Hotel, in Santa Cruz, Douglas was shown onto the terrace where Alexa Cortes was holding court over three of the city fathers. Douglas thought she looked more like one of his daughter's friends than a seasoned activist, as he approached the table. But then, failing to stand, as he introduced himself, she simply dismissed her previous visitors, with the command that they stay around in case they were needed. As instructed, they left, without as much as a murmur.

As Douglas lowered himself onto the chair facing the ocean, he was fully prepared for the game to begin. He adopted a differential tone to his voice, as he spoke.

"I'm glad that you could find the time to personally meet me, Ms. Cortes."

Alexa too was in business mode.

"It was a necessity, if you are to become our main supplier." The tone was matter of fact and the accent was on *if*.

"I feel certain that ZEN is the only company that cannot only fulfill your expectations, but exceed them."

"That may be so, but we have received a proposal from both Chinese and Russian companies that promise the same."

"Now, Alexa, if I may call you that, you and I both know that no Russian company has the necessary expertise, and the Chinese have been blocked from such enterprises in the U.S., so why don't we just discuss how we are going to work together." Douglas tried to keep the level of condescension in his voice to a minimum, but some slipped through.

"Do you know why I chose this place to meet?" she asked, and, without waiting for a reply, she continued, "*If* I stayed here and wanted to bring my dog - because you know how much we love our chihuahuas - I'd have to pay an extra one hundred and fifty dollars pet fee. So my night's stay would cost me three-hundred dollars plus tax."

Douglas said nothing, as her statement made no sense to him.

"I see you look puzzled. Well, that kind of money might not mean much to an Englishman living in Switzerland, but here, it's a week's unemployment money." She gesticulated, "Don't you think that this view should be available to everyone. Not just the well-employed?"

Douglas stifled a sigh, and, realizing that the conversation was to be, at best, fluid, continued, "I don't need the sales pitch, Alexa. I'm just the facilitator. As I said a moment ago, you and I both know that if we're not involved, the project doesn't happen. I'm here to see if we can work together, so I'd appreciate it if you'd cut the crap, as you say out here. Now, I've heard all sorts of fanciful numbers, so I need to know what you are planning, so we can decide whether the project is truly scalable."

Alexa wasn't fazed by the blunt approach of the man that they both knew she needed. She was young, she had the support of the governor and she had time on her side. The next hour was as enlightening for Douglas, as any had been before. This woman was as good as she'd been billed. And, if he discounted her occasional flights into her Utopian editorial, her plan was as forward thinking as he'd ever heard. Her premise was that automation and AI were on course to destroy society, and that companies employing only productive people could stave off such a disaster. And, to bring home her point, she quoted a Berkeley study that discovered that because of ever-changing new technologies, in the majority of companies, only thirty percent of workers were mentally engaged, and that that only rose to seventy percent in successful companies. And, as many of these companies inevitably failed, the lack of social housing would cause homelessness to reach astronomical figures, as would California's social benefit programs, therefore, it was only a matter of time before California would simply financially implode. Other states would follow, and, inevitably, sooner or later, America would be in a new Dark Age." Alexa ended with, "So, Douglas, whatever the cost, the money will have to be found to take care of those not working, and that includes those fleeing to America from the south."

"You expect to fund these ideas through taxation?" Douglas asked, knowing that the push-back from both the taxpayers and businesses would be, to say the least, extreme. And he continued, "You do know that you are just going to push the wealthy to other states. And, as for the new immigrants, undocumented or otherwise, why should they get a free ride?"

Alexa knew that it was time to disclose the inflammatory part of her agenda, and one that could end the meeting on a disastrous note. She took a sip of water

before answering.

"I would like to give you a short history. America always finds money for what it wants to do. Since 9/11, America has spent a trillion dollars trying to bring democracy to the Middle East. The cost was simply added to the national debt, and the accepted rationale was that the civilizing of the Middle East would make America safer. But you and I both know that America cares nothing about the Middle East, except for its geopolitical value. Now, let's look at the few hundred million dollars in aid given to the countries that millions are fleeing from, to move to the U.S. The aid has, more often than not, ended up in the hands of dictators, and they care little about their people. The drug lords that rule these countries kill with impunity, *and* Americans consume almost ninety-five percent of their products. Every few years an occasional king-pin is arrested and extradited to the U.S., but then the vacuum left by the removal of the *capo* is replaced by even more extreme violence, as others wrestle for control. Now tell me, if America really cared about spreading democracy, not to mention saving the American people from drug addiction, why was a trillion dollars not applied there?"

Douglas was going to respond, but Alexa had simply paused for a breath, before continuing.

"Then we have the damage done to the undocumented people that you obviously object to supporting. I suggest that you read up on the politicians that America has supported, and those who it has blocked, in these countries. Then, research how America's various trade pacts impacted on local growers. Mexico fared the best with NAFTA, which made some Mexican businessmen richer, but only a few. So, don't you think that these undocumented people have a right to come north for support? *And*, also, if America is serious about protecting its own people, shouldn't U.S. forces go in and clean these

people's countries up? So Douglas, go research these issues and then tell me that America does not owe these people something.

Douglas was neither disturbed or annoyed at the impassioned speech, which he acknowledged with a sage-like nod of his head. He was well-aware that America's border issues were far from straightforward, but he also knew that, depending on the volume that they were looking at, there could be a serious under-funding problem.

Instead he just asked, "I know that the governor announced this program, but, in reality, how close are you to writing the Bill?"

"The final draft is on the governor's desk."

Douglas thought for a moment. As extreme as her ideas were, he liked her presentation, and he decided to offer to increase ZEN's involvement.

"How would you like ZEN to partner the state and not just be a contractor."

"That's what we need to get away from - so called partners. The governor tried that a few times and it never worked out."

"So you speak for the governor?"

"No, never! Of course not," Alexa said, almost petulantly, and Douglas knew he'd struck a nerve. He pushed a little harder.

"I didn't know that you were that close, but you know the rumor mill."

"We're not, just kindred spirits."

Douglas backed off, but it was common knowledge that the governor had considered ditching his wife for a staffer some months earlier.

A moment of silence passed while the waiter straightened the table and placed the lunch plates.

"So, I'll ask again. How would the governor like a partner - one that would add value, and I mean social value, as well as, dollars?"

Alexa picked up a bread-stick and pointed it in Douglas' direction.

"We'll be taking a risk letting ZEN anywhere near this project. You may be new to the organization Douglas, but remember, ZEN spied on its customers to get filthy rich and then turned against the very government that enabled them. And, what makes you think that ZEN's terms could, in any way fit, the zeitgeist of our project?"

"What would you say to a contribution of five billion dollars, seats on each other's boards and full transparency?"

"I don't think you heard what I just said." Alexa half stood, and was ready to leave when the waiter returned with the salad course, but Douglas' host continued. She knew that whatever the waiter heard would make the local and then national papers.

"Are you crazy? Why should we pay you anything over your bare costs, plus ten percent? It's ZEN that needs California not the the other way around."

Douglas played her media game, as the waiter withdrew. Neither, at this point knew whether the waiter was an Associated Press stringer, who'd bribed the restaurant manager to serve the couple.

"No, that's what I'm offering the project - five billion at zero interest. *And*, perhaps, I could even swing a negative interest rate."

Game, set and match, but Alexa did not flinch.

"What is it exactly that you want, Douglas?"

"To help. When we first saw the governor's outline for an unheard-of level of social change, our initial reaction was, here goes crazy California again, but then we thought that if we could apply our database techniques, using...."

"Yes, and I can guess - data mining."

"Well, yes, now that you have said it, data mining. What are the largest social problems that society faces? Drugs, both legal and illegal, weapons, obesity, diabetes, Alzheimer's, and that's just the tip of the iceberg? What if there was even half-a-chance of tackling them, not head-on, but through legislation and at the source?"

"So ZEN is thinking social experiments, when what the people need is welfare?"

"No, Alexa, nothing as iniquitous."

"If we can improve peoples' health, who knows what advances society could make? Who knows what talents exist in those who currently won't retrain, or those in a generational poverty trap, or those who can't get out of bed, because they're too unhealthy or drugged?"

Alexa was dubious, but she asked, "And those who can't be helped, will just stay and be taken care of?"

"Now you have the idea," Douglas answered enthusiastically.

"All through data collection."

"And some unseen behavior modification..." This time Douglas spoke tentatively expecting an automatic negative response.

"Unseen as in 'we'll supply food and entertainment and everything else you need, but we'll choose the brand and the contents.'"

Douglas didn't hesitate, with his fish on the hook.

"Can't you just see the possibilities? Food that is pesticide-free. Movies that entertain, without being corrosive and video games that don't teach violence.

Alexa laughed, as she said, "And 5G-enabled fridges that order food automatically."

"Yes, and the food will be bought through ZEN's *libre* purchasing system, which would supplant the food stamp program, for better monitoring."

Alexa was impressed by this comment and asked, "You have the power to arrange such a purchasing system with these suppliers? And we would have access to how the the drug, entertainment, food and grocery chains would be involved?"

And she was even more taken aback by his next comment.

"It would be your right, as a board member. I take it that you personally would want the seat on ZEN's board?"

Alexa suppressed a smile and then came the expected push-back.

"*If*, and, although you've put forth an interesting proposition, it is still an if, the governor wants ZEN to take part. I'll call you. How long are you staying in the Bay Area?"

Douglas held out his hand to say good-bye, but the gesture was not reciprocated.

"I am here for a few more days, but I would not take too long if I were you. Anna is not as patient as I, and you might find yourself in competition instead of a partnership. Her global membership is now over three billion, and *that* engenders a lot of confidence when it comes to ventures."

As the last words softly left ZEN's negotiator's mouth, and he was not one for loud public speaking, his counterpart was already entering the restaurant.

That went well, he joked to the waiter, who was now clearing the table.

"She was a really prissy thing," said the waiter out of turn.

"Yes, she was. And quite a powerful renegade."

And, Douglas had given the stringer the next day's San Jose Mercury News headline."

### **ZEN TO BACK 'THE PEOPLE'S' RENEGADE**

It was not quite three o'clock, and Douglas was in no real rush to get back to the city, so he asked his driver to give him the fifty cent tour of Santa Cruz. Rejoining the highway heading north, the road was completely open, which was not the case going South, where the lanes of almost stationary traffic signaled the beginning of a ten-mile afternoon crawl, out to Watsonville.

The driver saw in the mirror that Douglas was surprised by the volume of traffic, and he couldn't help but comment, saying, "They added a lane about ten years ago and the work took five years. If this was China, we'd have built a city the size of Chicago in less time. It was a real pain, with the construction work making the congestion far worse, and all that happened was that the bottleneck that was a couple of miles up, just moved a couple of miles down. Typical of local government money - spend, but don't spend clever."

Not another whingeing driver. Seems to be a pattern, Douglas thought, as he responded.

"Trust me. You'd not want to live in China. It all sounds good in the media, but there's no freedom there. None at

all."

"So, you'd live in Santa Cruz?" his driver asked.

"Certainly, why not, the town's beautiful."

"Think so?" came the response, as he turned onto River Street towards the ocean.

"Look over there," he said, continuing, "Look at all those tents. And that's just some of the homeless here, with more arriving daily, from places with stronger rules against panhandling and homeless camps. The city is strapped, but it somehow finds eighty thousand dollars a month to house a couple of hundred people in over a hundred tents. Hundreds of addicts toss used needles in parks and on beaches. If the clinic is downtown, the needles just end up in the bushes along middle class streets. It's just got real crazy and the city doesn't care. My mother lived here up to a couple of months ago, but when I saw the pairs of sneakers thrown over the phone wires outside her house, I knew that it meant that drugs were being sold there, so even though I didn't want to take her in, what else could I do? This used to be a great little surfing town. Real laid back, real cool. But now, with the homelessness and the drugs, the overbuilding, and don't get me started about the Hispanics. Don't think I'm being rude, but this town's fucked. And go to Fremont, or Oakland, or most other places, unless you live in the crazy expensive new-tech areas of Mountain View, Palo Alto or Sunnyvale, it's the same mess all over. So, I guess, at this point, sure, give me China."

"You don't think other countries have the same problems?"

"I don't care if they do, *this* is America. The home of innovation, and its time that our politicians got off their butts and got innovated."

Apart from this last comment, Douglas had listened without argument. This was no revolutionary talking, this was the voice of the common man, and, added to the taxi driver's comments, it made sense of Alexa's argument for drastic action.

Now, though, he just wondered if it was too late.

### Chapter XIII

## **Wonder Woman, and Friend**

A week passed before Amrit found the mental energy to focus on the task that he had accepted. And, for the first time, he was stumped. He knew that to properly, if not intrusively, monitor an individual's health there were far too many variables for the solution to be as simple as a smart-watch. But even though he was running at a reduced mental capacity, he was still one of the brightest minds in the industry, and he recognized the answer when he saw it.

Amrit was half asleep when Magda came in to deliver his post-breakfast vitamin injection and the inadvertent enlightenment.

"It's that time again, I'm afraid." she declared as she came through the door carrying the hypodermic tray.

They both knew that this event was not Amrit's favorite part of the day, and, it was because of this, that Magda had developed the habit of introducing a topic of conversation that would take her needle-shy patient's mind off what was to happen next.

"I do not know about you, but I believe that the American youth are finally, and lemming-like, going to go over over the precipice."

"What now, Magda?" a smiling Amrit asked, the diversion firmly established.

As Magda rolled back her patient's sleeve, she explained how a California games company was offering, to a number of selected players, subcutaneous sensor implants that would send feedback to the games company showing the different levels of excitement achieved during the game-play, and that once they had the empirical data, they would be able to develop even more excitement in their games.

"And, so many people have requested the procedure, that smart-phone apps are being developed for the players themselves to monitor their excitement in real-time."

As Amrit's arm received a small bandage, and the deed was now complete, Magda finished with, "Now, I know that you are a scientist, but please tell me, isn't that the craziest idea that you have ever heard?"

But Amrit didn't immediately answer, except to himself. That was when he thought, 'Eureka! We embed a vital signs monitor, about the size of a grain of rice, into everyone taking part!'

And, then, Amrit joined in laughing.

There was no such humor being experienced in the White House that day.

"Get me the governor of California on the line will you, Julia," requested the president, in an even less than his usually unfriendly tone, signaling that someone was about to receive a lambasting down the phone. Then he added, "And, after exactly two minutes, conference-in Wonder

Woman," using the name he had given Alexa Octavia Cortes, thinking that she looked and acted like the 70's TV show character."

Despite the early hour, the governor was in his normal jovial mood that morning.

"It's good to hear from you, Mr. president. I guess you saw the unfortunate PBS transmission."

"If you mean your treasonous announcement, you stupid bastard, then yes, the First Lady and I both did. You make one move in that direction, and I'll have the National Guard in your office so fucking fast it'll make your fucking head spin."

There was silence, as both men knew that the first to speak would concede a point.

After fifteen seconds or so, during which time the president was watching CNN, the line clicked, as a third voice asked, "How may I help you Mr. president?"

"It is me that can help you, Alexa. I can help you correct the influence you have on your boyfriend who's also on the line as we speak.

The governor attempted to interject with, "I object Mr president...I think," but was spoken over.

"I also object governor. I object to the way that you have been manipulated into wanting to turn your state into a 1950's Moscow suburb. Apart from the lunacy and stupidity of the idea, there's no way that federal dollars would be committed to such a stupid project."

Alexa thought of telling the president that he was repeating himself, but sensibly let it go.

She then lowered the boom on him.

"We, I mean California, doesn't need Federal help, Mr

president. I believe we have the whole budget covered, and, in fact it should show a profit. We have an understanding with ZE..." and she was cut off mid-word by the governor. "I don't think we need to bore the president with the details, Ms. Cortes."

"I think you should," responded the president. "Because if you are to take in foreign money, and we both know where your Trotsky'ite of a girlfriend would get it from, then that would indeed be insurgency at best, and more likely treason."

"No, Mr. president it would be an investment. Just like your company's overseas properties." The governor immediately regretted the reference to the president's own businesses, but he had, so he just continued, "And, anyway, we do not need investment, California will be investing in itself. We will pay all the bills and reap all the social benefits. If anything, our contributions to Washington will increase as corporate taxes will improve, and it's likely that we will no longer need any funds from Washington. When you see what can be achieved, you will not only thank us, but want to adopt the the system nationally."

"And you will make the lame walk?" the president joked, but left no time for a response. "So, tell me how all this is going to happen, Alexa." His voice softened, with his interest now piqued. The concept of savings and the word 'influence' had caught his imagination."

The governor of the Golden State said nothing, as they proceeded two exchanged ideas, only to discover that she had not only added to the project, but she'd basically rewritten it. Both men of power were told that mandatory mental and physical healthcare manipulation were to be enforced on this new population, as would civics, and good old-fashioned common sense. And, after fifteen minutes of conversation, and with much to think about, the Leader of

the Free World thanked the rebel for her time and then invited her to the White House for further discussions.

Perhaps she was Wonder Woman, he thought, as he replaced the receiver.

He quickly picked it up again.

"Julia, I want a complete dossier on Alexa Octavia Cortes, and I mean back to the name of her great- great-grandfather, on my desk within the hour." And, having lost interest in the fake news he had been watching on CNN, he was salivating at the possibility of the dual black arts of 'tracking' and 'influence.'

His next call was to the San Francisco Homeland Security home office of Colonel Dauber.

"Rich, what do we know about California 20/20?"

"In what sense, Mr. president?" There were no pleasantries exchanged, as Dauber hated being called Rich, and not Richard, as the president well knew. "I take it you mean how's California going to vote?"

"No, Dick. I'm referring to the massive social program that the governor wants to implement; social welfare for the unemployed, the undocumented and those just wandering through."

And, the president explained what he'd just been told by *Wonder Woman and her friend*, as he now described them.

"I'd say that was pretty much ridiculous, Mr president. With companies leaving the Golden State in droves, as they are, there's no way that such a plan could house ten thousand people, let alone the millions they're talking about. Were you told how they were going to fund it?"

And bored with yet another annoying phone call from his boss, with the memory of the ZEN debacle forefront in his mind, he tapped open his phone's calendar, as he spoke, to see who he was supposed to be lunching with.

The president was in no mood talk to his expert, if they knew less than he did, so he dismissed the career professional with, "Find out about it, Rich, and call me back within half an hour."

The order unnerved the subordinate. It had been this president's idea to use ZEN, the government's data provider, to implement VALHALLA to infiltrate the global leader's private information and indiscretion data, but then he washed his hands of the whole affair after it blew up in the colonel's face. It had simply been the colonel's ability to keep the real source of the program away from Congress that had kept the colonel in his position, as West Coast Homeland Security Chief, and that meant that he really did serve at the 'president's pleasure;' both knew it and he hated it.

So, like a good soldier, he followed the order, and found that he was possibly the last person in California to have heard of California 20/20.

He called the president back.

"It's serious, Sir. The manifesto is all over the internet and *Neuvo California* flags are flying on trucks from San Diego to Eureka and across the Central Valley."

"It must have taken time to have the flags made, if nothing else," responded the Commander in Chief. "How the hell can the government be the last to know about this? Where was the intelligence on these people?"

Dauber paused before answering, "Well, Sir, after ZEN stopped feeding us data, it has been an uphill battle to reinvent their wheel. We almost had to start from scratch,

as most of their algorithms were proprietary. "

"Wasn't *their* wheel, *our* wheel, Dick? Wasn't it built with government money?"

"Yes, Sir, it was, but they retained the rights."

"And what else did they get under the contract with us?"

"They could access our hardware - wherever it was installed."

"Let me get this right, Rich. You're telling your president, that a private company has the legal right to track Americans, without the government having access to what is seen and heard, and *we* cannot access that same tracking data because, we ourselves, neither have the right to demand it, or the software systems in place to access it?"

"Effectively, Sir, yes. But we *are* getting there. In a year, possibly less, we will have the same abilities."

The president picked up on an intonation in the Homeland Security Chief's voice that sounded less than positive. "What was hiding in your last comment, Dick?"

"Well, Sir. Last week the Chinese telecoms company that you slapped an embargo on..." and he hesitated, "Was our new main contractor."

"That's a real fuck-up Rich."

They were the best choice, Mr. president. If you remember, Sir, you openly endorsed them in a press conference. Of course, that was before their espionage issues came up. But, by that time, the contract had been signed."

Both men knew that this was not going well.

"Why not the Russians, Dick?" There was no humor in the president's voice, and he added, "I want a full report on California 20/20, and those behind it, or you and your wife

better go and buy cold-weather clothing for your new posting."

"So, what do you need to know, Mr president, and what's your time frame?"

"Everything and yesterday," came the expected response. "And, the data on Alexa Cortes needs to be at the top of the list, as I'd say that this was her plan. You should also know, Dick, that it *really* bothers me that I'd not heard of her until this morning."

And in a voice normally reserved for incompetents, the president added, "*Do* I make myself clear Colonel?"

"Crystal, Mr. president," the colonel replied to a dial tone.

Long before the line went quiet, the combat veteran of two wars and a number of skirmishes, good husband and doting father, and, most of all, a proud patriot, knew that there was only one person in the world that could assist him. He was going to have to deal with Anna Eisenberg again, and not only had she got the better of him last time they tangled, but she doubtless held a grudge. *He also* he knew that his Commander in Chief was up to his old tricks again, as when the word 'tracking' issued from the president's lips it was said with delight. Here we go again, Dauber thought, back between a rock and a hard place.

When he'd returned from Rome, after Roger de Courcey had been assassinated, those many months ago, the once-proud government executive had come back like a bear with a sore head. He promised his family that he'd be a gentler, happier Colonel Dauber. Deep down though, he knew that he'd never live down how Anna had got the better of him, so he'd never made the transition back. And now, with the president looking to send him into battle with ZEN again, he wasn't sure, who, if it was called for,

he'd side with. After all, if ZEN genuinely did have a way to deal with unemployment and the homeless, because the president's own policies were far from Christian, he thought, perhaps, just perhaps, this time he'd play for the other side.

Looking across the room at the silver-framed photo of his wife and children, he silently acknowledged that for some time now, life had left him feeling disappointed. This sentiment was echoed by his wife, who, while inside the manicured grounds of the elegant 18th century Presidio home, enjoyed the air of quiet refinement. However, that feeling of refinement was greatly disturbed by the dirty, noisy and homeless infested areas that started at the park's elegant gates and spread along many miles to the Mission District and further. She was happy that Josh and Abigail had stayed back East after their college days. There was no need for them to see what had happened to the beautiful city of their childhood years. Not many could say they were brought up with such beautiful views of the Marin Headlands, or, literally, being able to touch the gleaming red Golden Gate Bridge, but *they* could. Recently though, Sara had begun to speak of how she missed their New England farmhouse.

He looked down at the photograph of Sara and the children on his desk and silently promised the quietness in the room that he'd retire after this case was closed.

## Chapter XIV

### *Veritas*

There is little doubt that the 'black box' that governs foreign exchange transactions is loved by banks, and *bureaux de change*, worldwide. After all, as the *LIBOR* scandal of recent years proved, is anybody really in charge; does anybody *really* now why, on a given day, the US dollar might convert to, say, one fifteenth of a Swiss franc, ninety or so Japanese yen, or twenty Mexican pesos? It's all incomprehensible to the buyers and sellers, so what's for the transactors not to love?

As the White House was just waking up to the possibility of California 20/20, they were firmly behind the curve, as Anna Eisenberg's focus had moved on to establishing the *libre*. She knew that, having the State of California adopt it, even as just an accounting system, it would make the world's financial headlines. And she congratulated herself for involving Douglas, as his convincing the credit card processors to come on board was pivotal to ZEN's success. It was unheard of for anything other than a currency to be accepted, and by them doing so, they were unknowingly signing their own death warrants. She knew it would only be a matter of time before ZEN's many billions of members having *libre* accounts would force businesses to accept the 'tokens.' And, following the release of the *libre* payment app, and ZEN's cloud carrying all the transactions on their own servers, neither banks nor card processors would be needed.

Perhaps, Alexa Cortes could be a sticking point, but, from what Douglas was reporting back, even she was

malleable to the point of using the world's social media company as a Socialist tool. Her acceptance of ZEN, and possibly being open to receiving stock options, was to give truth to Mary Poppin's saying that 'a spoonful of sugar does indeed help the medicine go down.'

The only danger, as Anna saw it, was that although Douglas was a banker, he was also a good man, and that might move him in the direction of altruism. She would have to ensure that her main objective was his 'job one,' and that everything else was secondary. As for the California governor, Ms. Cortes seemed to have him ready for the slaughter. The irony being that his political epitaph as 'the man who lost California' would be delivered by a woman who could treat him just as disposable, as he'd treated his wives.

But Anna knew that there was still a major player, possibly the most important and probably the most difficult, to bring to heel.

She needed *Veritas*, and Marec had a reputation for being an utter bastard to deal with.

But the call needed to be made.

"Marec, I have Anna Eisenberg on the line," said the sweet-voiced secretary.

A click later.

"A pleasant surprise, Anna. I haven't seen you since, where was it now, yes, of course, Cannes. How are you, and I was so sorry to hear about Adam, but then I always thought that you could do better job running ZEN. And by the sounds of it, you have." His arrogance poured down the phone like dark molasses."

"I'm very well Marec," her response friendly but short.

"Me too," he lied, followed by, "Life is good."

But that was far from true as, just a few days earlier, Marec had had too much fun in London and was feeling ragged even for him.

That morning in the hotel had been the last straw. The media had been hounding his industry for what seemed like months, and the continual congressional hearings were nothing but a sideshow. They knew nothing of how the technology worked, and why it was so addictive. They might as well have been wearing horse-hair wigs and writing with quill pens. Who were they to say what the people should have, what was safe and what was not. While these groups of self-serving ignorants were trying to reign his technology, the military were actually recruiting his young user-base to run real war games using the quick-fingered technology that *Veritas* had hooked them on. Now, perhaps enough was enough, and the billions that he was to receive from whoever had blackmailed him might just be enough reward for having the right idea at the right time and warped enough to make his killing. So, as Anna came on the line he wasn't as angry as he could have been.

"Well, Adam said that he'd get *Veritas* one day, but I didn't think that you'd be following in the bastard's footsteps."

"Sorry, I don't follow you."

Marec thought for a moment."

"Lev Oblomov?"

"I don't understand. Adam bought some things from him, but I only met the man once, and that was in Bridgetown. And she briefly explained the interaction with Dauber and Lev, and how she'd thought him innocent."

Taken aback by Anna's open-handed reply, Marec explained what had happened to him at the hotel.

"So, you assumed that I'd strong armed you?"

"Like husband, like wife," he replied, adding, "Adam swore that he'd get *Veritas* one day."

Anna was briefly impressed that Adam had thought that way, but didn't comment.

"I don't work that way, but I did want to make you an offer. It would have been a fair one, and you could have cashed out at the top of the market."

She paused.

"You do know that Congress wants to destroy you?"

"I thought so, but I don't know why." He was being open, and Anna was open in return.

"It's because your games disrupt family life. They're so addictive, that they work like a drug, and, to be honest, I think they have gone too far."

"So you're okay with real drugs being legalized, but my games are more dangerous?"

Anna didn't reply, so Marec continued, "Tell me. Has your friend in homeland security taken me out of the game? Is that who now has the option?"

"I doubt it because of the value that you'll get when the option is exercised."

Marec didn't skip a beat, "That's why I thought it was you. There aren't many companies capable of paying tens of billions of dollars, without extreme shareholder push-back."

"We'd have proposed a share swap with you, "Anna

commented.

"So who? Who stitched me up?" Marec asked angrily.

"Perhaps we should think countries, not companies, and, as I said, I don't think that Washington has the appetite for such an expense, and if they did what would be their purpose?"

"Think further East?"

"That would be my guess, or possibly Far East."

"But they have their own technology, and, in a couple of years, they'll get in front of us; they're both brilliant and state controlled."

"So back to the East?"

"Anna thought for a moment."

"Will you let my people audit your complete catalog? I know it's a risk, but our tools will be faster at finding anything hidden, and I promise that not one line of your code will be used, without your permission."

"You know I can't do that Anna."

"You have no choice, and I've given you my word that anything compromising found will be destroyed and without being so much as looked at, let alone copied."

"Marec thought for a moment."

"I can't send it over the internet, for the obvious security reasons."

"Use a courier," Anna replied.

"Where do you want it?"

"Anna gave the Geneva address of a sanitarium."

"Why there?"

"Because that's where the person who's going to review the code is, and, before you ask, you won't know this person, but he's not the only one who's up to the task, and he's trustworthy. And, when this is over, you and I will meet in person, to structure a deal that will make sense."

As Marec put down the receiver, he wasn't sure that he'd not have been better off just sticking to Lev's deal, but deep down, he knew that was a fantasy. Why would blackmailers be honest enough to go through, with their end? They had him by the balls, and they both knew it. So why did they want control if they could not use his company? Did they want something that someone else wanted, and if they were from the East, and they knew that ZEN wanted it, then perhaps their real target was ZEN.

And that made this all the more interesting.

But that was not the case for Anna, who vividly remembered meeting Lev that day at the Sandy Lane Hotel, after all, it's not every day that the head of Homeland Security takes a girl to lunch. And, especially not to vet a supposedly international political manipulator. She'd thought him innocent. Nothing more than a high-end salesman, supplying exclusive trinkets to the world's super wealthy. She'd been convinced that he'd just used the fitting name LobbyShop, as the hotel lobby had been the place where he first conducted business. Now though, it would seem, that she had misjudged the man thought to

be the fly, and not the spider, and that worried her. If he had an interest in *Veritas*, was he aware that their interest was mutual, or was it a fluke? Either way, it would not matter that the price could go up, as she could easily outbid whoever his masters were, but how much did they know of her plans, as any leak of ZEN's end-game could result in a disaster.

There was only one way to find out. So she called Douglas to deal with it.

"It's been a while Lev. How are you," asked Douglas casually.

"Fine, thank you, Douglas, and I hope that the Patek is still keeping good time."

"It is, but that's not why I am calling. I am currently working on a project with Anna over at ZEN and it seems that we have a property interest in common."

"We do?" responded Lev cautiously.

Douglas told Lev what he knew about his meeting with Marec, continuing, "You and I have known each other for many years, and, if what you did to Marec became public knowledge, you know that your business would be dead. Instantly. So I'd like you to tell me who are you working for and why?"

The direct attack took Lev aback."

"I had no choice, Douglas. I was called on by the people that helped me to the West those many years ago. I thought they had forgotten me."

Douglas guessed at the meaning of the response.

"You have picked the wrong side my friend.

"The agent that contacted me declared that there are party members who believe that America is about to become a Socialist country. I believe that they still dream about films like Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* and Mamoulian's *Summer Holiday*, and the sentiment that ran

high until Senator McCarthy's HUAC doused the flame. They remember the famous writers, actors and even politicians that believed that the way forward for America was Socialism. Of course they are naive to think that the truly powerful would accept anything other than naked Capitalism, and that all others would be crushed. No hole was deep enough for them to hide i, and even the famous 'Tramp' was refused reentry to America in 1952; an irony that a wealthy and influential Socialist was banished back to his Capitalist Switzerland."

He paused.

"It was as if none of these well-meaning souls understood that the business of America is business, and Socialism stifles innovation, so now for California to want to turn its clock back sixty years, or so, is indeed peculiar. And especially to the political system that brought down my 'Mother Country' after almost a century of its people suffering."

Douglas paralleled Lev's words to California 20/20, but dismissed it as a ridiculous coincidence. Instead, he said, "Perhaps they now have a better mousetrap?"

But Lev knew differently, "There is no better mousetrap when it comes to the American people and politics, my friend. The rich are the rich, and they leverage the system, while everybody else looks for crumbs, not knowing that the cake has left the plate."

"Yes, Lev, but it *is* possible to become rich even in a Socialist society. The Scandinavians have proved that."

As Lev began to answer, he wondered which one was the more naive.

"Possible, but unlikely, because its not as it used to be. America has become a system of monopolies. The media, internet, transport and the drug companies, and all the

industries that will exist after robotics take over, pay a fortune to lobbyists, while pretending to be accountable to their customers. If the authorities that are to govern the industries are themselves surreptitiously governed by the industries, what hope is there for any public benefit? It started long ago, with the steel companies, railroads and newsprint companies, and, is there really a difference now and have things really changed, except for the worse? If the internet giants make changes to any of their policies, all they have to do is email the changes to their customers, and *voila*, the changes are law. If the media-streaming services wish to raise rates, all they have to do is make an announcement, and it's done. When toll roads, drug prices, airline tickets, gasoline, energy, and other costs all go up, they cannot be argued with. So, my friend the only option to becoming rich, is the invention of theft."

"That's a very narrow and negative outlook, Lev. What if an American doesn't want to become rich, but just comfortable and just living within their means?"

"Good luck to them. Jobs disappear and companies offer part-time employment to avoid payroll taxes and benefits, and that's while cities offer massive inducements to the largest companies that are the worst offenders. That is why the fastest growing groups in America is the unemployed and the homeless."

"So you would now chose your old country?"

"The choice was not mine. My country chose me. And if you had been where I was last week, you would know why I agreed. Now I must go, as I am late for an event, but before I do, Douglas, for your sake as well as mine, please do not call me again."

Lev was standing at the rail of the celebrated Sky-Garden on Fenchurch Street, the tallest open-air location

in the city, taking a breather from celebrating the launch of the new thirty-fifth floor auction room, when his handler appeared unexpectedly.

"Good evening, Comrade," Lev said in jest.

"I have a message for you from home, Tovarich," the handler replied, but there was no lightness in his voice.

Then Lev watched in horror as two men, that were flanking his handler, moved, as in a ballet, to pick a passing waiter up by the elbows and flip him over the edge of the shoulder-high railing. The effect was cartoon like, until the screech of brakes and the alarming sounds of car horns confirmed the ghastly reality that Lev had just witnessed.

Lev clutched the rail to steady himself, and, as the handler passed, he touched Lev's shoulder and casually said, "I understand that you have been speaking to Douglas Wilde, Tovarich. Do not do it again."

Lev could not recall how he got home that evening ,and he just assumed he'd had the forethought to have left before the police cordoned off the floor. He knew that he would be questioned, but not until the guest list had been produced.

When his cellphone rang, after what seemed like an indeterminable amount of time, he was still shaking.

He saw Douglas' name as the caller, and he let the phone go to voicemail.

He then blocked the number

No message was left.

## Chapter XV

### **In Vodka. *Veritas***

On November 11th, 1989, the day after the Berlin Wall came down, the skinny twenty-year old Jonas Bulaitis, and his equally undernourished eighteen-year-old sister Magda, stepped over the rubble to a new life. Neither Jonas' record, as an amateur pimp and low level black-market hoodlum, or that of his sister, Magda, a respectable nanny, survived, as, across the crumbling empire, the official buildings were burned to the ground.

Or, so Jonas thought.

And, the following day, with their past supposedly behind them, Jonas, always a loner, handed Magda half of his two hundred US dollars savings, and declared that he going to London. Magda, thankful for the money, but relieved that they had separated, had different plans.

In London, Jonas quickly discovered that the black market was ruthlessly territorial, and the occasional beating told him that there were no gaps for a petty criminal, which is all that his life skills extended to. He lived on the street when a hostel bed was not available and begged food when he could not steal it. He was the mirror image of Lev Oblomov, and the other refugees that managed to establish their future outside the grip of Moscow. Magda was another story. She interviewed well and was hired in Geneva as an orderly, and, taking courses, and finally having earned a degree, became a physiotherapist.

She joined OneWorld.

And that was when her troubles began.

She accepted Jonas as a 'friend,' and he came to visit.

He arrived without notice, and, although he could not stay at her small apartment at the clinic, he found a hostel

half a mile away. Over a lake-side lunch of liverwurst and French bread, he cried out his tale of woe. Life had been unkind to him. Ignoring that he had chosen the path of least resistance, peddling black market cigarettes, fake Louis Vuitton bags and bogus art and watches, he claimed he hadn't had the same lucky breaks, as she'd had.

She listened dispassionately, that was, until he made clear his real reason for his unwelcome visit.

"You look after all these wealthy sick people, and they must give you presents," he started.

Knowing what was to come next, Magda cut him off. "It's expressly forbidden under Swiss law." She wasn't certain it was a fact, but it sounded good.

Jonas wasn't giving up.

He'd spent his last few pounds traveling across Europe, and now he was stranded. And, he suspected, that the Swiss authorities did not tolerate beggars. Surely, his sister wouldn't allow him to be jailed for vagrancy.

So he had to keep on at her. "Aren't you pleased to see your bother again?" he asked.

"I might have been, if just wanting to see me had been your reason for coming," she replied reticently. "Instead you're try to strong-arm me. So, I'm not so sure. How long are you planning to stay, because I can't support you. I just can't let you freeload off me. I earn well for a single person, but not for two. And, anyway, you won't qualify for a Resident Card."

Jonas' attitude changed at this stark reality.

His own sister didn't sound like she wanted to help him at all.

"But I got you out of East Germany, and this is how you repay me?" he pleaded.

"Drinking too much cheap vodka has softened your brain. *I* got us out. You were so drunk all the time, *you* hadn't even noticed that The Wall had come down. So, don't come here and tell me your tale of woe. Because I

don't feel a bit sorry for you."

Jonas sat in silence, just tearing off pieces of bread that he then tossed to the ducks at the edge of the lake. His sister's years of independence and freedom had given her a voice.

Little Magda had changed.

"You'd rather look after rich old people than your own flesh and blood?" he spoke, this time with a feigned sadness.

"Yes, if that's the alternative."

Jonas wanted to curse his sister, but that, he recognized, would only work to his detriment.

"So tell me about the people that you take care of."

"Why, so you can go rob their houses?"

"That was unfair. You know I wouldn't do that."

"Do I?" And she let the words hang in the air.

Magda thought for a moment. She did have some information that, perhaps if she shared with him, he make him go away.

"I could give you some business information that's not public knowledge yet."

"What can I do with that ?

"You could sell the information to someone with money enough to buy lots of shares before the information is made public. It's called 'insider trading.' It's illegal, but lots of rich people do it."

"I know what insider trading is," he said indignantly, but he didn't. But he couldn't let his little sister know that. "But who would trust me? I don't have any connections."

She racked her brain for anything that she'd heard that might be useful, and, thinking of nothing else, she gave him what she had. "ZEN is going to buy *Veritas* Systems."

"When?" he asked, seeming excited.

"Not sure. But I think soon. I overheard some executives talking about some political event called California 20/20, and they were going to pay for it by what

they called 'harnessing *Veritas*.' It didn't make sense to me, but it sounds like maybe it does to you?"

"It just might," Jonas said, his corrupt mind now in spin. He was smiling as he continued, "Perhaps, if I find the right partner, I can come up with something."

Magda was surprised to hear that anyone with intelligence might want to know her loser of a sibling. "So now, will you go and leave me alone?"

Jonas had softened, "Of course, dear sister. And if what I have in mind works, I'll come back for you."

"Don't bother," his little sister replied, with a tone of dismissal, continuing, "I'm happy here in my nice small clean world. And I want it to stay that way."

Magda, relieved to get rid of Jonas so easily, gave him the fare back to London.

As they parted, his mind was hyperactive on how to benefit from what he'd just heard. He leaned instinctively to blackmail, as that had worked back in East Berlin, when he'd sold discretion to businessmen that he'd had secretly filmed, doing things with his girls, that their wives would not have appreciated. But *Veritas*' CEO's squalid lifestyle was common knowledge, so how could that be used against him? But, if a deal was only half struck with ZEN, then perhaps he would find a way to capitalize on it, or interfere in it to his advantage.

And, then he came up with a twist on the classic blackmail leverage idea. All he needed was a video of one of Marec's escapades to influence him into a side deal.

Jonas Bulaitis' years, under the yoke of his Communist Party oppressors, had taught him that only dreams were necessary to survive the bad times, and, with his new dream, his first-class journey back to his South Woodford bed-sit, thanks to the hand-out from his sister, was a lot happier than his trip out.

He needed two aspects to have any chance of success. The first, an instrument of leverage, he believed he could find, but the other was a front man, as no one, let alone a billionaire, would take seriously any threat that he could present. And, the front man needed somehow to be already associated with Marec's kind, and that posed the problem. Otherwise, why should they even meet with him, let alone buy into a blackmail scheme?

For days, he wrestled with the idea, as he would need to have someone in place before approaching the programmer.

Then the TV delivered the answer.

It was around 5 PM Saturday afternoon when the soccer game ended on the television, and, having applied a little too much Vodka as a thinking stimulant, *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* started before he could find the remote to it off. It was not a program that, under normal circumstances, he would have watched, but in a light alcohol-induced glow, thanks to his great prospects, he left it on.

As the interviewer switched away from drooling over the images of super-yachts and estates in the South of France, a sedately smiling Lev Oblomov was asked if he would ever divulge, to the viewers, his fabulously wealthy client list, and some of their favorite objects of desire. Naturally, Lev declined, but, with a twinkle in his eye, he declared that he'd recently delivered one of the supposedly lost Faberge Easter eggs to a software mogul.

It was as if Jonas had been struck by lightning.

He instinctively knew that anyone who had access to such jewels, all of which were snapped up by oligarchs, as soon as they came onto the market, had to have tremendous contacts. And, more importantly, anyone with a Georgian surname, with such contacts, must be an ex-informer and probably was still working.

He'd had enough experience with the NKVD, on the

victim's side of the desk, to pass as an interrogator, when he contacted Lev. And Lev would be unlikely not to take him at face value. Believing that he now had his front man, he thought twice about cutting in the programmer who'd be going to the Dark Web for the video of Marec. But then, would what he was planning work as a bluff? Probably not, so the programmer would be needed.

The blood surged through Jonas' veins as he poured himself another very large vodka to celebrate.

And, by the time the bottle was empty, he was fast asleep on 'fantasy island.'

The next morning was not an easy one for Jonas. He'd never quite got the hang of celebrating before the success of a venture, and, what celebrating he did before the event, was always excessive.

He went to his local library, and, by simply searching, 'How to Contact the Dark Web,' he did so. He was amazed at what was available. There was credit card data linked to national insurance numbers, addresses and telephone number; child trafficking, drug purchasing, tips on drug purchasing phishing and how to blackmail for Bitcoin and more that he didn't understand. Why hadn't he found this gold mine earlier, he wondered. Paging through the lists of available hackers for hire, and extreme social activists, he was amazed at the variety of instant crime at his fingertips. If he'd wanted to have someone hack into coal-fired power stations, there were at least twenty to choose from, but the one listing that caught his eye was for 5G interference, and, not knowing what that was, he connected with them out of interest. It was a blind alley, but the referral he was given, was for a hacker that offered corporate disruption services.

The hacker was known as MissyZ, and he made contact.

Missy Z was a refugee from a Boston-based venture-

capital firm that funded much of London's East End slum development. She'd become disenchanted with how the residents were dealt with, as their wonderfully gritty East End of London was being turned into Singapore. In many ways, she was a typical hacker-for-hire. A professional with a distaste for the modern world, she'd entered beauty pageants to put herself through college, coming out with an MBA and a minor in Electrical Engineering. Although she'd all but revolutionized her university's computer systems, it was because she was attractive, that she'd been hired as the public face of a large Shoreditch development. And, it was only later that she understood that it had been with good reason that she had been shouted at, and her Mercedes had been vandalized. She had naively believed that her company acted in the best interest of the locals, but that was until they syndicated the project to China and brought in builders that simply had their eyes on the prize. The stores that had come in were of no use to the locals and were better suited to Bond Street or Rodeo Drive, and the affordable housing promised was to be so far out of London, as to be moot point, and the payments to the Council for the leases, barely covered the city's ongoing pension obligations *and* gave nothing back to the community. But what finally turned her against the project, the company and the area development, was Brexit. The Council, when it expected to share in a percentage of the profits lost out because the properties never sold. The people would be cheated again. She had a total dislike of megalithic companies, and had she been aware that Jonas' target was going to be *Veritas*, she would have done the work for free. And she wasn't alone in hating Marec and the other Valley emperors, for what they were doing to San Francisco real estate prices, through its overpaid and IPO-rich workers.

And Jonas Bulaitis had lucked out in more ways than one.

MissyZ already had seen a video of Marec, that would not only all-but destroy his company, but earn him some years in prison. The information had been collected in the government-instigated dragnet code-named VALHALLA that had been shut down by ZEN, before any of the information was made public. And, she knew how to get into *Veritas* code, without being noticed, to insert it.

But he couldn't just call Lev out of the blue, even though LobbyShop was a listed number. He needed an approach that would guarantee Lev's cooperation.

It took two days, but again, the Dark Web delivered. The price, that of hocking his watch; the last piece that he owned that had any intrinsic value.

But it was a bargain.

Not only was Lev listed as a dormant agent of a foreign power, but his 1990's burner-phone number was included in the price.

Luck, so far, was on the side of the blackmailer, and it continued.

When Lev's phone rang that day, and Jonas addressed him as, 'Tovarish,' Lev, all too naturally, assumed it was time for the *sleeper* to be woken.

## Chapter XVI

### **Snakes and Ladders**

It had been the routine monitoring of Lev Oblomov, at the Sky-Garden 'suicide,' that had linked him with the small-time hoodlum, Bulaitis. But, although no connection had been made, other than they had been standing near

the waiter who'd decided to take the fast way down to street level, the event was appended to both men's files as a 'blue note.' When a facial recognition software sweep of the previous month's central London area put them together outside the Albert Memorial, the link was confirmed, and the note changed to 'red.' When Lev met with Marec Winger, Winger was given a 'blue' mention. The Swiss added a mention of Anna's visit to Douglas Wilde. The US noted the linkage of Lev, Anna, Marec and Douglas, but then GCHQ Cheltenham, using its advanced array of super-computer-driven facial recognition software, following its citizen meeting with the Cortes woman, did what it was supposed to do.

It linked them all.

But, although most of the players were known, it was not known what Lev Oblomov was up to.

When the briefing note arrived in Colonel Richard Dauber's secure email, he immediately called the president, because, from past experience with this particular Leader of the Free World, he doubted that he'd been the first American to hear.

He was correct.

"So Dick, tell me, what's all this secret service stuff going on? Why should Russian handlers, international spies, a legit Brit finance man who lives in Switzerland, the arrogant head of *Veritas*, the delightful revolutionary, Ms. Cortes, and our own ZEN Corp. all be playing in the same sandbox? I won't even comment on the fact that waiters are not supposed to jump from rooftops at private parties, but I will ask you why you gave Lev Oblomov a clean bill of health, as I understand that he was at that party?"

The colonel found himself again at a loss when the president not only knew what he knew, but a lot more than what he knew."

"Well, Mr. president, it would seem..." But he got no further.

"Seem, Dick? Are you saying that there is no firm intelligence?"

"That's the case Mr. president."

"Then why don't we speak when there is some Dick? In the meanwhile, GCHQ have sent you their findings. Try not to jump to too many conclusions, will you?"

And, with that conscious insult, Richard Dauber had been dismissed. And, he knew why, as had he been the president, he'd have said worse. The colonel queried himself. What *was* this nonsense going on his backyard? Was Lev, who he'd been suspected of being all along? Had Anna played him yet again? Unlikely, he thought. She was no actress, and her sincerity would have been hard for her to fake. In which case, Lev had been a sleeper, and, although not active as thought to be, he now was, and, seeing the photo of the waiter in flight, there was no reason for that event other than he'd seen or overheard something. A simple case of right place, wrong time? And, if that was the case, and only Oblomov and Bulaitis were present had something been passed? The Brits had decided not to pick either of them up, and that was for the best. Now they were in play, and, as long as they weren't using burner phones, they could be monitored. That, left Anna and Douglas. Douglas was considered as pure as the driven snow, although he'd had a run-in with the Yakuza, the Japanese Mafia, when he worked in Tokyo. He'd thought to have retired after the unfortunate death of his wife, to become almost hermit-like, surrounded by a lifetime collection of art in his Zurich villa. What brought him out of retirement must be pretty special, and then there was Anna herself. Since she'd taken the reins at ZEN she'd become an unstoppable force, so the idea of her meeting another tech titan like Marec would probably be just some for sort of commercial tie-up. So that left Ms. Cortes, and

wherever she went these days, the governor seemed to follow. To his dismay, as hard as he could imagine, although some sort of matrix, nothing half-way sinister came to mind. He could link three at a time, even four at a time, but not everyone.

And then the obvious came to him.

He knew that ZEN was likely to be the states' partner in California 20/20. He'd heard that from more than one source. So, was the foreign agent, Bulaitis, targeting ZEN, using Lev as an intermediary between himself and Anna for some form of data collection for political influence? No, that wouldn't fly with Anna. She was a democrat. Anyway, not unless that was to be the cost of ZEN doing business with Alexa Cortes who was a rabid socialist. And, where did Marec and *Veritas* fit? He hated the Soviet Bloc that he'd grown up in, so there was no way that he'd join forces with any one associated with that past. Again, not unless they had something on him, which given his reputation with a Fellini-like existence, *was* just possible.

As much as he hated the idea, he would have to speak to Anna again. And it would have to be soon, because if people were *not* actually 'jumping' over balconies, a major scandal could rock the markets and he'd be instructed to start looking into Lev Oblomov's possible political involvement. And, instinctively, he knew that there were bigger issues at stake.

The colonel knew that he badly needed a game plan, and his first step was to frighten the truth out of Lev, who he perceived as the weakest link in the chain. But he wasn't the only person who wanted to speak to Lev, in fact there was quite a line, but Anna got to him first. His phone rang in Heathrow's first-class lounge, as he counted down the hours until he could board the plane to Barbados.

"What a pleasant surprise, Anna," Lev said, as relaxed

as he could be under the circumstances, but quietly praying that the call was a coincidence.

That morning, having shuttered his West London home, he 'd taken a car-share ride to the airport and was happy to wait the many hours, before using his emergency identity passport. He'd paid cash to fly to where he regarded home to be; the place where the local police were his friends, and, to date, no one remotely near him had ever been thrown to their death over a balcony.

"I believed in you, and I'm normally a good judge of character," Anna started, masking her anger. "It is because of me that the investigation into you was dropped. And I still do not believe that you are anything other than what you seem, so tell me, am I wrong?"

"I..."

But Lev had taken too long to start..

"Who are you working for? Obviously, *you* personally can't afford to buy *Veritas*?"

"I am not what you think I am. Let me explain how I come to be in this terrible situation, and, perhaps you will understand how you came to your conclusion about me. I was born in 1954 in the Black Sea port of Odessa, in the Ukraine, and I spent my early years as a drifter and with little education, but a lot of drive and moved to East Berlin around 1980. There I developed a love of the finer things in life when I apprenticed with a jeweler in Friedrichshein. And, when the Wall came down, I was one of the first to cross into freedom, and, via Hamburg, I found my way to the UK. I was prepared for change. I loved the West, having grown up listening to bootleg Beatles tapes, but not for the struggle to make good. Unemployed and hungry, I tried selling cheap jewelry bought from wholesalers to stores, but my venture failed because of the quality of the goods. I had a brainwave. Luxury goods to the wealthy delivered to where they stayed while on holiday; gifts for wives and girlfriends, or girls buying themselves presents

while in a relaxed vacation mood. I started LobbyShop. I spent my last few pounds on a good suit and visited the Dorchester and the Savoy, to find that my concept was welcomed by the concierge; the man who had the power to influence guests more than any other."

He paused.

"And, I was, as the British say, off to the races! Within three years LobbyShop serviced guests at the world's most exclusive hotels. If the Mandarin in Zug had a client that wished to purchase a watch and was known to only purchase the best, an email would be sent to the LobbyShop. My contacts would know that an 18k gold Harry Winston or Van Cleef & Arpels wristwatch was needed, with a similar shorthand used for an Hermes Kelly bag or a Chanel suit. As my influence in the ultra-high end of the market became so pervasive, and clients came to me direct, and included Gulf Princes and South American dictators, I moved to the level of handing them dedicated LobbyShop telephones."

He paused again, wondering if he was talking too much, but feeling the need to paint a full picture to perhaps the one person that could save him.

"Having been born in a coastal resort, I loved and appreciated hot weather. One visit to Barbados was sufficient to convince me to buy a property there, and, if my company was registered there, it would lend kudos to the operation and make the home and office costs deductible. When initial suspicions were raised, because of my international dealings, I was interviewed by MI6, but, having lived in East Germany, I wasn't overly fond of interrogations, so I refused to answer questions, and what they found most infuriating was that I refused to disclose my client list to prove that I was legitimate. And, that's when I became 'a person of interest' to the global intelligence community. Especially the country that I'd left."

There was a now deep sadness in his voice, as he continued, "But then my world changed. A first-generation mobile phone was delivered by special delivery. Along with the phone was a simple message, 'One day this phone will ring. And when it does, remember mapт 1881.' Of course, I knew it referred to the assassination of Czar Alexander II, but I have never spied or entered into anything unethical, let alone illegal, and that phone has never rung. That is, until few days ago when I was approached by a man who told me to meet with Marec and have him sign a document. I did what was asked of me, because I was afraid, and I am even more afraid now, thanks to an awful demonstration of evil, that I was right to do so."

Anna had listened to Lev's tone of voice, as much as his words, and was yet again convinced of the his sincerity.

"What are you going to do now?"

"I am supposed to somehow liaise with you, but I have not been told how, and..." he had decided not to mention the airport just as the information system announced his flight, so Anna broke into his sentence.

"Do what you must. We can always talk by phone." And the call was disconnected.

As Anna parsed the conversation, she was looking for reason why Lev's Eastern handlers, if that's who they were, would be interested in *Veritas*. It made no sense, as any such takeover would be blocked by the US government. So, was it to be just a bargaining chip, and if so, why had ZEN not been contacted? Douglas was the one who'd know. His mind worked that way.

And a phone call later, she also knew.

"Someone must have leaked our plans, Anna," he said, after he was brought up to speed on Lev's situation." Continuing, "That's the only way that anyone would know. And that's only you, me and Amrit, because we were the only ones who knew that we were going ahead."

"Why would Amrit talk to anyone?" she asked, in a tone

that suggested disbelief.

"He wouldn't. And that gives me a problem," Douglas said, wondering if somehow, and for whatever reason, he'd been taken for a fool.

"And you are sure about that, because the farm is at risk here," continued Douglas, in a voice that Anna had not heard before. And she knew that he was including *his* farm *and* his reputation. So, this businessman had sharp teeth behind his British suavity.

"Well, let's get him on the phone and ask," Anna responded in her *own* business voice."

It was Magda Bulaitis that intercepted the call, as Amrit was asleep.

"I can wake him if you'd like, but he has only just dropped off."

"No that's alright, Magda. Let him sleep," said Anna, knowing that sleep was currently a precious commodity to her other partner, continuing, "Tell me, has he had any visitors lately, or any phone calls."

"No, not to my knowledge?" came the honest reply.

"It's just that he shouldn't have any visitors while he recuperates, as his rapid recovery is indispensable to a project that he's working on."

"No, he sees no one, except for myself and his doctor. Those were your orders, and, unless the instructions are countermanded for medical reasons, we always follow our client's orders."

Magda was now concerned.

Had the knowledge that she'd imparted to her brother somehow triggered some form of information tripwire?

Anna informed Magda that a courier would be bringing Amrit some papers, and that no one but Amrit should be allowed to open the package. Would she then text 'your gift arrived safely' to two separate numbers in California, when Amrit has been given the package?

"Of course, as you request," Magda replied, but she was almost certain that Anna had picked up an intonation in her voice. If her involvement in any information leak was discovered, no matter how innocent, and this was not that neutral, then she would not only lose her job, but under Swiss secrecy laws, be jailed.

## Chapter XVII

### **Sanctuary**

The Alexa Cortes road show traversed California, as it traveled north to Klamath, east to Sacramento, west to Monterey and south to San Diego. And, as selected members of the California legislature were reviewing the final draft of California 20/20, it seemed she'd won the day. It had not been an easy task to set the locations for the first ten thousand homes, but it had been done, and, to the annoyance of the president, they were the cities that had declared themselves outside the law, by ignoring immigration laws. They were the so-called 'sanctuary cities.'

Initially, even for the sanctuary cities, the shortage of suitable land was a problem. But then many absentee landowners cashed in by selling land that was otherwise unusable, and were promised *gratis* installation of huge windmills to deliver free power to their farms and vineyards. And, with options on the required land, any of the hold-out councilors, mainly those who had generational ties to the areas, were approached by the organized groups of socialist-minded voters, and they too

fell in line. The local businesses had been easy to convince, as misunderstanding the project's goal, and instead seeing a potential pool of cheap labor, they all had been generous in their offers to fund media advertising campaigns and local rallies.

ZEN of course had been an incredible partner and had bombarded the eyes and ears of their multi-million California audience, so the info war was over before it started. It was to be a beanfeast for builders, their suppliers and white goods merchants, and when local dissenters voiced their fears of the social destruction of their neighborhoods, they were reminded of how the Native Americans must have felt, and that progress is never entirely pretty.

Tens of thousands of 5G internet antennas would power the data collection systems that would eventually finance the housing developments. And the data-driven health advances, even though the jury was still out on the safety of 5G, when it came to the effect on the general health of the community, would pay dividends. And, again, the argument for such technology, acknowledging that mistakes were possible, was that progress is not always pretty, and surely the end justifies the means. If millions of people that can't help themselves are to be taken care of, then what's a few broken eggs along the way to making the largest omelet the world has ever seen.

A whiff of greed and a lot of promised immigration reform, was on target to change one of the historically traditional states from red to blue.

As the still recovering Amrit paged through the *Veritas* code, it hadn't taken him long to isolate the rogue additions, and he was appalled at the video file that he found. He immediately called Anna to ask if she was familiar with the contents.

"Anna, do we *really* want to be associated, and, I mean in any way, with this man?"

Anna answered simply. "It's for good reason, Amrit. What his programmers have built would take us years to recreate, and then we'd have no guarantee of success. He may be not be a fine upstanding citizen, but his games are played by hundreds of millions of people globally, and that's what we need."

But Amrit wasn't convinced.

"But his games are a scourge on society. They are addictive and give nothing back. Why? Why in God's name do we need games?"

"*Because* they're addictive," replied Anna, continuing in a voice that sounded like she didn't wanted to get into a discussion. "That's exactly why we need them. Our internal merchandising in the games will generate tens of billions of dollars."

"But ZEN already makes that kind of money, and what do you mean by *internal* merchandising?"

Again, Anna found herself pushing back, but was not prepared to go into detail. Amrit was not a marketing person. He hated marketing. So, she answered, "WE could house every homeless person in California, and we could bankroll unemployment."

"Why would we want to?" asked Amrit, feeling frustrated, "We should find a way to employ people; not make them happy doing a soul-destroying, nothing."

"But most of the homeless are sick, and too many of the unemployed are obese. We could monitor their lifestyle and health and help develop drugs to ...."

It was Amrit's turn to be disrespectful. Cutting in to her pep-talk, he started, "What kind of Kool-Aid have you been drinking Anna?"

But she ignored his comment, continuing, "What if we could take political decisions away from government and give it back to the people. Don't you think that a

government should just follow the real honest will of the people?"

"And of course, their ideas will come from what they see online. Ideas that ZEN will support."

"If, what they are seeing is genuine, then yes!" Anna answered.

"So we should first house the people of California, and then tell them how to vote by feeding them the truth? And, I assume that we do the same state by state? Then what? Take the system international with ZEN quasi-operating a world government?"

Amrit paused, obviously upset.

"Why stop at telling politicians what to do? Why not develop a social scoring system? The people the algorithm deem to be *good* citizens will get more benefits, and those with anti-social tendencies will receive less. Every aspect of society could be streamed. Movies, TV, food, transport, music, and, of course let's not leave out, the news. You could achieve the sort of social engineering that writers have been predicting for almost a century."

Anna ignored the sarcasm in Amrit's voice and replied, "No, only political influence and only using the people's real voices and wishes."

"Anna, Anna. What's happened to you? When we first met, you seemed such a simple country girl, and now you want to be Empress of the World? Tell me how *you* see this madness unfolding?"

Anna explained how companies would limit their workforce to only produce the goods and foods that people actually needed. The money that the companies saved, by having a slim-downed workforce, would be contributed to ZEN's housing fund, which, combined with the revenue from the enhanced *Veritas* sales, would cover all the costs of the project."

Anna paused to let the concept sink in before continuing, "Imagine such advances, as instant psychiatric

diagnosis and treatment based on brainwaves?"

But Amrit's response was not what she had expected.

Amrit, the humanitarian was horrified, and the programmer in him was astounded at the complexity of what would be needed, and he had zero faith that any one human could create such a system.

"So, by extension, my task is to develop a system that could decide the instant state of an individual's body? ...A system that could distinguish between plain excitement and an impending heart attack, or whether a moment's melancholia generates the need for a sedative? In other words, create an artificial intelligence system that could take over from human decision making, by creating algorithms that are sufficiently intelligent to decide who needed what and how urgently.

Amrit was now deeply troubled, but he continued, "If you want me to create a system that can be programmed to identify forward behavior, I have to tell you that its not possible now and probably its time will never come, because it is an impossibility."

But Anna wasn't interested in how. That was Amrit's job, and she'd already moved on to another aspect to deliver what *she* saw as the *coup de grace*.

"ZEN is going to launch its own currency for this project. Every transaction would be carried out in our own currency. And the currency would live on ZEN's servers, so no card processors would be able to scrape off a commission."

Amrit looked out at the beautiful natural lake, as he started to speak, "I have never heard of anything quite so...."

But Anna stopped him before he could say anything that might damage their friendship, stating, "Don't you remember that we discussed all this when Douglas and I visited you?"

"I thought that we were just having a fantasy

conversation."

Anna wasn't prepared to let Amrit go that easily. He was needed.

"This is an opportunity that shouldn't be passed up, Amrit."

"What support do you have for this crazy scheme?"

"We have the California governor and most of the counties."

"Especially the sanctuary ones?"

"Well, yes, of course."

"Is everyone aware of the potential societal degradation?"

"What do you mean?"

"Does *everyone* understand exactly how much data you will be supplying to the pharmaceutical companies, product developers and marketing companies to meet the cost of the project?"

"Only on a need-to-know basis," Anna replied

"So, the authorities will know, but not the activists that are enabling you and certainly not the guinea pigs? And just how many people are you hoping to include in this project?"

"In total, possibly up to five million." Came the response.

"The number crashed around Amrit's head."

"*Five million?*" repeated an astounded Amrit. Continuing, "And I assume that this is why you sent me the *Veritas* garbage? You may not be as close to success as you think. Do you know who added the unauthorized patches in their software?"

"No, of course not," replied Anna.

"MissyZ."

"MissyZ?" The name seemed to mean nothing to Anna.

"Yes, I found her signature style in the code."

"Where do I know that name from?" Anna questioned herself out loud.

Amrit jogged Anna's memory, "Roger de Courcey was using her as a data supervisor to spoil the government blackmailing the global elite."

"Now I remember. But why should she become involved?"

"Perhaps she's heard of your plans and felt the need to step in."

"But she was on our side."

"That was when you represented a just cause, and, for her, that's all changed."

"So, now she's a blackmailer?"

"Not necessarily, but I'd say she obviously knows one."

It was at this point that Magda was overwhelmed by the need to speak.

"I suspect that she knows my brother, Jonas," came a voice without warning.

"Your brother?" asked a shocked Anna, worried about the eavesdropper. "Is that you Magda? What are you doing on the line? How much have you heard?"

"Everything, and I have to say that I'm with, Amrit. I was born into a country that couldn't even dream of what you are planning. It was a cruel, authoritarian regime that always knew best. That too started off as nothing, but a well-meaning experiment. Then, came the simple curtailment of freedoms and not questioning the decisions made by the government. You must be crazy to think, that of all places, it will be accepted in America.

Anna ignored Magda's comments.

"Are you working with your brother?"

"No, of course not."

"Then how did he know about our interest in *Veritas*?"

"I mentioned it to get him off my back. He arrived here out of the blue, and I didn't want him to stay. I thought that he'd go home to England and sell the information on."

"But he stepped into the deal instead? You do know that what you did was illegal under Swiss law?"

"I can only assume that," Magda replied coldly, waiting for the flood gates of wrath to open. But they did not.

"Where can we find our brother?"

"As far as I know, he's back in London. In some place called South Woodford.

"Now listen to me, Magda and listen carefully. We do not know each other. *This* conversation never took place. Now please get Amrit's things together in preparation for him checking out tomorrow morning. And, if all of this blows up, you will be terminally sorry."

And Anna disconnected the call.

Amrit was shocked to the core. Anna had not even said goodbye to him.

But Anna was even more distressed.

Could ZEN deliver if she lost Amrit? She had seen Adam attempt to deal with the genuinely inspired programmers. She'd seen first-hand how power went to their heads, and they no longer acted like employees, or felt bound by any directions. Regardless of their sex, they became *prima donnas*. It was their way, or they simply walked away from the project.

Richard Dauber was fed up to the back teeth with the attitude coming out of the Oval Office. He longed for the days when villains were soldiers and spies from competitive nations, and not individuals with grudges, or worse, those that had a bad childhood. And, when his phone rang, he was almost pleased to hear from Anna Eisenberg. At least she had standing in the world, and, more importantly, some class.

But, even more importantly, it saved him from having to call her.

Anna politely asked after the colonel's family, and could tell from his voice that things were not going well for the patriotic, multi-decade veteran, and she launched straight

into her reason for calling.

"What do you know about Magda and her brother, Jonas Bulaitis?"

"I've never heard of them. Why?" deciding that it was not a good time to share what he knew.

"They are blackmailing someone I know, someone important, and this person cannot go through the proper authorities because of the nature of the blackmail content."

"It sounds like they have a problem then."

"Can you help?"

"I doubt it, and, after the trouble that you gave me last time we interacted, I have to say that I have no real inclination to do so."

"What if it was for the country?"

"Not again, Anna. Which one of the president's schemes have you decided to stop today?"

Anna took this strangely deprecating answer to confirm that not all was well with the Homeland Security chief, and it gave her the confidence to go into her reason for calling.

"You are joking aren't you? I thought that the Oval Office was the only really crazy place in this country."

But his voice was more humorous than dismissive, so she let out a bit more rope.

"We both know that unemployment and immigration are eventually going to destroy the US, if someone doesn't do something, and the window for doing so is already all but closed."

"And you don't trust Washington to figure things out?"

"Do you?" she answered.

There was no answer, and that convinced Anna that this career security, and family man, whose desk featured prominently a photo of his family that looked like the cover of County Life magazine, was possibly ready to cooperate.

"How can I convince you to help me, help us, help the people of this country?" she said almost saying great country, but held back.

"I am close to retirement, Anna. And, apart from a military pension...."

The words hung in the air, and Anna was almost afraid to speak, but, as she knew that the next voice was to commit to a path that would be impossible to come back from, she stayed silent.

Twenty seconds passed and both wondered if the other was still on the line.

Douglas, who'd come into her office when she'd finished talking to Amrit, had been quietly listening to the interaction and quickly scrawled a note on his cellphone's screen and showed it to Anna.

"How much do you want, Richard?"

"I'm not sure what you mean?" But the intonation in his voice showed that he did.

"Well, Richard, this is obviously neither *official* business, or a social call. So what will your help cost me?"

"How's Amrit?" The colonel asked, in a seemingly disassociated question.

"I thought you could tell me," Anna responded without thinking.

"No, but perhaps I could assist you, should he ever turn up?"

"And why would a high-ranking serving officer in the administration do that?" A now curious Anna asked the question that Douglas, thanks to his recent encounters, had already guessed the answer to.

The Homeland Security colonel took a deep breath.

"I've seen wars up close, and I've seen peace fade into the distance, and I see the future where, instead of armies and shells, we will use routers and data. The cost of protecting our freedoms, and that includes the military, the CIA and the NSA, is just phenomenal. The money is spent on the wrong things, and if just half was spent on the people, it would solve so many social issues. It's as if no one in power understands that physically preempting

problems, with boots on the ground, has become a problem in itself. I don't have to tell you, Anna, that the brightest minds in our country are focused on counter-offensive issues. And that needs to change and it has to be a major change. Of what I understand of your proposal for California 20/20, it sounds like it might just work, and if it does, then I'd like to be part of it."

Douglas looked at Anna and nodded his approval. So she continued.

"You do know that we intend to use people's personal data, and I mean really personal data, for health and other social issues? Would you have a problem with us feeding big Pharma data?"

"Not if it's genuinely helpful in creating medicines that work and don't just create conditions that need other medication."

"How about banning self-drive cars in favor of autonomous vehicles?"

"Who'd pay for it?"

"The car companies and the insurance carriers would. The way people drive now, thanks to the powerful acceleration of most cars, and legal and illegal drug use, the roads are treacherously insane, the repair costs ridiculous, and the insurance carriers can't make a profit anymore."

"In which case, I'm all for it."

"The absolute monitoring of all communications?"

"That's nothing that the government doesn't already have in place."

"How about an individual's food being controlled by what they are *permitted* to purchase and their exercise monitored?"

"Sounds pretty healthy to me."

"...Vital sign's readers that pick up any use of illegal drugs?"

"Someone should be doing it."

Anna paused before the next question, and posed it as just information.

"We will be developing a new accounting system, specifically for the project. It will be a token-based payment system."

The pause was returned before Richard Dauber responded.

"You mean that ZEN is developing its own currency?" he asked with amusement in his voice.

"Yes, the Libra."

"An excellent name," came the response, and the potentially awkward moment had passed.

Douglas passed another note to Anna.

"You could become ZEN's director of Ethics or Compliance," Anna said in the calmest voice that she could muster and without allowing the colonel time to answer, "You could start at twice what you are getting now and have stock options for the same again."

"The money sounds good, Anna, but the ethics title sounds more like Amrit. Compliance sounds about right. After so long in government, I can't always take a stand when it comes to ethics, but legal issues are a different matter. So, Director of Compliance would be a better title. And, talking of Amrit, I can't afford to know whether you have him or not. But whoever does, as things stand, they better be careful, and we have no idea who it was, but compromising the Walter Reed installation was a federal offense, not to mention," and he laughed, "the misappropriation of a government wheel chair."

"So when can you start Richard?"

"I must discuss this with my family first, but my guess is in a couple of weeks. I will have to leave my house in the Presidio for a week or so, while the official equipment is removed. Then I'll have it swept for anything left behind."

Anna was delighted and showed it.

"That sounds just fine, Richard. Call me in a day or so,

and, in the meanwhile, I'll have a service contract drawn up and the paperwork in process, to add you to our board."

Anna paused.

"I'm glad that we can put our differences behind us, as what we propose to do is going to show the world how a state can be run efficiently and compassionately."

"I hope so Anna. I just hope so."

Douglas only spoke after the call disconnected, not wanting to alter the positive vibe in the atmosphere.

"Well done, Anna. If Dauber's on board, many doors, and the right doors, will open to us. I suggest that the first task for our colonel should be to rein- in, Bulaitis."

## Chapter XVIII

### **Knowledge Equals Power**

It was five thirty in the morning when the battering ram smashed its way into the small South Woodford apartment. Snapped awake, after a night of heavy drinking, the occupant's initial reaction of 'What the F...' was stopped short by the duct tape quickly and expertly spread over his angry expression. Now hooded and tied to a chair, he could only listen, as six figures in black nylon jumpsuits, tore the flat apart. A figure with insignia on his shoulders, stood over him, as he vainly attempted to protest through his joined lips, but Jonas could only mumble incoherently. Within minutes, a large brown envelope was retrieved from the back of the dresser, where it had been taped.

"We've been a naughty boy Jonas," the officer said as he

removed the hood from the captive, "And we've seen too many TV programs where the incriminating evidence is taped behind furniture."

"The crew laughed in a mocking tone.

"He could have done it to the back of a painting, if there were any in this dump," said one of the less bright officers.

Jonas whimpered as, with a quick movement, the officer in charge ripped off the tape.

"So, tell me Jonas, where's your flat mate. The man who rents you this salubrious residence?"

"He's in Manchester...left yesterday."

"Does he know what you've been up to?"

"No. He knows nothing."

"Well, that's lucky for him, Jonas."

"Now, what are we going to do with you, I wonder?"

"You bastards."

"Now, now, Jonas. You don't want to get hurt resisting arrest do you?"

You can't touch me. I'm not British. I demand to talk to the Lithuanian Consul.

"Do you? Well I believe he's at home tucked up in bed. Probably with his wife, so that's not going to happen. So why don't you be a nice man and tell us all about your blackmail plans. Then, we'll decide whether we'll leave you alone, or take you in for some more detailed questioning."

As the officer spoke in quite reasonable tones, Jonas explained how he was just trying to make some money on the side. Of course, he was not going to any cause *real* trouble.

"I was just going to sell the signed paper back for a few thousand pounds."

"I see. What about MissyZ?"

"I only met her over the internet. She was keener than I was to get involved. She did it for free. We never met."

"So you don't know her, and she doesn't know you - is that right?"

"Yes," Jonas answered.

"Alright lads, everybody out," ordered the officer in charge, and he turned his attention back to Jonas."

"What about the waiter you had killed?"

"That was just a joke, nothing ever..." But the pistol with the silencer fitted, spoke first to cut the explanation short.

"Maybe you'll find *that* funny," the officer said, in a ironic tone as, with the brown envelope in his hand, he closed what was left of the flat's front door.

Marec was relieved when word filtered back that the document had been recovered. He knew that there was no reason for Anna to shame him publicly. She wanted to buy *Veritas*, and they both knew that such an act would destroy its value. He telephoned her and arranged a lunch for the next day.

Anna arrived first at the three V's Cafe in Palo Alto. She always arrived early at lunches, as it gave her the opportunity to chose both the table location and where she sat.

Marec, late as he always was to an appointment, sauntered in and sat down.

He was holding an open bottle.

"I don't now how you did it, but thank you," he said, referring to the retrieval of the document. And now that you have, I'd like to be part of the project."

Anna shuddered inside. That was exactly what she did not want as, if Amrit resigned the project, both would fail."

She just wanted to simply purchase a controlling interest in *Veritas*. She knew that the last thing the project needed was a self-destructive cowboy of Marec's caliber, so she responded with, "Now that's dealt with, why don't you go do something more interesting with the billions we'll give you? There must be *some* other things you'd like to do? Go develop a better autonomous car, intergalactic

space travel, bullet train, discover fusion?"

"I get the idea, Anna., but the more I think about California 20/20, the more excited I get."

"It's not going to work, Marec. *This* problem of yours may have been dealt with, but what about the next time? And you do know that it's more than likely there will be a next time. What then? And when there is, it could not only take down the project, but anyone associated with it and that includes ZEN itself."

Marec was becoming agitated, and he took a sip from his bottle.

"What if I could bring something special to the party?"

"Such as?" Anna replied, but her tone suggested disinterest.

"Ideas. Sure, I'm considered crazy and unreliable, and I get outrageous, but *Veritas* didn't build itself. Let me tell you about the real me, not the loud drunk that can't keep off Twitter, but the real me."

Anna wasn't sure she wanted his life story, but perhaps there was some insight to be gained, so she just sat and waited for what ever pearls of wisdom might just drop from this guy's mouth.

"I was born into the strife-ridden country that is Kosovo. I found university too easy and started skipping classes. My father, who taught at the European School of Law and Governance in Prishtina suggested that, perhaps, I would have a better future in America, so he paid for my trip to California. I can't tell you the excitement I felt on that plane. I just couldn't sit still and spent hours walking the isles, and, as I walked, I got the idea bug that created *Veritas*."

Anna was beginning to lose focus, and it showed.

"Tell me Anna," Marec asked, in a tone loud enough as to be almost threatening, "How do most people kill time on long flights?"

It had been a while since Anna had flown commercially,

so she guessed, watching movies.

"No. He answered categorically, "They play games. Either on those terrible seat back screens, or on their own laptops or pads."

"That can't be much fun," came Anna's response.

"That's why I started *Veritas*. Back then, the Japanese were the largest game and console producers, and even though their stuff was boring, they sold in wild numbers. I knew I could do better. Instead of the typically cautious 250-year plan that Japanese companies were famous for, and a lot of good that's done them over the last twenty years, I just hired a bunch of renegade programmers and gave them their heads. You would be surprised how little spend was necessary on promotion. The first game went viral and the rest followed and the more violent, misogynistic and overtly sexual, the greater the paying audience. Within a year we were generating stupid amounts of money, and I bought into a crazy lifestyle. Then, as our internet platform sky-rocketed, with multi-player environments, our income tripled, and that's when I started the infantile one-upmanship thing with Adam. When Adam bought a yacht, I bought a bigger one and the same with your jet. When he put on a rock concert at the Fillmore, I threw a weekend-long rock concert in Golden Gate Park. But, when the military came calling and commissioned me to make war games, to train their killer-drone pilots, that's when I decided that *Veritas* was no longer my passion. I know that I've created a destructive element in society, but I'd like to change all that, and, if you have something more constructive in mind for *Veritas*, you can have my shares for a dollar, as long as you take me with them. We both know that programmers can be some of the most difficult people to deal with, and, games programmers, are the worst of the best. And, for what I'm going to suggest, games programmers will be your best fit."

"And that is?"

He had now piqued Anna's interest, but they stopped talking while the waiter took their order. Anna ordered the salad that the restaurant was best known for, and Marec ordered another beer.

"You have to promise me that if you haven't already thought of what I'm going to suggest, you at least consider including me."

Reluctantly, Anna agreed.

"Education!" Marec said emphatically, and he continued, "You need to fully automate the state's educational system. Human teachers are not effective in today's world. Most can't control their classes, thanks to the existing primitive technology of cellphones and student lack of attention, so both sides just go through the motions. I believe that AI-based teachers-bots, using game-like classes, would teach far more effectively. And 5G going into every home in the state could deliver a learning-speed adjusted syllabus, to every level of student and in any language. Then, as there would be no need for school buildings, over ten thousand buildings could be converted into housing units for your project. Even the poorest of families, that might not be rehoused by the state have smart TV's, so there's little-to-no additional equipment cost. I've already calculated that the alternative syllabus development and maintenance costs would be a damn site less than the current multi-billion dollar budget. *And*, this way the state already owns what will become a major contribution to the project's new housing needs. "

Anna, surprised by such a idea, thought for a moment."

"You'd really dismantle the world's best universities in favor of robotic-based learning? What about the CTA? They'll go crazy. And what about the custodians, canteen staff and school bus drivers?"

Marec didn't hesitate.

"It will be easy to deal with the CTA. You won't need a teacher's union if there aren't any teachers. You should

begin with K-12 and leave the universities alone at first and get to them in time. As for dealing with unemployment, isn't that the whole point of California 20/20?"

Marec was right. This idea had not crossed ZEN's radar, and it could house hundreds of thousands or so, in good locations, and at massive savings. There was little doubt that with Marec's programmers, Douglas' financial expertise and Richard Dauber's legal guidance, made for a sufficiently powerful triumvirate to deal with any state or even federal interference, but could Amrit be convinced that Marec could be useful? Was the danger now, Amrit, not only knowing about Marec, but having access to the video, and how to disseminate it to maximum effect?

Lunch turned out not to be as terrible as Anna had feared and bordered on fun. Marec was on good form and told anecdote after anecdote of how he'd left his native country, lucked into Stanford and left after a year to build the most successful games company the internet had seen.

Towards the end of the meal, Anna took the precarious step of bringing up the video.

"That's a difficult subject for even me," he said reticently, continuing, "All I can say in my defense is that the church school that I attended was not as humane as it could have been. Regular beatings were commonplace and some of the Brothers were not as Christian as they could have been. Some joined us in the showers, others felt more comfortable without their robes on. But we'll leave the subject there, if that's okay with you." Then he added, "But I will say that nothing will ever be filmed again, as, like a certain royal, I have turned over a new leaf."

Anna thought for a moment before reacting.

"If, and it's a big if, you join us, you will need to sign an undated letter of resignation, and to know that at the first inkling of scandal we will back date it, before publishing it."

Marec smiled.

"I understand. Now when will you speak to your partners for the go ahead?"

"I'll start this afternoon, and I have to admit that your education idea is a big plus in your favor."

"Let's leave it here and talk as soon as I have an answer for you," Anna said as he slid back her chair, leaving Marec to pick up the check.

It was only short Lyft ride back to ZEN. Douglas had decided not to join them for lunch, as only one dominant voice was simpler.

After the debriefing, Douglas felt the solution to be a workable one, but the ramifications would need looking at. It would be good to have fewer cars on the road, as children would be learning at home learning, which would give the freeways a welcome break, but then the loss of the gas tax would need to be addressed. And, he was concerned about Amrit response to Marec's involvement.

"I've known Amrit for a few years now, and I know him to be a good man, and, although Marec is not the most honorable person I've ever met, he's also not the worst. My suggestion would be to tell none of this to Amrit, but to isolate him. You mentioned that Lev has a secure compound in the Caribbean. We should move Amrit there, and keep him away from anything to do with Marec."

"Would automating education be moral, Douglas? And would that concept be likely to stop Richard Dauber from joining us?"

"Possibly not moral, but practical, taking into account America's educational ranking in the world, and legal, but that's Richard's area of expertise. What Marec has suggested is the creation of a techno-state; children to be inculcated with technology almost from the moment they're born. Education, development and creative thinking will be as second nature as eating. Language barriers will not exist, because of simultaneous translation,

to those interacting when it comes to development, and it will run like a battery-farm for the clever and Heaven for the intelligent. California could dominate the globe, as no civilization ever has before. We will have a greater influence than the Mughals, Romans, Venetians, the British Empire and even the United States. Add to that, a new currency and the ability to self-govern by an online voting system. It makes me dizzy just to think of the potential. No wonder Marec wants in, and his drive will be extremely useful. And, do we really want to take the time and aggravation to steal his programmers, since now that he knows what we're up to, will be incredibly difficult. As, as we both know, programmers just follow the money, and he'll just continue to outbid us."

Anna was convinced, but she also had some reservations.

"Marec may be a genius, but his bad habits could still need handling. Anyway, for now, let's get Amrit resettled, and then we can think about if, or how, we safely fold Marec into the equation."

Anna agreed to call Lev and ask if he'd house Amrit. The conversation went well, but when Lev was offered around the clock security, he declined, on the basis that a simple house guest should not need such a thing.

## Chapter XIX

### **Paradise Is a State of Mind**

Thanks to Lev's local government connections, clearing immigration had been fast. But once outside the air-

conditioned terminal, in contrast to the clean Swiss air, the heavy moist Caribbean air felt cloying and unnatural.

Looking a little lost, after less than a minute, Amrit was approached by a man who looked like he recognized him.

"So, you must be Lev?" he asked, continuing, "Are we going far, as the flight really took it out of me."

"No, not far. My estate is just a few miles over at the coast." And he escorted Amrit outside and to his large Mercedes Jeep.

"Pleased to be breathing cool air again," Amrit said, taking a stab at polite conversation, asking, "How do you know Anna?"

Lev gave Amrit a reasonably thorough version of how he knew Anna, only omitting his recent interaction with Marec and *Veritas*."

"So, I take it that I am *not* on a working vacation?" was all Amrit could say, having deduced it from the fact that he had been told of his transfer less than a day in advance.

"Yes, but you are not to regard yourself as my," Lev corrected himself, "Our, captive. A vehicle will be at your disposal, and your six month permit is in your new identity, Doctor Ramanujan."

"You are most kind, Lev. It might take some time for me to adjust to the heat and moisture in the air, but it does remind me of home."

"The one indulgence that I will ask, is that you let me know when you are going out, and where to, because, I hope this is not the case, but competing California 20/20 interests may have forces already on the island."

"You are familiar with the project?" Amrit asked, a little surprised that his host should be so involved.

"A little, but only on the periphery," stated Lev, with his fear of Jonas Bulaitis stopping him from explaining further.

"What do *you* think of it? Lev asked, sounding genuinely interested in Amrit's opinion.

"Both potentially disastrous *and* the shape of things to come," was Amrit's short answer.

Lev laughed. "Don't hold back," he said, continuing, "Tell me what you really think."

The atmosphere in the jeep relaxed, and Amrit expanded on how he felt.

"The danger lies in the fact that the people capable of creating these systems, and I count myself among them, are not in control of their implementation. Helping people is one thing, but corporations, and that *could* include ZEN, seem not to know where to stop. I think that it's more than possible that ZEN will want to control every element of California, with a network to end all networks. And, theoretically, that's a great idea, but when power stations, grid systems, hydro-electric dams, ports and airports are all on the same network, it is courting disaster. One bad actor, just one, could plunge the state into chaos. You have to understand that every facility, and I mean every one, is vulnerable to outside access through staff pc's. And, if you think that is unlikely, just search the internet for the number of municipalities and hospitals that have paid high ransoms to get back their previously-thought secure sensitive and unreplaceable data. The sad fact is that in today's world, the beauty of networks, the multi-point access to data, is also their Achilles' heel."

He paused, thinking that he may have sounded like an alarmist, or worse, a crank, but Lev's expression suggested that he thought neither.

"Now, I do support ZEN launching its own currency. And, I believe that it will survive the landslide of lobbying by banks and financial institutions, across the globe. Just imagine what will happen to the banks when ZEN's three billion members won't need them anymore? For decades now, the banks have paid their customers less than one percent on deposits, only to lend the same money out at fifteen percent or more. And their Foreign Exchange

departments, that have the nerve to charge two percent for a computerized transaction, will also be out of business. If I were you, I'd sell any bank shares that you own before ZEN launches the Libre, because, sooner or later, even the Federal Reserve will be redundant and commodities, precious metals and even oil, will be priced in libre."

And with his tirade over, Amrit sat quietly exhausted, until the electric gates opened, and the jeep pulled into the compound, Lev's servants helped Amrit to the wing of the house that was to be his new home.

"Make yourself comfortable, Lev suggested, as he handed Amrit a remote call box, telling him to summon help for anything he needed and left him to relax into his surroundings.

There would be time, much more time, to talk later.

The feedback, though mainly inaccurate rumors, that had been received in the Oval Office of late, had begun to concern the Leader of the Free World. It was time to understand the true strength of those who were audaciously attempting to sell the concept of a Socialist California and to decide whether it could be harnessed, or should be smashed.

Theirs had been an early flight from Sacramento, to be in Washington at the time that the president had allotted them. It hadn't seemed prudent to come in the night before, and to be photographed entering the hotel together, as the media would have had a field day. All social media, except for ZEN, were poised, just waiting for the next image of who they now described as a couple, to appear. Alexa didn't mind, as it gave her the name recognition she craved, even if her mentor had had the fire-knocked out of him, by the battering he'd taken from

everyone from the sanitation engineers to the teachers' unions. She was well aware that, given half a chance, he would have jumped at the opportunity for a liaison, and, as she still needed him, it seemed a fair emotional exchange.

That morning though, the conversation over too hot coffee and cold croissants, found the protege lecturing the master, on policy. And, feeling too old to get up that early, especially, to be in for a shredding by his president, he'd gladly have retired to the plane's sleeping quarters, had they existed.

He was not wrong about a fractious meeting. But not from where he'd expected it to come.

Even before he and Alexa were seated, having been escorted through the door by two bolt upright marines, the attack began.

"*You do know that*, deep down, California, if not the whole of America, is already pretty much run along Socialist lines?" Ms. Cortes stated, a little to emphatically for the president's comfort.

The governor blanched, but said nothing. If this was to be an all-out attack on the president, he'd rather sit back and watch. If she was to go down in flames, she'd go alone. He'd asked her to go softly, but she had only two modes, *on* and *off*, and when *on*, she was never subtle."

"If you are referring to Social Security, Alexa," started the president, "It's just paying back what's been paid in, and poorly managed if you ask me. Furthermore, I do think that my title, and especially in the Oval Office, should be included when you address me?"

The apology the president received was far from heartfelt, as she continued, "No, Mr. president, I mean the services that people receive, such as housing benefits, food stamps and the other safety net services that are handed out. *Your* latest pronouncement stated that the government is to spend two trillion on infrastructure. As this money comes from the citizens, isn't that technically a

redistribution of wealth?"

The governor wanted to agree, but thought that he'd let the scene play out.

"Well, Alexa, I see your point, but handouts are one thing, but running people's lives from soup to nuts, like your plan suggests, is something far grander and *definitely* along socialist lines. And, honestly, do you *really* think that treating Californians like battery-farmed animals is a decent thing to do?"

The radical didn't miss a beat.

"So you would rather that I accepted rampant obesity, thanks to the food chemists, poisoned air and water thanks to the agra community, bad drugs thanks to big pharma, brain cancer thanks to the cell phone manufacturers, school shootings thanks to the NRA, and road deaths thanks to the automobile industry?"

The president wasn't fazed by this upstart and was almost charmed by her courageousness.

"I think that you are exaggerating how effective *you* could be."

Alexa, this time on purpose, left out her audience's title, as it would have weakened her attack.

"Someone has to start protecting the people in California, and it's obvious that the FDA isn't going to any time soon. Wouldn't millions of people contributing data, better their world, without endless expensive studies that show results long after so many have died? Just a few weeks ago the FDA announced that regular users of sun screens have toxic levels of avobenzone, oxybenzone and octocrylene in their blood. It's probably been known for years that these chemicals cause cancer, nervous system disorders, allergies and birth defects. But God knows how long the study took. Probably a decade and how many people have been damaged, because of the time that the study took. With our proposed monitoring, we'd have picked that up in months, possibly weeks."

Alexa paused long enough, and the governor, seeing the president's face show interest, finally decided to contribute.

"We would also institute online voting for both local and federal elections."

The president didn't respond. He was still thinking that the FDA budget could be cut, if he could get that sort of data, at no cost from California.

"You do understand that there would be no appropriation for what you're talking about?"

"We would expect to run at a surplus," the radical quickly stated.

'Online voting?' the president quietly murmured inaudibly.

"How would you see online voting secured against foreign interference?" he asked.

"I'm glad you asked. Our IT contractor is ZEN Corp."

The president feigned an expression of doubt.

"You are aware that they were government contractors, and they," he paused, "Tried to blackmail world leaders?"

"I followed the Senate Hearings, and that was not the impression that I was left with."

The president was ready with his answer.

"Well, that Eisenberg woman is damn clever, and she managed to shift the blame. But, I have it on good authority that it *was* ZEN, so it does concern me that that's who you'll be using. For me to give you an official answer, you will have to agree to having Homeland Security involved."

The governor was stunned by the tacit permission that she'd just received.

Alexa had not had the time to look at her surroundings, as she'd gone straight into attack after the introductions. But now, it dawned on her that here she was, in the room where the Kennedy brothers had sorted out world problems, where Nixon committed crimes against his

nation, Clinton against his interns, and where two-hundred years of history had been made. This young and undocumented nobody, as she had been six months earlier, before she met the governor at a charity gala, was going to change America, and more than any of those who she had just thought of.

Neither the governor, nor the radical, thought it wise to let the president know that they were not in Washington for permission. It was just a courtesy visit, in response to the president's request, and that this was already a done deal.

"I'd like Homeland Security's, Richard Dauber, to become involved, and, as he's worked with ZEN before, it should be a good fit."

Alexa was not letting up. Even though she'd already accepted the colonel as a valued ally, she didn't want to make this deal seem too easy.

"Wasn't he implicated in the supposed government's blackmail plan?"

"Yes, well, that may or may not be the case. All I care about is that we have to have someone on the inside, in case the Russians or the Chinese attempt to fool around with voting outcomes. And, by that, I mean local, or national. Now let's have lunch."

Alexa and the governor glanced at each other, with the understanding that election interference might not be exactly what the president wanted to stop.

The governor came alive during lunch, but still the conversation was mainly, Alexa Cortes, stating how society *should* be run, explaining that, although the housing project would be implemented, over a two-year period, they would start with the information infrastructure, as soon as the California 20/20 bill passed the California Senate.

The president was in mid sentence when the door opened, and his secretary handed him a cellphone.

"Yes," the president said, followed by a, "No" and then, "Definitely not."

"I have to go," he said, as he stood. "Please, finish your lunch, and we will speak again."

And he left the room leaving behind him a confused governor and his protege.

It was not until they were on the plane home that the governor's phone rang with the news that the president had reconsidered their conversation, and that he could no longer back the project. Furthermore, should the governor proceed with his plans, it would be considered an act of treason.

To add insult to injury, the message was delivered by a secretary.

## Chapter XXI

### **Have I Got a Proposition For You?**

It is generally accepted, even by many politicians, that most of the recent laws in California are generally either experimental or worse. They are passed, sometimes after much deliberation, and sometimes not, either in Sacramento, or locally, by cities or counties. And, there are often conflicts in logic. San Francisco has banned the use of plastic straws and single-use plastic bottles, but distributes one-time use plastic hypodermic needles to addicts. California also offers voters the 'proposition,' a process, under which, once a person or organization has collected the required number of signatures, the proposition to add a new, or overturn or amend an existing law, is put to the voters.

The first proposition, Proposition 1, was held in 1886. The title was, 'Provides that all property be taxed in proportion to its value,' and it passed. Since that date, a hundred or so propositions have been added to mixed results. A highly beneficial 1912 proposition that passed made text books free at all elementary schools, others such as the proposed splitting of California into three separate states was suspected as being mainly beneficial to the billionaire that paid for the mandatory two-hundred thousand signatures to qualify to make the ballot.

While still conceptually great, many voters over the years have fallen foul of their purposely obtuse wording. An outstanding example being that a proposition to help chickens by providing a certain minimum size enclosure, was, in reality, a vote for a smaller enclosure than they already enjoyed. Other boondoggles through time, increased purchase and gas taxes, for road maintenance, only to have the proceeds drained by the 'general fund,' or to fund ridiculously high public employee pensions. Californians have long suffered from propositions, but there is no proposition to remove them.

Governor Jim McMurtry and Alexa Cortes were already seated in the small private dining room of the governor's Victorian mansion, when Douglas and Anna were shown into the room. The wine in front of them was untouched, and the prevailing atmosphere was not a happy one.

"You look like you've just been to a funeral, " Anna said as she seated herself.

"If one can be held over the phone, then we have," responded Alexa, and the expression on the governor's face concurred.

"Because it seems that California 20/20 is simply not

going to happen."

"Why the hell not?" asked a confused Anna.

"The governor's resolve is weakening, "Alexa said, even though the governor was sitting next to her.

"Well, that just can't be, as we've already started work on the project," Anna emphasized looking straight at the governor.

Again, it was Alexa who spoke, saying, "We thought we had had a very positive meeting with the president, and we were on the plane traveling back to Sacramento when the president called. It seems that something changed dramatically, and he inferred that if California 20/20 was to proceed, the governor's last act would be to leave the State House escorted by armed FBI.

"Is that a possibility?" asked Douglas.

"Well, started Alexa, "He's in no mood to find out. All he knows is there's a chance of that happening, and that's good enough for him. Anyway, all the president has to do is order the Republicans in the California Senate to vote against the bill and it's all over."

"So what do we do? There's always a way through a problem," Anna said, knowing it to be true, but that the cost varied for each solution.

"I have an idea," said Douglas, as he stood to leave the room. And having made a short call he was smiling as he came back in ten minutes later. "It was just as I thought. I remember reading about US election law a number of years ago, and I just had my memory confirmed by an immigration lawyer. Federal law does *not* prohibit non-citizens from voting in either state or local elections. So, instead of attempting to sway the president, or take him on politically, we let the people decide."

Almost before Douglas had finished talking, Alexa, quick on the uptake, spoke, "Hell, yes, Douglas. We'll use a Ballot Proposition. Nobody ever reads the wording of the pro's and con's anyway, they just go by the title. So, if it was to be headed something like, 'No Free Housing and Benefits For the Homeless and Undocumented Immigrants,' a good half of the voters, who just go by the title would vote YES, because they agreed with the heading. But we would know that a YES vote would actually pass the law, to deliver California 20/20, because the proposition was really to rectify the lack of housing and benefits for homeless and immigrants.

"California's roughly six-hundred thousand undocumented workers could vote on it?" added Anna.

Alexa didn't skip a beat before taking charge.

"So, Jim, you have the legal guys in your department draw up the proposition, and as soon as that's done, Anna, ZEN should text a message to its known group of California OneWorld Democrats. Then there's fifty-thousand immigrants and their families and friends, who are here because of DACA, and the number of registered Democrats already outnumber registered Republicans eight to five. With this sort of support, there's no way that we can fail to get this on the ballot.

"But is it ethical for undocumented people to vote on issues that potentially benefit themselves, at the expense of others?" asked Douglas.

"You're showing your age, Douglas. Does everything good have to have ethical roots?" Alexa snapped back.

And, perhaps he was, but he was wavering, enchanted by Alexa's enthusiasm and her bordering-on antagonistic problem-solving qualities.

"Anyway, Douglas, there is a precedent," Alexa quickly

said, adding, "Many of the undocumented have driving licenses and picture ID cards, so why not just the final step, and it's just as legal, so just think of it as 'self help.' And as renters already have a say in increasing property taxes for homeowners, by voting on educational bonds and to increase city worker pensions, I don't see this issue as revolutionary. After all, if the people that we are discussing are paying taxes on their wages, gasoline and anything else they purchase, shouldn't they have a say on the basis of 'No Taxation Without Representation.' Well, I see the proposition process as their representation?"

Douglas laughed, wondering, had he been twenty or so years younger, would he have gone out and bought a Che Guevara t-shirt and beret."

It was a typically hot and steamy day on the island when Amrit's phone rang to wake him from his shallow sleep in Lev's courtyard. Not recognizing the incoming number, he was unsure whether to answer, and it took him a moment, to recognize the caller's panicked voice, as Magda had started talking before he'd had the chance to say hello.

"Slow down Magda. I can't follow you when you speak so fast."

"They killed Jonas."

"Who has?"

"I do not now who they are. I just know they did it. I received a call, as next of kin, from our embassy, saying that he had killed himself. I know that is a lie, because he was too self-obsessed to do such a thing."

"But why would anyone kill him?" Amrit asked, a quietness in his voice intended to calm her, and it seemed to work, as she realized that she had someone she could

confide in.

"It was because of the blackmail attempt. His stupid plan with the games' company."

"But people aren't killed over such things."

"Perhaps, you have never lived in such a country, but I have. People can disappear for far less. When we spoke some months ago of the plan to bring down America, I did not tell you that as the American businessman slept, I copied the files from his laptop, so I could read them later. I have always been interested in politics, and I knew that such a plan might have sounded like science fiction at the time, but now, with the internet's ability to generate fake news, it seems that it is a reality. And, I feel that somehow Jonas' death is connected."

"But to implement such a plan would be no longer relevant, Magda. There are too many other powers in the world for that to make sense. America may still be the world's commercial leader, but for how long? The Chinese economy is fast on America's heels, and soon India will be a force to be reckoned with. So why would Russia bother?"

"You do not understand the Russian temperament, Amrit. Why do you think that the dangerous pistol game is called Russian Roulette?"

Amrit thought for a moment.

"Send me the files, Magda." He gave her his cloud account details.

"Then, go purchase a disposable phone, and text me the number. And only use that phone for our conversations."

"Thank you Amrit. I know that you are an honorable man. That is why I called you. I need to know who killed Jonas."

A large glass door slid open, as Lev appeared with a

lunch tray.

"I didn't want to eavesdrop, so I waited until you had finished your call. How is Anna?"

"It was not Anna. It was the sister of the man who asked you to blackmail Marec Winger."

"How odd. How do you know her, and I hope that the authorities caught him?"

"It seems someone did, as he is dead. Supposedly a suicide."

"He did not seem the suicidal type," with an element of panic in his voice.

"That is what his sister said. And if that's not the case, then that is not good news."

Lev was no longer listening, as his prime interest was now his own safety. If someone was carrying out a clean-up operation, then was he on the list? Was sheltering Amrit a liability? He needed to ask Anna what dangerous game she was involved in."

But Amrit's voice came back into focus and said, "Magda thinks that it all has something to do with a sixties Soviet era plan to weaken America." And he explained what Magda had told him that day he'd first read about California 20/20.

"I believe that we will know more after we have looked at the files that she is sending over, and, until then, I would not worry. We are safe out here."

Lev knew that was not the case. It had not been a year since his London home had been raided while he himself, less than five miles along the coast, was being interviewed by Homeland Security's Colonel Dauber. And, that same afternoon, Sergeant Braithwaite, the local policeman posthumously suspected of being a double agent, was

found murdered along the side of the road. No, nowhere was safe, and he felt as if he had traveled back in time to the Soviet Union.

He needed to speak to someone, but should he call Anna, or was it safer dealing with Colonel Dauber?

He reached into his pocket and took out his lucky Czarist gold coin and tossed it in the air. It came up Dauber.

## Chapter XXII

### **Truth, or Dare**

"Hello Lev, What can I do for you?" Were the colonel's first direct, but friendly words. "As you have probably guessed, on my salary, I'm not in the market for any of your expensive toys."

"It's what I can do for you, this time. What do you know about the late nineteen fifties Soviet project, to weaken America by debasing its society?"

"That was talked of when I was at high school, but only by the weird kids; the early conspiracy theorists believed it. There weren't many of those in the football squad, which is who I spent most of my time with. Why do you ask?"

"In which case, what do you now about California 20/20?"

The colonel did not respond, so Lev continued, "I believe that there is a connection between the two."

The colonel still did not respond.

"So, what do you know about Robert Bergman, the senator who retired a number of years ago?"

"Not much. He was a Republican. He hated communists with a passion, and he worked in the background, for McCarthy helping to progress HUAC. Why?"

"What if I told you that I had copies of communications in the sixties between Dobrynin, Gromyko and Bergman?"

"Then, I wouldn't believe you, as that was during the height of the Cold War."

"Then you probably wouldn't believe that he was the architect of the plan to debase America society, through its youth." He thought of referencing rock and roll, but realized that he would have been over-egging the pudding, so continued," But seriously, I have copies of files that should interest you."

"I hope that you didn't pay too much for the files, Lev, as you've obviously been played. But yes, email them to me, and I thank you for thinking of America first, because if these are genuine, you know that the Russian Federation would have bought them from you."

Lev thought for a moment.

"I'd rather send your office a thumb drive. And there's no need to get back to me. Goodbye Colonel, and please remember my cooperation in the future, if ever you hear any negative comments about me."

Colonel Richard Dauber did not need to wonder why the files would not be sent over the internet. A thumb drive could come from anywhere, any random address, and probably would, but an email was eminently traceable.

"Are you sure that that was the right decision?" asked Amrit, as Lev finished his call.

"If I had to choose between either Anna or the US government, at the moment I believe that the greatest threat to us is not Anna. So, in the great Russian tradition, I'd prefer to keep my friends close, but my enemies closer. Should these documents prove to be false, then no harm has been done, and I have improved my standing with Homeland Security. But if they are real, and they somehow link to California 20/20, well then, do you really want to see California link to the Russian Federation? Think of the future of Silicon Valley, the military contractors and the entertainment industry. It's bad enough that the Chinese are buying huge swathes of the state. I have experienced both the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation, and I understand the cyclical nature of history. The Cossack rides again, as the country has returned to the Czars."

Amrit couldn't argue with Lev's logic, but he wasn't certain that Dauber was the right choice. Having known Anna for years, she was no communist. Liberal perhaps, minor socialist, possibly, as she cared about the people, but no, not a communist. And if California 20/20 was in any way linked to a larger plan, she had her own ideas where it was heading. With Zen as the architect of the system software, no matter what other people may assume, she was the *de facto* captain of the ship and its destination.

As the colonel thought about the phone call, he wondered who else Lev might have told about what he'd found. If no one, then he was in a position to make the running. Lev would not have known that he'd now promised his services to ZEN. And if he'd told Anna, would she call him, or should he call her, and, if so, to say what? That you're being manipulated? But he was also a patriot, so the president should be told, especially as the president himself was thought to be in favor of the governor's 2020 plan. If this new connection came out after the White

Horse endorsement, it would destroy the presidency.

It was at that point he'd made the phone call, and that is when Jim McMurtry and Alexa heard the president respond, "Yes," followed by a "No," and then "Definitely not."

But it was not without some concern, that the colonel passed the information to the president, so his next call was to Anna.

"Who else have you told?" were Anna's first words, after he'd explained what he'd done.

"No one. There is no one else to tell. But others may already know if Lev has the files. And he wouldn't tell me who gave them to him, so I have no idea where they could have come from."

Anna knew. They could only have come from one of two sources, and Magda had no way of contacting Dauber, so it had to be Amrit. But why would he? Was he not being real with her and Douglas? If he was so against their plan, could he and Lev become obstructive, if they decided to combine forces?

"The files must have come from Amrit," Anna said down the phone.

"You're joking, Anna. But he's *your* man. Isn't he? I always assumed that you rescued him. If it wasn't you, then we might all be in trouble."

Anna said nothing.

There was concern in Dauber's voice, as he spoke, "So where is he now, and how are we going to stop him?"

Douglas hadn't spoken until then, but did now.

"He's staying with Lev Oblomov, and that's how you came to receive the files. But I don't think we need to

worry. So what if the president knows about a fifty-year old plan that was never implemented?"

The colonel thought for a moment.

"If I were him, I'd worry. A plan to weaken America devised by the Soviet Union, during the height of the Cold War suddenly turns up at the same time California is about to go socialist? Coincidence, possibly? But what president would be reckless enough to ignore the possibility of it having been set in place by sleepers? It changes any endorsement that he'd give, from a position of enlightened public assistance, to abject stupidity. He's going to have to withdraw any support and be against it. And ZEN will get caught in the crossfire.

"We can take care of ourselves," said Anna.

"Can you?" asked the colonel. "Anti-trust laws could eviscerate ZEN once they start to delve into its activities."

"Don't forget that we know where some of the bodies are buried," Anna replied, referring to the abortive VALHALLA plan that wasn't only backed by the president, but had been his baby. "And we now have you, Richard." The last addition, sounding almost like a veiled threat, was picked up like the challenge that it was.

"Yes, you do. And, I do not do a half-job on anything, so leave this with me."

Hanging up the phone, the soon-to-be private citizen, knew that he was now the meat in the sandwich. Supporting either the president or Anna, to the exclusion of the other, would be a dangerous tightrope walk, as either could turn, and he had no net. Anna, he couldn't control. As the head of ZEN she had the power to change her mind and in a flash, but the president had to follow the law, although he tried not to.

It was time to go to Washington.

"Come in, Dick," said the president warmly. "You really saved me from making a terrible error, and, for that I will be forever thankful. Now tell me what you could not over the phone." And the president rang through for coffee.

"Well, sir. I...," he said pausing, and, as he did, he handed his boss a while legal-size envelope.

"That sounds ominous, Dick. You know that you can be straightforward with me."

The colonel, knowing the exact opposite to be true, started over, "Well, sir. I think that you should know that I have accepted a post at ZEN Corporation, and, therefore, I am submitting my resignation."

He waited for the ranting and raving about disloyalty.

None came.

"But, that's excellent, Dick. I knew that you'd not let this Amrit Kahn escape get to you. But do you not think that the subterfuge of joining ZEN could be regarded as entrapment?"

The colonel was tempted to stop the conversation there, but he knew that it had to be said sooner or later, so he tried again.

"You're not following me, sir. I'm to be ZEN's Director of Compliance."

"But that's even better. No entrapment, and you can feed us whatever you see as being dangerous. We must celebrate." And he phoned through a request for a coca cola and a bottle of champagne. "I value loyalty, Dick, and I should have told you before now how much I appreciated you keeping me out of the VALHALLA fallout."

The president looked up, as if what he'd said had amused him, saying, "A lesser man would have folded like a tent, like John Mitchell did over Watergate. You were a

true follower of G. Gordon Liddy, and that's why I kept you on, even though you gave Anna a 'get-out-of-jail free' card."

The colonel winced at being compared to the felons who brought down the Nixon White House and wondered if that was the why the president, the architect of VALHALLA, saw his plan to spy on the world's leading corporations and leaders, as being quite acceptable.

As the drinks arrived and the aluminum tab was pulled off the coke, the colonel, being in no mood to drink, waved the bottle away, as he was shown the label for his approval.

"That's okay, Dick. As you know I don't drink, never have, so why don't you take the bottle home and share it with the little lady. Now tell me about the plan that you couldn't trust to email or speak about on the phone."

Having tried twice, but obviously failed, to make his boss understand, perhaps this was the perfect time to help his new partners, so he started, "Well, sir. I'm glad that you asked. I've reviewed the files that I sent you, and I feel that we can still play the game to our advantage, if we let the 2020 development proceed. Cautiously, naturally, but with myself in charge, it's quite possible that we can help California, while helping the whole country. But...."

The president felt uneasy all of a sudden.

"Stop there, Dick. There can't be any *buts*. If you want me to be happy with you proceeding, you have to report directly to me, no one else, just me."

"I can't be a mole, sir. It wouldn't be right. And what would Congress think of such an independent unsanctioned action?"

Both men were aware that the temperature was rising in the room.

"You had no issues, with right and wrong when you kept

me out of VALHALLA, so what's different?"

"I did that, sir, to protect the presidency, as much as for you. This would be different."

"Yes it would be different, Dick. You would be protecting the nation, and isn't that even more important? You do understand that if California was to become socialist, other states could follow and that would be the end of the Union?"

"You can't really believe that the most inventive companies on the planet would endorse socialism. Sure, I could see companies selling into a socialist environment, but not being controlled by it. It would be like the Luddites versus technology, and that's a no-brainer, as we all know who came out on top."

The president, ignoring his subordinate's oblique reference, as to what, or who, the other people fighting Silicon Valley were, countered, "You think so, Dick. You better not be channeling the spirit of Czar Alexander, because he underestimated the peasant farmers. And he was a lot more ruthless than we are, Dick."

Still uncertain about the conversation, the president took a deep breath, suggesting that he was still in two minds.

"If you promise to keep me in the loop, I'll just watch from the sidelines, but the moment I suspect that I'm being played, I'll come down on them, and you, like a ton of bricks. Agreed?"

The colonel reluctantly agreed. And having ended up exactly where he wanted to be, he firmly shook the president's hand, to be treated with a pat on the back and took the champagne back to his hotel room.

The president took a long drink from his can of coke, then picked up the phone and asked to be connected to the

Anti Trust Division at the Department of Justice.

The conversation had also gone his way, but he was a man who hedged his bets.

## Chapter XXII

### **2020 Visionaries**

As ZEN orchestrated a groundswell of concern, by featuring stories on the plight of the homeless and undocumented immigrant families, the liberal media, jumped on the bandwagon by digging deep into their archives, to show how California, while if not stolen from Mexico, was not exactly taken in a fair fight. Similar-veined stories followed. Some focused on farm worker's rights, while others showed how families, and remnants of families, suffered when they were sent to countries that they had never known. And, then it happened: the Hollywood liberals rose to help.

Now, with the social media promotion in high gear, the 2020 general election became synonymous, in the eyes of many, with California 20/20, and, as California had always led the country in the past, the second-term California governor grabbed the opportunity to publish his '2020 Clear Vision' statement.

"It was time," he was quoted as saying, "That we recognize all the people who want to cross our border, will not only help us grow our economy, but more importantly to show our American humanity to the world." He stopped short of referring to the huddled masses when Alexa

informed him that the quote was not only a late addition to the American psyche, but that too many had been turned away to make it true.

In San Diego, with Alexa by his side, he surprised a town hall meeting by referring to a past president, when he ended his speech with, "It's assumed by Americans that, when the Soviet Union fell, the first president of the Russian Federation made billionaires of his friends, by allowing them to take over strategic industries such as coal, oil and gas. Many friends of the US president added to *their* billions when American banks all but destroyed the global banking system in the 2000's. But there was no outcry in the US when, thanks to American junk bonds, trillions of dollars simply disappeared. Millions were foreclosed on and many more lost their savings and pensions. No one in our banking system was ever prosecuted. No one was jailed. The Russian president, of course, is demonized by the West as a criminal, whereas the American businessmen who scored big from the misery of millions, are just considered smart operators. So tell me, isn't who is or isn't a criminal a standpoint issue?"

Many heckled, some walked out, and some did both, but when he made the identical speech to an even larger group the following week in Salinas, California, the cheers almost brought the roof down.

Having openly attacked the federal government, Jim McMurtry understood that he had to do more than just give speeches while waiting for ZEN to bring his plan home. As an interim step, he and Alexa successfully worked the members of the California Senate, to approve health benefits for undocumented immigrants. And it had not been that difficult. The early objectors to the bill pulled back sharply when they looked at the polls taken in their own communities to discover that their districts were predominantly Hispanic and election day was quickly

approaching. So, combined with drivers' licenses, and ID cards, already being law, this sort of immigrant power had never been witnessed before. The train was on the track, and it was even more powerful than *La Bestia*, the network of Mexican freight trains carrying migrants to the US border. So, spurred on by Alexa, governor James McMurtry, was the most energetic he'd been since he started out in politics. He now knew that he'd go down in history, as no previous California politician had.

The president needed to fight back. And, not just because the governor had deeply insulted the office that he now held, but because his unproven accusations had begun to fuel a nationwide conversation on Republican values. Suspecting that the governor's strings were being pulled by someone, the conclusion that he reached was the only way to stop the train was to break up ZEN. And, as the head of the Antitrust Division is appointed by the president of the United States, the advantage should have been with the president.

However, that didn't take into account lobbyists.

The K street guns-for-hire argued that the US government had funded ZEN, as part of a national security exercise, and its members' financial, phone, health and Department of Motor Vehicles' record's linkages had been invaluable to the government. So, these and any other private and public footprint it owned could not be illegal on the basis of anti-trust laws, and that the government was simply striking out at ZEN because the government itself could no longer access those records.

They then posed the question, 'Had the US government committed acts against the Constitution in the first place, by not only allowing such a system, but by funding its construction?'

The government argued that, although it had established such a system, now that ZEN was no longer assisting the government, it had in itself become a security concern. It was further argued that the extent of ZEN's data collection, should it be hacked, would not only give the hackers access to over two-hundred million American's data, but that of billions more across the globe. Such a target had never existed before, and that put the whole world at risk.

When, in an open hearing, the lead Department of Justice attorney requested a demonstration of a typical data matrix for a OneWorld member, ZEN's attorney, in a dramatic and possibly reckless move, pulled a stunt that showed how useful their database was to their client's membership. The Department of Justice attorney was first treated to a schematic that included data on his family members, friends and acquaintances. But it then showed details of his last annual medical check-up, his past month's travel itinerary, the one point on his driving record, the habit of buying a plain cheese pizza every Friday, his dry cleaning receipts, and, finally, the *coup de grace*, his visit to a DC massage parlor. When asked if he wished to see any other data activity, he nervously declined the offer.

All in all, the Anti-trust investigation lasted just two days, and it returned a verdict of 'inconclusive.'

The president would have to think again.

While the governor was grandstanding and the president posturing, the ZEN partnership was not standing still. And it had made an important discovery. An independent poll analysis concluded that the proposition could safely be changed to start with the word, 'provide,' and it would still pass enthusiastically.

Marec had settled on Pacific Grove, on the Monterey Bay, for his team to set up shop, which was thought to be the best little town in California. Once the home to Microsoft's earliest competitor, the Digital Research building, on Lighthouse Avenue, now housed ZEN's 'Education 2020 Project.' The group was small, only ten in number, and had been purposely housed away from Silicon Valley to reduce both distractions and accidental interference.

Marec's team canvassed educators in the UK and Australia, as both countries were known to favor and had developed successful online curricula. Explained away as a theoretical study, the concept was to match their systems against existing US education criteria and to identify the most effective teachers and professors for their eventual ongoing services. Marec tasked himself with negotiating the huge purchase of the necessary hardware for the cloud-based systems, and with a renewed enthusiasm, he'd stopped drinking, ate healthier, and took advantage of the coastal path that ran at the rear of the building, by running it each morning and evening. With Douglas' help he established a housing trust to option hundreds of schools, from K-12, which was to inject cash into the state's coffers, only to be leased back to the state. Eventually, and 'as needed,' per an obscure clause in the leases, they would become residences for the poor, homeless and undocumented.

Another group, this time games' programmers who resided in an adjacent building, had been installed to maximize *Veritas'* platform by building-out its new revenue-intensive aspects. Anna, who had patented her plans prior to sharing them with Marec, was updated daily, with the latest developments and more importantly the cash flow projections.

As rumors concerning the ZEN's Pacific Grove activities spread, more of Washington had begun to wonder if insurrection was brewing. And, the governor's vitriolic speeches, being fully quoted on ZEN's news channels, and reprinted in newspapers from the Wall Street Journal to the New York Post, seemed to indicate that it was.

The leaders of the Republican Party called for an investigation of a state's powers.

We can't touch them yet," The Leader of the House was told by the DOJ, "But they will make a mistake, and when they do, we'll have them."

"That's not good enough," replied the president, with his Cabinet and the Secretary of Education agreeing, "Find me something, and find it now!"

"We can only build a picture of what they're doing based on the press, Mr. president. If only we knew for sure what they *were* doing, then we could possibly take action."

The president thought for a moment.

He needed to call on the person who owed him a favor, and who he had not heard of for some weeks..

"Okay, everyone out. I need to make a phone call. I've always said, if you want something doing, do it yourself." And, as the room emptied, he was already dialing Colonel Richard Dauber.

"Rich."

The colonel's hackles rose at his ex-boss's continued use of various abbreviations of his name, but the president continued, "I haven't heard from you in such a long time. Tell me, is what I'm hearing real, or just more fake news? Does California *really* want to distance itself from the greatest educational system in the world?"

With his fear of the Oval Office greatly reduced, thanks

to his massive monthly salary, Rich responded, "Not to split hairs, Sir, but it may be a great system compared to some, but we rank number thirty or so in the world table."

"That's simply got be fake news, Rich, because I know differently. I know that the schools I went to were the best in the world. Anyway, Rich, tell me exactly what ZEN's plans are, because some of my cabinet are getting quite disturbed about what they are hearing. I told them that nothing much is happening, because you haven't called me. But, it would be good to know exactly what the governor has planned, as it does seem that he's moving away from our nation's general policies and especially when it comes to immigration."

Dauber paused.

This was not a conversation that he wanted to have. He didn't know the full extent of the plans. But, to admit that would reduce his potential usefulness, and if there was one thing that the president could not stand, it was dead wood. And, he assumed, that dead wood would only be good for a bonfire.

"I'll put together some notes, Mr. president."

"Do that Dick, do that by this time tomorrow."

And, with the lack of any formal exchange to end the conversation, the line went dead.

Richard Dauber placed a conference call to Anna and Douglas to explain his predicament.

"If I do not provide the president with something, he is going to get ugly. And it has to be realistic enough to make sense, otherwise ZEN is going to end up in more hearings."

Anna had become tired of the president's huffing and puffing, so she simply said, "That doesn't concern me. Not

only do we have nothing to hide, but we could wait his term out. And, with what I know about VALHALLA, and what I did not bring up in front of the committee, we could bury *him*."

The colonel was not comforted by what he'd just heard.

"I'm not certain that this would be a good tack for us to take, Anna. Sure, presidents come and go, so we could deal with this one, but he still has time to damage me, and that would render me useless to the project. What do you think Douglas? No insult to you, Anna, but Douglas is more used to dealing with the eccentric and powerful."

Douglas needed no time to consider his response.

"Richard's right, Anna. There's no point in making an annoyed powerful enemy more angry. We should give him something. I've had to placate many a CEO in my time, so Richard, if you can let me have some notes on what you need to tell the president, I'll have something back to you by morning."

"I appreciate that Douglas," and Anna concurred, adding, "Let's step up the pace though. He's not stupid, and, as soon as we seem to deviate from what we're going to tell him, he'll guess that you're lying to him."

Richard Dauber only had a rough idea as to what should be included, and not enough for Douglas to massage into anything believable, especially, in the unlikely event that the president decided to show it to the new head of Homeland Security. So, now that he knew that Amrit was staying with Lev, he obviously was the person to speak to.

"Lev," he said as the call connected. "How are you. It's been a while."

"Perhaps not long enough," the trader answered without a hint of irony in his voice..

"May I speak to Amrit?"

"Amrit?"

"It's okay Lev," the colonel reassured him, "I'm working for ZEN now."

"So you're a gamekeeper turned poacher? Your government pension not enough to live on, Colonel? Or, have you just called to apologize again for having him shot?"

"It's as I told him in the hospital. It wasn't the government's fault. Adam dropped a dime on him."

"Of course, you had nothing to do with it. You had nothing to do with VALHALLA, and, of course when ZEN refused to carry out your plans, you didn't want ZEN destroyed? Amrit has told me all about your dirty tricks. And, I supposed that your department did not fake the Marec Winger video?"

"What fake video? The colonel asked sounding surprised."

"The one that Jonas Bulaitis used to blackmail Marec into signing away his company."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. That was the work of some crazy individual and nothing to do with us."

"So how did he install it on the *Veritas* servers? I suppose that he was just some hopeless blackmailing genius?"

The colonel ignored the question, but he was interested in the train of events.

"How to you know the video was a fake?" he asked, now genuinely interested in Lev's accusation.

"Because Amrit compared Marec's voice from a conference he attended, to the person in the porn video,

and they were not the same."

"Someone overlaid Marec's face over an actor in a porn movie?"

"Don't tell me that you really didn't know, Colonel. So, it was just a coincidence that, when ZEN was interested in partnering with Marec and *Veritas*, Marec gets blackmailed into an agreement? And, it just happened to occur while you were still working for the government and then shortly after joined ZEN? Who else would have been interested in doing it?"

"I've no idea, but it wasn't me, or Homeland Security."

The sincerity in his voice impressed Amrit, who'd been listening in.

"Well, Colonel, let's leave all that to one side for a moment. How can I help you?"

"I have to generate an overview for the White House on our progress. Can you give me a heads-up on how far we've gotten with integrating the finance system into the merchant accounts and establishing medical, insurance and personal data records?"

Amrit thought for a moment before responding.

"You really want to do that? If we give over an accurate position, especially on the finance integration, we will completely give our game away."

"What can we give over safely?"

"*IRIS*"

"IRIS?"

"IRIS is our AI system that will run the medical center and will impress the president. Other companies have home-based voice controllers for playing music and turning the lights on and off, but that's just child's play.

IRIS, thanks to a remarkable Chinese student programmer, is a deeply integrated auto-triggered response service to help people with everyday emotional problems. If someone has a problem, say depression, or general unhappiness, IRIS will help."

Richard Dauber held back laughter, as he continued the conversation.

"Help in what way?"

"Well, let's say that someone starts to take too many anti-depressants or starts to drink too much, IRIS will ask them if their feeling alright, and, depending on the conversation, IRIS could modify their medication, schedule an appointment with a doctor or therapist, or hospitalize them.

There was no laughter in the colonel's voice as he asked, "How will it ask?"

"Through engaging the subject in conversation via their home's two-way information system. Remember, that this is all experimental data gathering, and we need results to send to the purchasers of our information. This is the essence of the value that we are to provide."

The colonel was speechless. This couldn't be the same man who was against government spying. He asked Lev what he thought, but Lev had already left the conversation.

"This is all part of Alexa's plan?" he asked.

"No, it's Marec's. I initially thought that this was going too far, that was, until he explained how valuable a tool that this was for the human race. He called it 'restoring the sanity of life.' "

"What does Anna think?"

"I haven't spoken to Anna lately, but I just know that because she cares so much for the people that she'll sign off

on it. Anyway, it's part of Marec's remit, over which he has absolute control."

"And how about the media and drug companies?"

"They'll love the idea. They really understand the value in what we are building. "

"Okay, Amrit. Thanks for the update. I think I have enough to tell the president about the great job you guys are doing."

And as he hung up, he still couldn't believe what he'd just heard. He had enough to report to the president alright, and he did not need Douglas to massage this insanity to make it sound any less crazy. Amrit was obviously suffering from complication from his head injury and was now as crazy as a loon, if he thought that IRIS was of any *beneficial* purpose.

Lev had heard more than enough for his comfort, before he'd put down the phone, and as a reassurance of being so far away from the madness, he sat in his favorite chair staring out to the ocean. He then turned in response to a loud noise from the TV, that was showing a clip from the latest spy film franchise, that had been filmed on the island. The scene was a high-rise roof garden of a London hotel. A waiter approaches a James Bond-type character, and there is the flash sighting of a gun, but before the waiter can fire, two men rush and grab him by the elbows and toss him over the balcony. The clip ends with the screeching of brakes down in the street below, as the station goes to ads.

Lev was confused and relieved, in equal measures, and it was only a search on the IMDB movie site that gave him the answer. Jonas had been a film extra, listed as 'Balcony Reveler #2.' So, no one had died, the waiter doubtlessly

was thrown into a net just below the balcony, and the screeching from the street below was probably caused by the braking reaction of someone just looking up at that moment. No wonder when they met in the park, Jonas was dressed like a Cold War spy. So, the private party at the London hotel that Jonas had invited me to was really a film set, and I was an unknowing extra. He knew that I would translate the waiter's fake death, as a personal threat.

But why then was Jonas killed?

But that thought would keep, he was just happy to be away from the lunacy.

Richard Dauber, however was not away from the lunacy. He was in the thick of it and going deeper.

What should he tell Anna and Douglas? He could just tell Douglas, that he didn't need help replying to the president after all. But then should he tell Anna about the Frankenstein Amrit was creating? What, if she in favor such a crazy idea? What if she too was a control freak. IRIS could sell politics or religion under the guise of health, or simply cut down people's options, until the people themselves meant nothing.

He needed to work through what he'd just heard, before making his next call, and, as it was late in the day, he turned his phone off to give himself the night to think. He worked through the pros and cons of who would be involved in such a inhumane system. He'd taken part in two wars to protect democracy overseas, and while they hadn't worked out the way that they should have, that couldn't be helped. Was he really going to sit by and watch the creation of a system for people that was nothing short of battery farming for humans. The idea of having people organized to a point where their very existence was dictated to for marketing and research programs, by machines, was exponentially worse than Orwell merged

with Huxley.

And, if Anna did buy into this scheme, then his only choice was to revert to where he'd just come from.

After a restless night Douglas made his phone call.

## Chapter XXIII

### **Burn, Baby Burn**

The fractious conversation started with, "Mr. President, I'm not sure you're going to like what I'm about to tell you."

"I'm used to hearing crazy stories coming out of California, Dick, so nothing could surprise me that much."

That was not the case, and, as the more the colonel spoke, the more horrified the president became.

"So, California is going to dehumanize the homeless, milk the unemployed for profit, and, let me get this straight, and launch a currency that's potentially going to be bigger than the dollar?"

"There's more, Sir," and the colonel reluctantly gave over everything that he knew, and that included IRIS.

"Robotic social workers? What are they smoking out there in California, Dick? I know it's now legal, but they should keep it out of the boardroom."

The colonel ignored the remark.

"I think that we might have been underestimating the power of ZEN, Sir. Apart from the threat of algorithms

controlling every aspect of peoples' lives, research suggests that within a year they could have well over a hundred million people using their currency. And, then we would have an international currency that's not regulated, and, as the transactions would be on ZEN's own servers, the transactions would not be traceable."

"You must be exaggerating, Dick."

"No Sir. Not at all. And if the ZEN bank is, say registered in Ireland, or Lichtenstein, we have no authority to regulate it. I can't imagine what would happen if any of the exchanges, stocks, commodities or oil exchanges started to quote in the Libra. I really think you need to talk to these people, Sir, and, in person. After all, most Americans still respect the office, even if not the man."

The colonel did not regret the implied insult in the tail of his comment, as desperate times called for extreme measures. And, if the Libra could upturn the financial system, and then they turned their eyes to the voting system, not only was the presidency vulnerable, but the whole of DC's pork-barrel could go.

"I think you're right, Dick. It's time I paid the 'Golden State' a visit, so arrange something. Not Sacramento, though, it's a god-forsaken place. Arrange a meeting at the Defense Language Institute; that way I can get a round or two of golf in at Pebble."

The colonel made a face that fortunately the president didn't see.

"I'll set it up, Sir, but I'd suggest sooner rather than later. May I suggest a flying visit next week, and I'll make sure that Douglas and Marec, as well as, the governor and Ms. Cortes, are available."

"Okay, Dick. There's a visit to Israel planned, but I can scrap that. No one is likely to understand more than Israeli

politicians that business comes first."

"Leave it with me, Sir."

"I think that you are doing great work, Dick." And as the line went dead, the president was wondering how his new putter was going to work out."

As the onion-like layers of California's proposals were made public, even ZEN's lobbyists begun to feel uncomfortable. And, when rats jump ship, everyone knows that it's pretty much been holed below the water line. To make matters worse, both Anna and Douglas started to receive unsettling calls from the online retailers and credit card processors that had broken bread with them months earlier in the ZEN bunker.

It was time for ZEN to gather the troops for a refresher.

As Douglas called the video conference screens to order, he introduced the governor, Ms. Cortes and Amrit, as his alter ego, the bearded Dr. Ramanujan.

The conversation started with introductions and pleasantries and then quickly got down to business.

Dr. Ramanujan spoke first.

"The system that we have developed is to bring about the largest change to society since the Industrial Revolution. It will replace simple capitalism with the ultimate system of..."

But he got no further...."

"No disrespect, Doctor," the lead credit-card processor started, continuing, "And I speak for everyone here when I say that we are not interested in social experiments and neither are our investors. Over the last few weeks, we have all had calls from the Federal Reserve, and, after

consulting our lawyers, who tell us that you can be stopped by legislation, this is a no-go for us."

Anna replied first with a restrained voice, "But you are all committed."

"If you remember, Anna, we all expressed doubts at our last meeting. None of us really signed on to a new currency. It would be so volatile, as to be impossible to use as a payment method.

Douglas reacted with a carrot, saying, "You do know that you are in the privileged position of being first 'in the know?' And that international investors will be climbing over themselves to buy ZEN's stock once we launch the Libra."

He wondered if he'd gone overboard with his enthusiasm, but it was still no sale.

And the push-back was even stronger.

"We also know that your eventual aim is to replace us, Douglas," commented the twenty-something chairman of an electronic-payment start-up, continuing, "Why should we go along with your plan, when you know as well as we do, that we will be working to destroy ourselves? When the Libra is kept on your servers for accounting purposes," he laughed, "And in your members' eWallets, with ZEN processing the merchant accounts, none of us will be needed. And, as soon as that happens, ZEN becomes the global finance eight-hundred-pound gorilla. We all here will be left with the scraps. Now that might benefit the merchants in the short term, as you will probably offer them a better deal than we can, but we can't join in and so must fight you. And if the merchants have any sense, they will pass, as well, as once you are the only game in town, you can set whatever terms you like. And then what? Take over the personal loan industry, issue mortgages and car

loans? I'm out, and he turned off his screen."

Anna had the foresight of taking the merchant screens offline half-way through the impassioned speech, leaving just the few shocked card-processors' faces, who had rapidly thought it through and decided simply to leave it to their lawyers to deal with these upstarts. But even they were shocked by Anna's response.

Anna was now annoyed.

"Listen to me, Conrad," she said looking directly at the spokesman, but they all knew that the message was common to the group. "It's a little late for objections, and, if you fail to cooperate, don't count on the ZEN network to carry any of your future ads, and don't be surprised to see articles that express consumer concerns, like when your company, Jim, helped process late charges on a million fake accounts."

She paused to let her words sink in and then added, "And, if I were you, I'd have my legal people review the non-compete clause in the document you signed, because, when we launch the Libra, and we're going to with or without you, if you are not with us, you will be competing. Now, if any of you still want to take ZEN on, just say so now and leave this meeting. But leave knowing that we will have our lawyers tie you up in court, until the end of the decade."

Her threat hung in the air.

The lead credit-card processor, preferring to ignore the overt threats, spoke again, "What assets will the ZEN bank have?"

"Twenty five billion in paid-up capital and another twenty five in reserve," responded Douglas. Its Swiss charter was approved six weeks ago and is fully compliant with international banking regulations."

Over the following thirty minutes, but to little enthusiasm, Dr. Ramanujan went through first the benefits of the closed system and then how the system would physically work. By the end of the talk it was obvious that the use of ZEN's currency was integral to the A to Z tracking of goods and services.

As the meeting was concluded, no one thanked anyone, in fact no one said a word. They all knew that unless a miracle happened, first California would belong to ZEN and then the world.

And this was not a group that believed in miracles. Not unless, that was, they were responsible for them.

The weather was beautiful that late autumn Friday afternoon, and Monterey was more than usually swamped with tourists, thanks to the floating hotel of a cruise ship anchored in the bay. Loved only by the city for the 'head taxes' they generated, these juggernauts of the ocean, disgorged two-thousand, or so, passengers into the heart of the city.

And, the president was in town.

Douglas' telephone rang in ZEN's jet as it was preparing to land in Monterey.

"It's great to hear from you Amrit. We haven't spoken for a while, and I hope that Lev is treating you well."

"I could not ask for a better host, but that's not what I wish to talk about. I know that you are our numbers man, but I've also been looking at financial projections. And, regardless of what anybody else says, the project, as it stands, could not only bankrupt ZEN, but take the state with it.

"Are you saying that you are now against California 20/20?"

"Not all of it, but I do feel that if we include the unemployed, there are going to be some serious taxpayer headwinds. And, if you look at it logically, unemployed or not, until someone is actually homeless, the state already takes care of them. So, until then, is there really a reason to step in? There are currently over quarter of a million homeless in America, and that number would make the plan worthwhile, and we can grow from there."

"Do you really think that a pool of people that small will be worthwhile?"

"A quarter of a million test subjects is not that small, especially if they are being monitored 24/7. And just think of all the maladies and conditions that people suffer from that we can study. I have already spoken to Anna, and she sees the sense in it, and, of course, she qualified that it would be subject to your approval."

"Still using the Libra?"

"Of course, Douglas," Amrit replied and added, "That idea was a stroke of genius."

"What about Marec?"

"Marec won't care as long as he sees social value in what we are doing."

"...And Alexa, because she's the instigator of the grand plan."

"She wasn't really. In reality, her plan was nowhere near as extensive. She just wanted a better life for her undocumented people and many will be automatically included. I believe that she will welcome the change, if it makes the exercise more feasible."

Douglas thought for a moment. Amrit was logical,

because his programmer's mind simply sought structure.

"Okay, Amrit, I'll put the plan to the group after we've met with the president.

"That is good enough for me, Douglas, and thank you for taking this seriously.

And Amrit disconnected the line feeling like he'd finally made sense of their task.

Before Amrit's call, as Douglas' day progressed, it seemed that the project was exactly at the right point to share with the president. Now, the scaling back of the venture, to only take care of the homeless, while leaving the state as the *de facto* caretaker of its unemployed, would reassure the president of ZEN's altruistic aims. Now, it seemed fortuitous that he'd picked that time for Anna, Marec and the governor to meet with the president. Marec's housing plans were coming along, as were the merchant contracts and banking arrangements, and ZEN had selectively rolled out many additional and cleverly addictive, fee-based features to *Veritas* games.

California was to be the petri dish for the 'world according to ZEN,' and, although only initially catering for the homeless, it was to be a fully scalable to absorb and control any additional section of society. It was to inaugurate a brand of socialism that could not be faulted, and what men had tried to do for hundreds of years would be accomplished by a woman under the age of thirty.

Neither Anna, nor Alexa, were overly enthusiastic about being almost ordered to meet with the president. It was one thing for the governor to ask for an update, as that could have been accomplished face-to-face on a conference call, but to combine it with a meeting with the president could only mean interference. There again, Anna thought, it might just be an opportunity to instruct the president in

the difference between state and federal.

And, with that more positive attitude, she called Marec.

"Hi Marec. The governor and Alexa are already at the Institute and the president is expected at five past. I know that it's only a few of miles to the Institute, but, thanks to the president's security people, it's gridlock every where. I 'm staying over at the Intercontinental, so I'll try to get clearance to helicopter us both in."

The new health-conscious Marec responded, "You needn't bother for me, Anna, there's a footpath that passes the Institute's main gate, and I'm almost there. As for the traffic, the helicopter I've already arranged for you should be landing on the hotels' lawn in five minutes. I have to tell you that Amrit and Douglas have done such a great job with the numbers that I'm really looking forward to showing our plan to the president."

Douglas and Marec had formed an understanding, more than a friendship, in the short time that they had worked together. Marec had impressed Douglas with his knowledge of the financial world, which explained his survival in an environment that so often spat out the founders of the high tech companies. Once the company had gone public, the all-powerful venture capitalists often demanded a more seasoned hand at the tiller, but Marec had come from an environment far harsher than Silicon Valley, and he'd sat out all of their Machiavellian antics. And Marec admired Douglas for not being one of the raptor-like VC's, as he took into account emotion when it came to judging a project's viability.

Their joint presentation was to make Anna proud, and Douglas looked forward to his first meeting with a US president.

Exactly five minutes after her conversation with Marec, Anna strapped herself into the passenger seat, as the helicopter lifted slowly away from the hotel's garden and out to sea over the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

The pilot was a talkative sort, welcoming Anna aboard with, "You're in luck, Ms. Eisenberg, there's great visibility today." The helicopter had not traveled more than a mile or so before it banked to the right, a half circle, and headed back low over the ocean towards the shoreline.

"Almost not worth the gas," Anna joked, but the pilot couldn't hear over the noise of the rotors and just stared through his Aviator sunglasses.

He then said, "Three minutes to landing, Ms. Eisenberg. I just need to check which pad the Defense Institute wants me to land on."

He called in, "Request touch down location for November-Niner-Seven-Eight-Charlie-Papa?"

The reply came, "Permission denied November-Niner-Seven-Eight-Charlie-Papa. We do not recognize you, and your flight is not authorized. Turn back or prepare to be intercepted."

Anna shouted over the noise of the rotor.

"Tell them that this is Anna Eisenberg, and I am the president's guest. Check your records, as we are now approaching."

"Let's not push it, Ms. Eisenberg," suggested the pilot. "The president will understand if you are late."

After ten seconds, the second reply came, "Repeat, permission denied. Your flight is not authorized. Turn back immediately."

"I think they're trying to tell us something," the pilot said without humor, his face showing extreme discomfort,

at the order to turn back.

After a pause, he continued in the voice that showed that he was genuinely concerned.

"I know the danger of ignoring a warning, Ms. Eisenberg. I was at the Institute back in 1997 when, during a previous president's visit to Monterey, an experimental plane, which was just about where we are now, exploded and sank into the Monterey Bay."

And then he made the only sensible decision.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Eisenberg, but we're turning back," he said, as he took a hard right to head back to Lover's Point.

It was not clear to the quickly approaching fighter pilot whether the helicopter, as it came out of the sun, was obeying instructions to leave, or taking evasive action. All he knew was, that it was no more than a few hundred yards away from the president of the United States, so he fired off a quick burst of shells.

He then peeled off at an almost ninety degree angle, as the message came over the helicopter pilot's headset.

"Apologies, November-Niner-Seven-Eight-Charlie-Papa, please proceed, as you are now cleared for landing."

"That was some welcome," Anna said, in a voice that even she had not heard before, as she cleared her throat to laugh.

"It certainly was," said the pilot, obviously shaken and clearly perspiring. "The sooner we get this thing down, the better. Too reminiscent of movies about Vietnam for my liking. I was too young to go out there, and it would have been ironic to get shot out of the sky in the US of A..."

Anna simply agreed with the pilot, but she wondered if she'd just had a warning.

As the helicopter arrived at the Institute, it was obvious, from the tanks on the lawns and the battle-ready sentries at the gate, that security was on high-alert. And, when the honor-guard escorted her into the auditorium, the sea of military uniforms gave her the reason. The president had stacked the deck. And, not only with military, but with governors and CEO's from around the country.

What had been sold to ZEN as a semi-casual get together, was to be an inquisition.

Despite the attempted intimidation, neither she, nor Marec, who had met her at the helipad, was fazed by what they saw, as ZEN's own three-billion strong army was always close at hand. And, as they looked around at the paintings of victorious battles that covered the walls, they noticed Alexa amusing herself by exchanging pleasantries with the president. They could tell from her demeanor that she was savoring the anticipation of the crowd's reaction to letting the president know that, although it was thoughtful of him to offer his opinion on California 20/20, his input was not actually needed.

With the gathering now assembled, and the room humming with quiet conversations, Anna, Douglas and Marec were escorted to three arm chairs on the stage, a fourth for the moderator, being empty.

A mild clapping broke out as Colonel Richard Dauber walked on to the stage, shook hands with the three and then seated himself.

No smiles were exchanged between those on the stage, as Anna, having now seen how the stage was set, anticipated that she and Marec were to be bushwhacked.

The governor and Alexa were then directed to front row seats either side of an unoccupied one.

The room then erupted as the sound of the Stars and

Stripes continued to play, as everyone stood to attention. A subdued hand clapping, rippled through the audience, as the president of the United States entered, smiling broadly, as he took his place between Alexa and the governor of The Golden State.

"I'd like to thank you all for coming," started the colonel, continuing, "And a special thank you to Anna Eisenberg, Douglas Wilder and Marec Winger, who represent ZEN, and of course to you, Mr. president. He might as well have said in the 'blue corner' and the 'red corner,' but to have done so would have stated the obvious. Alexa and the governor, while wondering why they had not been thanked personally, sensing the atmosphere in the room, were quite content to be excluded.

Looking directly at Anna, the colonel continued, "I have a number of written questions, and then we will open up to questions from the floor.

He paused.

"The first question is, what is your philosophy behind tendering for the California 20/20 project?"

Anna spoke, responding, "Firstly, on behalf of ZEN Corp., let me than you all for your collective time and now to the question. ZEN offered to project-manage California 20/20, because we are the only company capable of fulfilling the remit."

An officer from the back of the room shouted back, "Not because you want to take over the world?"

There was a muffled approval of the question.

"Not at all," answered Anna. "But perhaps I should qualify that statement. Not unless we have to."

The disapproval was not in any way muffled. Angry shouts came at Anna and Marec, and the colonel had to ask

for order.

"Perhaps you could explain further, Ms. Eisenberg, as your response, which while I am sure was tongue-in-cheek, seems not to have been received well, by the very people who's charge it is to keep the world safe from dictatorships. Many here have had comrades-in-arms and good friends lose their lives doing what you have just suggested that ZEN might do."

Anna thought for a moment and then looked at Marec.

"Perhaps, I can explain," started Marec, adding, "ZEN has no intention of being a political or military power. We simply neither have the desire nor the capability. What we do have is a channel to talk to our members, and have them respond in any way they feel. You could call it the first true democracy, as there is no comeback to whatever views our members hold. And, therefore, we are the best company to assist California 20/20, because of the ability to speak directly to the Californians that we will be working with. We will deliver the news and the views, and let them decide what they like and don't like."

The colonel asked, "And do you plan to eventually do the same for your three-billion members world wide? And, don't you realize that if you do, you could accidentally start revolutions by challenging the order of things?"

"Or stop them," responded Marec, and he paused before launching his attack.

"But then, how many in this room think that either they, or America, started or helped the Arab Spring? Does anyone here think that NAFTA really helped anyone, but a few billionaires? Can someone tell me what benefit decades of CIA interference in South American politics brought to anyone?"

And, finally, he threw at them, "America despises, or so

it says, the drug epidemic fueled by the Mexican drug cartels, but has it *really* tried to do anything about them?"

The muttering in the room stopped dead. None of those present could believe that they had been brought there to be insulted.

The more senior officers and politicians noisily stood and left.

The president could not have wished for a better reaction, from this abrasively loudmouthed foreigner billionaire, and he just sat patiently waiting for the insults to really start flying.

But his enjoyment was cut short, as a secret serviceman, having cupped his ear to better hear a message, then approached the president.

The president cracked a half smile.

Then Anna's phone also rang.

It was Amrit calling to say that Lev's house had been firebombed, and, although the house and all its contents had been destroyed they were both safe.

"Terrorists?" the Commander in Chief said, almost to himself.

"We don't know that yet, Sir," responded the secret service agent.

"I do," responded the president, and, almost as an afterthought said, "Isn't *anyone* who challenges order a terrorist."

Anna unclipped the microphone from her dress and stood, and she motioned for Marec and Douglas to do the same. As she approached the edge of the stage, she looked directly at the president, her eyes icy and calmly said, "You are right, Mr. president. We *are* at war!"

**WE ACT, But We Do No Harm**

## Chapter I

### **A Burning Desire**

Lev could only stand and watch as the flames consuming his house sent shimmering embers into the night sky.

"It could have been a lot worse," he said to Amrit, who was standing next to him, also in a state of disbelief. And, he quickly added, "If we'd not been sitting on the back terrace, we could have died."

His eyes were now misting over as he continued, "And, if the peacocks hadn't started screeching - they are such great guard dogs - we wouldn't have called the fire department in time."

Lev was now rambling, as he added, "Peacocks make me feel safe."

Amrit was not so sure about being safe, as, having only just survived a near fatal gun-shot by a SWAT team less than a year earlier, his faith in any individual's personal safety had been severely compromised.

Lev, now with tears in his eyes, watching the sparks shoot high into the air, as the garage roof collapsed onto his precious cars, continued, "What worries me, is that this was probably just a warning. I was treated badly when I was suspected of election interfering, but now someone's after

me for harboring you, and for some reason that's more serious."

Amrit, who was angry, more than he was scared, had only been half listening up to that point.

"Not so fast, Lev. How do we know who did this? From what you told me about your past associations, it might not have been Jonas Bulaitis, the real KGB, or whatever it's called these days, blackmailing you, but his death could have drawn attention to you, and now the genuine article might just be sending a message to keep quiet."

"By using a petrol bomb, if that's what they used?"

"Why do you think that they're called Molotov cocktails?" asked Amrit.

Lev was even less comforted by Amrit's alternative, as he understood the ruthlessness of the Eastern mentality, and he was just about to change the subject when the Bajan police jeep arrived.

"Nasty mess you have here, Sir," said the sergeant, who looked more than a little nervous, as he approached.

"Yes," said Lev. "It was lucky that we were down on the beach enjoying the sunset."

"A petrol bomb attack is ... ," started the constable, promptly interrupted by his superior.

"Now, Marvin, let's wait for the experts to tell us what happened. After all, it could have been dry lightning. And if not, then our job is just to find out what it was."

The sergeant turned to Lev.

"Can you think of anyone on the island that might hold a grudge, Sir? Though I must say that, here on Barbados, a machete would have been the favored way of settling a dispute. And, it would be regarded as nice and personal, if

you know what I mean."

"No one." Both men lied, almost in unison. And, Lev continued, "I have lived here peacefully for many years, and I am both surprised and horrified that anyone should do such a thing."

"Have you thought of moving off the island?" inquired the constable.

And, again, his Sargent had to step in.

"Now, Marvin, we are a friendly island, and we would not like our privileged guests to fee unwelcome in any way."

And, there was a tone in the word 'unwelcome' that moved the short hairs on the back of Lev's neck.

Not wanting to spend too much time at the scene of the crime, the sergeant abruptly turned, as he said, "Well, that's all we can do here today, Gentlemen. We will need to wait for the fire chief to tell us how it was done," and he handed Lev his card, saying, "Meanwhile, please get in touch with me, if you can think of anyone who might have carried out this terrible act."

As the officers walked back to the jeep, the sergeant chided the constable.

"We were just going to burn a patch on the lawn to frighten them into leaving the island. I knew I should never have chosen the team's fast bowler to throw the bloody thing."

"Well, it's done now, and it really does send a stronger message," replied his accomplice.

"Yes, but what if it brings its own reprisals?"

"Then we'll deal with it," came the cocky reply, continuing, "After all, we are the Royal Bajan Police Force."

"I didn't like that one bit," said Lev, adding, "The way he pronounced the word, unwelcome. It was as if they knew that we were being told to get off the island."

"You're just being paranoid, Lev."

"Am I? And, if I'm right, how deep does this conspiracy go?"

"If that's the case, I'm not sure I wish to find out. But I do know that we have to respect their request." Lev paused before continuing, "We need to speak to Anna about this."

"Tomorrow. Let's call her tomorrow. I'm really not up to a conversation right now. I need time to think this through."

Lev called the Sandy Lane for two rooms, and, leaving the firefighters to do their job, he and Amrit spent the rest of the evening, and much of the night, watching limbo dancers, while sixties rock stars and bit-part soap actors got ever noisier drunk.

The evening at Monterey had not been a success for anyone, and after Anna had accepted the president's response to Lev's house being firebombed, as being a declaration of war, the gloves were off. She mistakenly asked the military in the room what they felt about the president's Valhalla plan, to spy on global leaders and was surprised to hear that they were all for it. So, she then accused the president of abandoning the homeless in favor of tax cuts for the wealthy and got no reaction at all. The president countered by asking Anna what right had it to usurp the government by helping the homeless, and then he slammed the governor for allowing ZEN to do so. All in all, it turned into a bear-garden, and the event was eventually abandoned long before its scheduled two hour duration.

Away from the pandemonium of the evening, and in the tranquility of the corporate jet heading back to Northern

California, Anna called Amrit back.

"A warning to leave the island. You *are* joking?" Anna replied to Amrit, as she was told of the police visit, and she followed it with, "Who do they think they are dealing with?"

She turned to Douglas.

"What do you think, Douglas?"

"I think that we have to think very seriously before we take on any sovereign state, as they're probably taking orders from the US and possibly the UK governments? I've always believed it best never to take on a fight that one can't win."

"Who says that it can't be won, Douglas? You read the papers. You see on the news the demonstrations against governments. The French and the British have both been forced to roll back policies, after the people have taken to the streets. Even the Chinese soft-peddled when they knew they had to. Well, today we represent the American people, our street is the Internet, and we are millions strong. And, we *are* at war."

Anna's repeated reference to war disturbed Douglas. When she'd said it to the president, he'd put her outburst down to shock, but now he saw that it was an expression of how she really felt.

"We will fly you both back tomorrow, Amrit, and you can stay at Woodside with me, while we work out what we do next. And don't worry. We have friends in high places, and that's not only Richard Dauber's Homeland Security and CIA contacts. If the US government *was* responsible for what just happened, we *will* bring them down."

Douglas doubted that Amrit would be particularly keen on bringing down the Administration, and he thought it unlikely that the ex Homeland Security chief, Colonel Richard Dauber, would be either. Always the classicist, he

hoped that Anna was just giving Amrit her equivalent of Henry V's St Crispin's Day speech before Agincourt.

"Well, Anna," Douglas started, as she disconnected the call from Amrit, "before we do anything, we need Marec, Richard, Amrit and you and I in the same room. And, you have to agree that if anyone dissents, we do not go forward?"

The question was answered in the affirmative, but Anna had already decided that her promise of war to the president was an honest one.

It was exactly one week later that ZEN's heads of finance, development, income enhancement, compliance and its CEO gathered at Anna's Woodside estate. For security reasons, no one had submitted their ideas, or even an outline, prior to the meeting.

Close to the technology's money centers of Menlo Park and Palo Alto, Woodside housed the richest of the rich, and, Anna's fifty-acre estate purchased by Adam, just before the market went crazy, was one of the most valuable properties in the US. It was the best purchase her ex-husband, and current federal prison inmate, had made, and, Anna had transformed the main house from a frat boy's paradise, into *her* sanctuary.

Sitting out on the marble terrace in front of the Olympic size pool, the group was in a somber mood, and, uncharacteristically for Marec Winger, who generally preferred to listen before joining in, he took the floor first.

"All of you know that I have, or shall we say had, a reputation, and it was well deserved, for craziness. You name it, and I was up for it - trekking across the South Pole, paragliding across the Grand Canyon, street racing my Lamborghini and all sorts of madness. If it was dangerous, I tried it, and, I more often than not had a bottle in my hand.

But.."

He paused.

"..but, taking on the United States government is in a another league altogether. I fled Eastern Europe, because I saw what a government could do. I watched in horror as atrocities were committed in the name of keeping the people safe, when all the government was doing was keeping the government safe. Disappearances and accidents were so common-place that they were just part of everyday life. Everyone knew that, whoever raised their head above the parapet, would, metaphorically, take a bullet for freedom."

He took another pause, as he looked around the room.

"So. Anna, I know that you're up for it. Douglas is a banker, Amrit a software programmer, and Richard, especially you, an ex head of Homeland Security, are you all *really* prepared to take on all-comers? Are you ready to take on the people that not only enforce the rules, but also make them?"

Douglas echoed Marec's sentiment, and, as he pointed around the grounds he asked Anna if she was really prepared to give up her lifestyle.

"Yes, of course," she responded.

Douglas, still not convinced of the veracity of Anna's response, became more direct.

"I'm not sure it went too well last time you took on the US government."

Anna wasn't fazed. If anything, it emboldened her.

"Last time I had no idea how to use the power of ZEN."

Marec stepped in. "So, even if it ends in a jail cell on a remote island, or, more likely, your death? You should consider that this democracy hasn't survived two hundred

and fifty years without defending itself."

"So, what are you suggesting, Marec?" Anna shot back, "That we give up the chance of bringing in a real democracy, because we might get hurt in the process?"

Douglas, sensing that Anna's argument might carry some sway with Amrit, spoke again.

"So, Anna, even though last time ZEN challenged the US government and you were chased across the continent, and Roger de Courcey was killed, you'd do it all again? Don't think that you are untouchable just because you came back to run ZEN. And, not to mention Amrit being shot, because we all know about that stupidity."

Anna was shocked. Douglas had never attacked her in such a way, and she'd assumed that was because he'd known his place in ZEN's hierarchy. He was valued, but replaceable, and it re-aligned her position towards him.

And then Marec, ignoring what he took to be a spat, spoke.

"If, and it seems to be a big if, we agree with taking on whoever was responsible, then unless we plan correctly, we *will* fail. I suggest that we continue with CALIFORNIA 20/20, as it's seen as benign, and use that as a screen to cover whatever we are planning next."

Surprisingly, Amrit, spoke up in agreement.

"Yes, Marec, of course you're right. And in its way CALIFORNIA 20/20 is our first strike at Washington through California. Housing California's homeless to save it from a crisis of its own making and, creating bio-personal medicines as we do so, will be a perfect cover. And, while that is progressing, I suggest that we become involved with civic activities to greatly enhance ZEN's profile. We should buy garbage collection and water processing plants and distribute solar power through panels on individual roof

tops, and then the unused power can be sent next door, or down the street, via a ZEN grid, across town. In simple terms, we address the fabric of society and better it. 'We act, but we do no harm.' At the same time, we endorse politicians that feel the way that we do. We simply take control of California, by delivering a better alternative."

"I agree," said Douglas, adding, "... mainly because it would be suicide to come at the US government head-on even if we were one hundred percent certain that that's who was attacking us."

But Amrit's comment took Anna back to her warring thoughts.

"Who else, Douglas?" asked Anna. "Who else would want to stop us, and what didn't you understand from the president's comment about punishment? Did he seem concerned to you when I mentioned 'war,' because he didn't that seem concerned to me. He simply want's to stop CALIFORNIA 20/20, because of the power it would take from Washington."

"No, Anna, I don't think so. He thought that you speaking *for* America against whoever fire bombed Lev's house, not against America for doing it," responded Douglas.

Anna did not look convinced.

Douglas, who, when he joined ZEN, never expected to have to fight the US government asked, "So, even if this is a misunderstanding, are you still suggesting that we take on the US government?" He laughed, continuing, "We should perhaps have Lev file a criminal damage suit against the CIA."

Anna thought for a moment before speaking.

"Okay, not fighting then, perhaps a take-over bid?"

No one understood, so they let her continue.

"We don't fight the president. We take his job away from him. We fire him. We defeat him in the upcoming election."

"So we support his opponents?"

"No. Along with creating a more robust social structure, we put up our own candidate."

Amrit broke the silence that followed Anna's radical suggestion.

"Jim McMurtry? And, have Alexa support him as his personal adviser?"

"Hell no, Amrit," Douglas said emphatically. Alexa would run the show, and that's *our* job. Right, Anna?

Anna couldn't tell if there was humor or sarcasm behind the smile, on Douglas' face, so she assumed both were present.

"Well, Douglas. Only if you think that we must?"

And then Douglas laughed.

"I understand that you want to change America for the better, Anna, or at least I assume that you do. BUT what makes you think that you can do any better? After all, world events change minute by minute, and the First World countries no longer have the luxury to be proactive with unfettered power."

Amrit, who'd been almost enjoying the private game of tennis, interrupted at thirty-love.

"Going back to basics, although this is a fun mental exercise, I can't see a bloodless way of getting our person into the Oval Office. And, I'm not up for any alternative."

Douglas picking up on the anguish in Amrit's voice, whether it was caused by the conversation or the residual

PTSD from having his office and possessions destroyed when Lev's house was firebombed, knew he had to discharge the energy in the room.

"We shall do nothing, Amrit, without having a firm plan, and, I promise you that you are to be one of its architects. I also promise you that it is not our intention to take over the world."

A large furrow in Amrit's brow lessened, as he relaxed. "Thank you Douglas. I know that I can count on your English coolness. Now, as I'm already late for physical therapy class, let's follow up later."

As Amrit left, Douglas acknowledged the elephant in the room.

"I know that we all admire Amrit and not just because he co-founded ZEN, but because he's a fine human being. But if we start to make an enemy of the president, we will be open to attack from all sides, and Amrit is not up to the task. The fire has done to his mind what the assassination attempt did to his body, and now both are weak."

Anna picked up the gauntlet.

"And that bothers you, Douglas? I'm not suggesting that we do anything either illegal or unethical. We will not have to. I'd like you to read up on US election law, as before we start, we need to know everything there is about legal contributions, and that's individual, political action committee bundling and corporate donation limits."

"So we are going with Jim McMurtry? asked Marec, adding, "He's not very bright."

"So, when does a president have to be bright? And, Jim believes in what we are doing. Remember, it was Jim that introduced the project."

Marec wasn't so easily convinced, saying, "But I

understood that it was Alexa's plan all along. He just jumped on the bandwagon and possible something else.

Both Douglas and Marec laughed.

"So why not make Alexa President?" Anna asked.

"You have got to be joking. A woman and a Hispanic one, at that. Thank God she was born overseas!"

"That could be fixed," Anna said, to the surprise of the others.

"You would really do that?" asked an incredulous Douglas.

"Why not? Don't tell me that you actually believe in the sanctity of nationality. Remember Wittgenstein's observation that, "National boundaries are the greatest evil known to man."

Douglas thought for a moment before answering.

"And, in many ways he was correct. But I am not sure that he was suggesting altering birth records."

Marec then changed the subject by asking, "Were any copies of the Valhalla information saved, or were they all destroyed?" And, he smiled as he further asked, "Part two of my question has to be, would you regard blackmail, or undue influence either illegal or unethical?"

Anna looked neither shocked nor surprised at either part of the question.

"With regards to part one, I'm not sure."

"And, part two?" Marec asked again, and for five seconds the only sound was a bird chirping.

"Blackmail, certainly would be both illegal and unethical. But as for influence, as knowledge is power, it would just mean that, when it comes to dealing with politicians we will all be on equal footing. So Douglas, if you

could break off from what you are doing to look into the types and limits of donations, Marec and I will go see first-hand how we are doing with Operation Homecoming."

Neither Douglas nor Marec needed to ask a follow-up question. They had their orders and although Marec was neither used to, nor comfortable with taking orders, he knew that his time would come. And, as the meeting broke up, he alone understood why Richard Dauber, ZEN's compliance officer, had not been invited.

## Chapter II

### **Home Again**

The physical journey from ZEN's majestic doughnut-shaped office complex to CALIFORNIA 20/20's first triage center for the homeless was less than thirty minutes, but, on arrival, Anna and Marec felt as if they had been transported back centuries.

The volunteer members of local churches that greeted the shabby rag-tag of citizenry that slowly stepped down from the luxury coaches were shocked at the level of society's degradation. In another age, they could have been Napoleon's defeated, bleeding and shoe-less army returning from the his failed Moscow campaign, or waifs and refugees from London's Black Plague, or a scene from a Middle European pogrom.

As the societally dispossessed moved slowly through the

reception area, they were categorized as being active or injured, sane or deranged, or sober or not. Any relocations to hospital or showers, were preceded by hot meals, and the sane and uninjured were treated to immediate accommodation.

It had not been easy separating these unfortunates from their roadside, alleyway and doorway refuges, and most had to be convinced that this was not an exercise to move them on. The rules allowed for no possessions to be brought along, except for photographs and other genuinely irreplaceable personal items, and, what was left, was swept up by the dumpster trucks that tailed the buses. Behind the trucks, clean-up crews efficiently returned the locations to their former condition so no trace of occupation survived. The whole exercise was badge-engineered for maximum media exposure, with every vehicle and participant, including those who boarded the coaches, wearing a ZEN insignia to leave no misunderstanding as to those responsible.

As Anna and Marec watched the sorry procession enter the building, the journalists and television and social media bloggers, that had been in place since dawn, rushed over to the limousine carrying Governor Jim McMurtry.

"How do you feel the project is going, Jim?" asked the loudest voice from the pack of journalists.

"Governor McMurtry to you," responded the governor, continuing, "I haven't forgotten the slash and burn job you did on me with that interview that created all sorts of problems."

"What was unfair about it, Governor?"

"Other than its content, nothing. It was as *you* people say, 'fair and balanced.' "

"There was no editing, Sir."

"That's my point, Damien. There was NO editing. I came off a lunatic revolutionary, and not as someone who just wanted to help some unfortunates."

"So, you do not intend to house hundreds of thousands of people at the state's expense?"

"Well, yes, with ZEN's help."

"Because the state really can't afford it? Is that right?"

The governor hesitated.

"Well, err. No."

"Thank you, Governor, for my next column."

And the journalist turned on his heels to make his deadline for the evening edition.

The governor addressed the remaining group asking if there were any more sensible questions.

A tall blonde, who looked like she'd made a bit of a night of it, asked, "Is there a larger message behind housing the homeless? Are you telling other states that they should be doing the same? After all, if California, with its huge economy and tax base, can't afford it without corporate support, are you trying to send a message to Washington, even to the president himself, because it's common knowledge that you and he don't see eye to eye on this matter and most other issues?"

"Thinking about the White House are we, Jim?" came a voice from a grubby trench-coat holding a sound boom in the governor's face.

"No, I'm not. I'm looking forward to retiring when my term's up."

"To spend more time with the family?" another joked.

"Time for a new wife, is it Jim?"

"I have no idea what you mean," said an obviously offended governor, who knew exactly what the question inferred.

"What about this?" asked the journalist as he held up a photo of the governor and Alexa boarding a plane at DC's National Airport, as they traveled back to Sacramento.

"Ms. Cortes and I are just co-workers."

"What does your wife think?" someone asked, and the governor was saved from further embarrassment by Anna walking through the group to stand next to the besieged politician.

"What you see today," Anna began, continuing, "Is the beginning of a revolution."

She paused.

"A revolution in how America *should* treat its citizens. Housing is such a fundamental that, frankly, the UN should have stepped in many years ago to stop this sort of atrocity from gaining such a foothold."

Now the journalists, having had some fun with an easy target, switched to draw blood from a more realistic opponent.

"Where's the money coming from for these luxury coach rides and housing?" asked one.

"This is just a publicity stunt to embarrass the president," shouted another.

"You won't be able to keep up with demand. The homeless from all over the country will come here, and it'll bankrupt both you and the state," said the editor of *Screen*, a San Francisco film magazine.

"So, what's the real game, Anna, and why is ZEN, the company that spied on the American people, involved,"

asked the Political Editor of *the Washington Bugle*, who'd flown in to just witness the event for himself."

And that was the question that Anna chose to address.

"You all know Marec here," and she tapped him on the shoulder, who'd been quiet up to that point,

"Not as well as his bartender," someone shouted.

Anna ignored the jibe.

"Tell them about our project financing, Marec."

"Well," he started, "As you all know, Veritas merged into ZEN a short while ago, and, between us, we have tapped into a market that has been largely undeveloped. But you are going to have to wait for our accounts to be published to learn more, but I can tell you that it currently generates just under a hundred million dollars a week, and we see an exponential growth trajectory."

The crowd of seasoned hacks was silent.

"So, ZEN is going into politics?" asked Damien, who'd sent in his piece and returned to the fray.

"Not necessarily," replied Anna, "Only where we recognize a need."

"Local, national or international?" he asked.

"Possibly?" came the response.

"What has brought this wave of altruism on, Anna? And, isn't it rather ironic that many of the problems that society is facing have been created by online companies like ZEN, and now you want to save society by using the peoples' own money."

Anna was ready for the journalist who mistakenly thought that he could best her in an argument.

"The root of many of today's problems is the break

down of society, Damien," said Anna, reading his press badge, continuing, "And you can't lay that at the door of technology. Technology didn't start the fire. The rot that has eaten America's brain started in the sixties, when the establishment, hitching a ride on the hippy mentality, allowed the destruction of the educational system. When Berkeley activists demanded that the students set the syllabus, the Regents gave in and the education authorities just sat back. Of course, the four dead in Ohio was the turning point, but all the government did was cut and run. Ohio State weakened their resolve and then the education system was just left to rot. And, what has the government done for the huge numbers of Americans that have taken to drugs to slip slowly into the gutter. They declared a 'War on Drugs,' but they failed to shut down the banks that handled the hundreds of billions of drug dollars, and it seemed easier for America to fight a war in the Middle East over oil than it was to go into Mexico to terminate the drug gangs. Tell me, Damien, in hindsight, which do you think should have been a national security priority? And, then we have the medical industry. You read the papers, so you tell me why protecting the jobs of the fifty thousand people that work in the medical insurance industry are more important than the millions who suffer from high drug costs thanks to the lobbyists who stop the industry being 'economically' consolidated?"

And, without a pause Anna said, "So, Damien, ask your question again, but perhaps you would care to rephrase it."

"So you *do* intend to take on Washington?"

"No." Anna lied, as this was neither the time or the place. We just want to help where we can, and California is fortunate to have a progressive governor like, Jim McMurtry."

Anna waited for Governor McMurtry to join in, but that

morning he'd already had enough. So Marec took up the cause.

"Developing on from Anna's comments about education and homelessness, we have found a way to combine two issues for the benefit of both. We are planning to re-purpose the schools, through a lease-back operation with California, to use hundreds of locations to house the unfortunate homeless. The children will be given laptops that will all run on ZEN's new and dedicated 5G education network, so they can all learn at home at their own pace."

An audible gasp came from the journalists.

"So you are going to close the schools? With both parents working, who would take care of the children learning from home," asked the blonde, who now looked awake.

It was Marec who answered, "Those parents who wish to stay home, will be paid to do so by the state, and those who want to keep working will have their children monitored by government workers at home."

"Sounds like you have found a way to spin straw into gold," said a voice.

"No, just better prioritizing."

"And you still claim that neither ZEN nor the governor are looking at going into politics?"

"The governor is already in politics," said Anna.

"Only until November. Then, it's 'more time with the family' time."

Anna wound up the impromptu meeting with, "I'm sure that if you contact the governor's press office, they can let you have more information on this project."

"We'd rather know what ZEN has planned," shouted

Damien, as Anna and Marec walked away.

As the car drove away, Marec asked Anna, but failed to get a response, if she still thought that Governor McMurtry was fit for their purpose.

### Chapter III

#### **Free Press**

The sun was setting as Damien Hurst finally made it back to his desk at the *San Francisco Register*. He'd been for a long lunch after being humiliated at ZEN's homeless event, and having met some old friends at his local pot shop, on his back to the Castro, they decided to take in a movie.

As he unsteadily made his way through the office door, he was greeted by the editor who proceeded to declare his article an irrelevant and malicious attack on one of the areas largest employers, and, as ZEN was their biggest advertiser, really bad for business.

"Aren't you tired of the urine and crap in the streets?" the editor asked as he approached the journalist.

There was a weak reply in the affirmative from a glazed-eyed Damien, so his boss continued.

"So why attack the only company that has decided to do something about it?"

"Because it's a sodding game. A ruse." Damien responded, finally finding his voice and continued, "You

can't tell me that even you don't feel that there is more to this than meets the eye? This is not the Summer of Love and ZEN, despite the name, is not that enlightened."

"And you're out to expose them? Oh, I forgot, strike that, you don't have any facts to expose - just a feeling. You're just wasting your time if you're looking for a Pulitzer. We're a free sheet, not *Fortune Magazine*, or even the *Village Voice*, but we do have standards. I'm not saying that there isn't more to ZEN's munificence, I'm just saying that we don't print feelings. So get back to me when you actually *have* a story on ZEN."

And the editor hit DEL on his terminal to erase what should have been, at the very least, the start of a story.

Regardless of the opinion of his editor, Damien was no novice. He'd arrived in the city from England, at age sixteen, to join the 1969 Flower Power movement and he was one of the few left alive who could genuinely claim to have seen George and Patti Harrison on Haight, at the height of the movement. Having survived the sixties with his senses pretty much intact, no thanks to his consuming copious amounts of LSD, he'd survived in the seventies as a tour guide, and in the eighties he'd begun his up and down career as an alternative journalist. Now, at five feet eleven, a few pounds overweight, if not a bit paunchy, with his long gray hair tied back with a colorful scrunchie, and dressed by Goodwill, he had the look of sixties acid-rock band survivor.

He was every inch a San Franciscan boomer.

Like most alternative journalists, Damien was used to being insulted by editors, and that was okay, because even he had to admit that he sometimes got stories wrong. This time though, he could feel that burst of energy that journalists get when they just know they are on to

something. He felt that surge when he'd been one of the first journalists to write about the then unknown disease that hit the Castro in the eighties, and when he'd championed the many local hospital and hotel union causes, and especially over the last decade, when he blogged, criticizing the city's housing policies. ZEN was just the break he needed to get back some respect as a journalist, so to hell with his editor's opinion; why shouldn't he get a Pulitzer?

Back home later that evening, as his head was settling down from the day's Maui Wowie, Damien set out his game plan. He knew that if he was to do a successful slash-and-burn job on the area's biggest employer, he'd best be super careful and super accurate. And, with this in mind, by the time the morning sun came through the windows in his small apartment, his research covered all of the large white board that, just the week before, he'd rescued from a dumpster.

Red arrows on the board went from ZEN's directors to their activities, past and present, with side notes to what rumors the media had published on their future exploits. Blue arrows went to their influential non-ZEN associations. Green arrows went to their financial dealings, and black arrows went to their political projects. In short, it was a mess that only an anal retentive or an investigative journalist looking for a hit could understand, let alone love.

And he did, because he was both.

His research reinforced his suspicions that that no one company, with such a web of interests and involvement, could be anything other than out for the kill, and he loved the way that their mission statement read, 'We act, but we do no harm.'

But there was a problem. Having grown his corporate onion, he found nothing incriminating - nothing beyond the obvious power and influence grabs seemed to connect the

layers in any nefarious ways. Sure, ZEN was known to have been a government tool, but then it was prosecuted by the government for holding back information, so that was a dead end. He tried to reason why Marec Winger, one of the world's wealthiest men, should partner his games company with ZEN. Then, who was this Douglas Wilde, a banker, who seemed to have no real profile? How did the governor of California and his beautiful radical left-wing mistress, if that's what she was, fit? Were they helping ZEN or was it the other way around? Amrit Kahn, the supposed terrorist and the programmer, Roger de Courcey, killed by a gas explosion in the Vatican seemed to fit just marginally, so they too were on the white board. And who the hell was Dr. Ramanujan, the man with no past?

Having built a mind map of events, as best he could, and, placing images of the individuals, he lit up again for enhanced inspiration.

It was just before dawn when, as he sipped at his sixth or seventh cup of coffee, he made his first breakthrough. He realized that he'd known one of people on the board. The photo of Roger de Courcey was actually Jim Nolan, a Brit that he'd shared a house with on Haight Ashbury in the 70's.

He'd sensed, on and off during the night, that there was something familiar with the name, other than it was that of a once-popular English ventriloquist. Jim's party trick after a few drinks had been to make cushions talk. It was his clever way of picking a girl for the night, and it meant that, as most evenings ended, Jim had seldom spent the night alone. So, why was he dead, and how many people are actually killed by exploding gas mains, while being extradited. That was definitely one for further research, and he wondered who else was not who they seemed, and, as the sun came up, he called his editor and quit.

"Good!" came the response, qualified by, "It saves me

firing you...you lazy bastard. It's long past time that you left. There's no room for old hippies in this city. I've only kept you on out of pity. Your work has been terrible for years, and, even worse, since the pot shop moved in downstairs. Go! Go chase ZEN. Go be Captain Ahab, Don Quixote, or whoever your pot-fueled paranoia makes you think you are, and don't ever bother coming back, even if, and you will, get a reality check."

And the editor slammed the phone down.

Damien hadn't been alone in his criticism of how that day's dealing with the homeless project launch had gone. Anna was silent in the car as she and Marec drove into the city to meet with the mayor. Trying to be upbeat, there was a note of hopefulness in his voice, as Marec said, "That went well."

"You think so? I'm not so sure,"replied Anna, sourly. "The press didn't seem to understand what we are trying to do, and McMurtry, turning up unprepared was unforgivable. The man's a walking disaster. How we ever thought of him as possible presidential material horrifies me. At least Alexa knows when to keep quiet. Luckily, we're not so far down the line that we can't change horses, and to be honest, I think that it's about time that women were better represented in the Oval Office."

Marec, generally in favor of equality, wasn't so sure and said so.

"That could hurt us."

His blunt comment caught her by surprise, but it was the first time that she'd felt that he was fully behind ZEN's creating the next leader of the Free World.

"I don't think so," she responded, qualifying in a way that Marec in all his worldliness had not considered it as a

reality. "Never forget that we have the power to tailor the news stream of every individual in our system; all one hundred million of them. If, and it's still a big if, we decide to promote Alexa, we will begin with the CALIFORNIA 20/20 program. So, for those who like hiking, Alexa will be seen on State Park trails. To beach goers, she'll be photographed cleaning up the beaches, and to the sick, she'll blog about single-payer health care. California is the ideal place to start, because it has let so much go. We wouldn't need to announce anything, because we'd have her face on every CALIFORNIA 20/20 tee shirt. And, they'll be worn by everyone working on the project, and that means workers filling potholes, repairing bridges, building water purification plants, installing solar panels and everything else. Within no time at all, whoever we chose will become famous."

As Marec's face showed a hint of concern, Anna then threw in a joke to lighten the tone.

"But seriously, Anna continued, "Once we've chosen our person, we'd then cover the diversity of interests simply by analyzing members' OneWorld pages and parsing their texts, phone calls and email."

Marec was as impressed, as he was horrified.

"Then what? Let's say that we can create a local hero, and then, by some miracle, place them in the White House, how do we control them?"

"The same way that we got them there. We simply help guide, by controlling the information content, and the news cycle to our members, who, in turn, contact the House and Congress to help guide the president."

"You mean, you make policy?"

"No, our OneWorld member's will make policy. It will be the world's first true democracy."

As Marec watched the buildings along the freeway flash past, he saw the future. What about the people that weren't OneWorld members? Who will represent them, he wondered.

But he said nothing.

And Marec wasn't alone in thinking that way, as Jim McMurtry knew that his performance that morning had not gone well. Being heckled was one thing, but when the press do it, it spells danger, and, with hindsight, he could see that trying to steal the limelight from ZEN, by going to their launch, had been a bad decision. Alexa had got that one wrong, so why in God's name had he listened to her? As a seasoned politician, he should have known that it had been a stupid idea, and he was going to tell her so.

Then, as his limousine pulled up to the City Hall, it crossed his mind that he'd gotten her where *she* wanted to be and that *he* might now be disposable.

The Commissioner for the Homeless met the governor at the curb, and Alexa was already by his side.

"Hi Jim, I'm Mark, We spoke on the phone. I'm sorry that I couldn't be with you this morning, at the opening, but I've had staffing issues that I just had to deal with," said the twenty-something who wore jeans and a t-shirt and a little too much eye shadow.

"Everyone's 'a rebel with a cause' these days, with too many ideas and too little time," he added breathlessly, as if that explained the issues that he had to deal with.

He was one of the city's uber-relaxed.

Alexa smiled as the commissioner spoke, to suggest that she had already formed a friendship with him. And, as they

turned and strolled towards the magnificent building, Alexa exclaimed, "Mark really has his finger on the pulse. He really understands the problem, and he appreciates what we, I mean you, have accomplished by bringing in ZEN."

Anna and Marec were enjoying a quiet moment with the newly appointed mayor, Mercy Cunningham, in her office overlooking the Memorial Opera House, when Alexa, Mark and the governor joined them.

With the introductions made, the mayor then started the meeting with, "As I'm the new boy here, so to speak, I'd just like to thank you all for coming. Now tell me about your plans for our great city. I know that your present thrust is the homeless, and that's a big enough problem in San Fran."

The shortening of the city name rankled the others in the room, as the mayor continued, "...but just know that I'm happy to help with anything else that you have in mind to implement. So, where do we go from here?"

Jim McMurtry hesitated to speak, in favor of letting ZEN commit to the future. One bad reception had been enough for the day, and it surprised him when Alexa responded first.

"I obviously can't speak for ZEN, but I also see housing costs for those who *have* homes as a problem that needs to be dealt with."

"You mean rentals?" asked the mayor.

"Exactly," responded Alexa, knowing that this was one of the mayor's pet interests. "It's really good to house the homeless, that's a given, but people shouldn't have to work two or even three jobs just to be able to live in the city."

She paused, and the governor, believing that Alexa knew that this was also one of his major concerns and had

teed this up for him, jumped in with, "It's simply not right that working families have nothing left after the cost of food, child care and rent. And, if they do, it goes on credit card payments that charge ridiculous interest rates."

Alexa feigned shock at what he'd said.

"Then why didn't you deal with these problems when you were San Francisco's mayor?"

There was a toxic silence in the room, and the governor knew that Alexa had set the question up for him, but only to hang him out to dry. Twice in one day was simply too much for him. He looked at his watch, muttered something about being late, stood and said goodbye to Mark and the mayor. He then thanked Anna and Marec for the opportunity to have his name on the first Building for the Homeless, and left.

"What just happened? asked the Commissioner for the Homeless. "I thought that you were a group of like-minded people."

Alexa, who had effectively decimated the room, within just minutes, answered as both Anna and Marec waited for her explanation.

She gave none.

"We understand," she began, "that San Francisco is the most progressive city in the nation, and, of course a great sanctuary city, but ironically it seems to have the most problems. We've already touched on housing and income equality, but that's just the tip of the iceberg. I believe, and I think that Anna will agree, that *only* ZEN, Mayor Cunningham, has the power to bring in that new start that you promised the voters."

Marec, Anna and especially Mark were transfixed by the enthusiasm and fervor in Alexa's voice."

"Go on," responded Anna.

"With *libre*."

"Freedom? Is that a code name for a social program?" asked the mayor.

"No," responded Marec, adding in a quizzical voice. "It's ZEN's new payment method, and its going to be the accounting system for ZEN's homeless project."

Marec turned back to Alexa.

"So, Alexa, tell us what you envisage ZEN being able to achieve for the city?"

Alexa spent twenty minutes unpacking a complete plan of how, if the city adopted the libre for all of its transactions, and made the merchants do the same, it could control costs and salaries, establish and enforce rents and perform every city-wide financial transaction.

"But surely that would be impossible, countered the mayor. I'm no computer expert, but I very much doubt that such a system could be implemented. And if it could, it would take years of convincing companies, merchants, not to mention the public, to accept such a change, and what about the hardware? Could any single computer infrastructure, independent of the established card processors be built to monitor such a huge amount of transactions?"

Anna had listened to the most outlandish idea that had ever been presented to her, and yet, it seemed a natural expansion to the CALIFORNIA 20/20 project.

"What if..." Anna asked, with a meaningful hesitation, "... it included medical records, welfare payments and all other benefits paid out by both the city and Washington?"

"You mean ring-fence San Francisco off from California?" queried Marec.

Mark, who'd been silent to that point asked, "What about public transport?"

"Make it free," suggested Alexa, and Anna did not wince.

But she addressed the mayor's concern, "We have more than enough capacity, in our cloud farms, to cope with what we expect the transactions will need."

The mayor, sensing that this was as important to ZEN as it was to the city asked, "How will we cover the software changes to our existing infrastructure, because they'll be expensive and far exceed our IT budget?"

Marec, caught up with the auction-like atmosphere in the room, offered, "We'll cover the overrun and maintain the old system in parallel, until the new system is running flawlessly."

"Washington will litigate to stop our autonomy," said the mayor in a voice suggesting that this was her final fly-fishing cast.

"San Francisco is already a Sanctuary City, which is technically illegal, and it will be just until the rest of California joins in," shot back Alexa.

And that was the moment when both she and Marec knew that Alexa was *their* girl.

"I'd like to know more about the physical implementation, and, especially any bumps in the road that we will need to overcome. Because for this plan there will be some. *And*, I have to stress that none, and I mean none, of this can leave the room," emphasized the mayor.

She was now emotional and continued almost tearfully.

"But, I have to tell you that my initial reaction is, not since I read Marx and Engels and the other great philosophers, have I felt so enthused by an idea. We could

be a guiding light for our state, and then, our great country, and we would finally have something truly exceptional to export to the rest of the world."

Alexa surprised the group once again.

"According to the constitutional experts that I have consulted, under the city's charter, as amended during the days of the gold rush, you as mayor, have the power to switch to the libre. And, I would think, so would any town or city mayor."

At that comment, all five sat back in their chairs, satisfied that they had reached an accord.

"That was incredible, but tell me why? asked the mayor. "I read the papers and watch the news, so I know that ZEN wants to make a difference, but this is going to cost you an absolute fortune. So, and I know that it's poor taste to look a gift horse in the mouth, but why do you want to do this?"

Anna looked at Alexa, as she replied.

"Because the time is right. We also keep up to date with affairs, and it's obvious that the city needs a radical overhaul. With respect to your office, and I can say this plainly now that Jim has left the room, your predecessor's years of neglect, with regards to city services and controlling its own environment, have created a chronic mess. I see that you and your like-thinking council, want to change things, but the city, in plain language, is broke. The city's social services are overburdened, the pot holes in your roads are a disgrace, and your homeless situation is simply unbelievable, for this century. We, on the other hand, are making more money than we can spend, so it's just a case of a convenient social marriage."

The mayor thought for a moment.

"Here and now, I can give you my word that, subject to all our assurances being met, we are prepared to go ahead."

She paused.

"I suppose San Francisco will be your proof of concept, before you take on other cities?"

"Possibly. But one monumental task at a time," jumped in Marec, realizing that the mayor, for all her keenness, understood that she might still need a very long spoon to sup with the devil. Adding, "We will submit a formal proposal to you within the next few weeks," as he stood to show that the meeting had reached its conclusion.

Mark went off to have drinks across town with a friend, Alexa went downstairs to the lobby to see if the governor had waited for her, and Anna and Marec took their waiting limousine back to her Woodside estate.

It was just before noon when Mark finally arrived at the basement coffee bar in the Castro district to meet Damien. Mark cupped his eyes to adjust to the darkness of the dive bar to better see across the room, when he acknowledged the sour look on Damien's face.

"I'm sorry, but when you hear what I've just been part of, you'll forgive me for being so late," he said as he sat down, and, over the course of the beer that had been waiting for him, which was now flat, he detailed ZEN's plans for the city.

"You are joking! Is the mayor crazy? Are you all mad?" was Damien's visceral reaction, as he continued, "The great city of San Francisco, the great city that was founded in 1776, the year of Independence, is to be handed over to a corporation?" And then, Damien unpacked what his night's research had come up with.

Both men sat in silence, as neither wanted to start an

argument.

They had been friends for a few years now, and each understood the other to be both honest and honorable. They both also knew that the city was broken and needed fixing. And, its citizens, having no say, had been beaten into submission by years of bureaucratic inefficiency. What other city would put up with a major dilapidated highway that ran through the center of the city, being under repair for years? But Van Ness, a stretch of California's famed US Route 101, had been torn up for over four years, causing chaos, morning and night. The Improvement Project billed as creating San Francisco's first bus rapid transit system, and simultaneously replacing a 100-year-old water main had generated nothing but delays and heartache. In the time that the work had gone on many twenty and thirty floor commercial buildings had been started and completed, but the Van Ness repairs simply rolled on. CalTrans made no announcements, no apologies, and drivers simply suffered in silence. The city was atrophying, and no one knew how to stop it.

Finally, and out of frustration, the Commissioner for the Homeless, broke the silence, "We need ZEN's help, Damien, and there's no evidence that corporate welfare would be bad for the city. All they are is a company with too much cash, and Anna would like to help out the state that she lives in."

"So it's Anna, is it. You're very friendly with ZEN all of a sudden, aren't we. And has nothing I've told you about them spying for the government made you think twice about their motives?"

"No, not really. Who can trust the news, or the government come to think of it. Anyway, wasn't it Anna herself that went against the orders to spy? I watched the hearings, and she put up a pretty good show and made

nonsense out of the whole thing. Remember what she said about the Homeland Security guy? What was his name - Donner?" Damien knew the name, as Mark searched for it.

Damien reported, "Colonel Richard Dauber, and guess where he is now? He's drawing a fat salary as ZEN's Director of Compliance. Nothing funny in that I suppose?"

"Not if he's doing his job. Aren't you after their compliance?"

"Very funny, Mark. You know as well as I do that money buys lobbyists, and lobbyists buy laws, and if ZEN's money buys the rules and laws that it likes, what value is compliance?"

Mark wasn't pleased with his friend's attitude towards a company that had given so much to society through OneWorld and wanted to give more. He'd expected better from this old proto-hippie who'd now made him late back to work.

As he stood to leave, Mark said, "We are going to have to differ on this, Damien. At least until you can bring me some real evidence of wrong doing. Until then, I'm with the mayor. We just need to change how this city is run, and if getting into bed with ZEN can achieve that, then so be it."

"I sure will, Mark, you just wait," were the last shared words on the subject.

## Chapter IV

### **Cash is King**

No one really knew where the Saloman family came from. One guess, and not a bad one, was from deep in Poland. But then it could also have been Romania, as Jack Saloman reminded some people of Dustin Hoffman. At five feet five, Jack was shorter than average, but solidly built, which was how his nickname, 'The Bull of Wall Street,' originated. Always impeccably dressed, his tie-tack featured a three-carat old-mine-cut diamond, which he'd once joked that, should it ever become necessary, he'd use to start over with. Not that such an event was likely, as he was known as the banker who could flick a dime in the air, and it would come down a quarter. It also did not hurt, that, unknown to the outside world, he was *the* investment banker for organized crime, and that was what made him the wealthiest person in the world - even though Forbes had him listed as number three.

'Jack the Bull' Saloman stared out over his domain, through the Saloman Building penthouse window. And, his influence did not stop at the Manhattan shoreline, as had it been a beam of light, it would have circumnavigated the world and reentered the boardroom through the opposing window. Any link to his world and that of his great grandfather's shtetl had long evaporated. They were as separate as his Brooks Brothers suits and his grandfather's long black coat and tall fur hat. And, as distinctly different, as his grandfather's orthodox trailing *peyot* side locks and Jack's battle-ready semi-shaven head.

The penthouse boardroom, which would normally feature fine wines, gravlax, Beluga caviar and Cuban cigar smoke was lacking in celebration that day. And that was due to the possibility that an industry disrupter, similar to that which had permanently morphed the retail world, had turned their gaze on the empire of those in the room. And, unless something was done, and pronto, they too would go

the same way.

The first person due to speak, and whose bonus was the stuff of Wall Street legends, was the senior VP in the room. He looked decidedly anxious, as he started to talk to the group through a PowerPoint slideshow, of the bank's five year projected profits. Starting relatively subdued, as he described the current year's operational profit, his voice became quieter still, as he then addressed the bank's imminent 'flat-lining' situation, which he knew to be the first loss in the bank's one-hundred-twenty year history.

"What is this crap?" asked the gruff chairman.

"Projections of our cash flow, if ZEN's libre succeeds as a currency."

"Based on what exactly?" came the response.

"Our in-house estimates of both domestic and international cash-flow," he hesitated, "...Due mainly to our credit card losses, as ZEN offers no interest balance transfers to their own libre-backed card. And, I'm afraid, if we could not count on the South American deposits, it would be even worse. We would run at a loss."

The Bull's eyes burned deep into the soul of who, to that point, had been his possible successor.

"Michael, Michael! Do you know what happened to the person who previously had your corner office?"

"He took the bank deeply into Bitcoin, Jack, when it was at twenty thousand," offered the Senior VP.

"Exactly, I hear that his wife took the kids when she left him, and now he's slinging burgers at a dive off Times' Square. If you want me to check if they have another opening I'd be happy to...."

But he was cut off in mid flow by the bank's Equities Trade Support Manager, whose recent months had been

preoccupied with thoughts of retiring to the smallish island that he'd just purchased, off the coast of Sardinia.

"...The man has done his research, Jack, and we all agree that this is not a phantom threat. We have someone on the inside, and, very soon now, ZEN plans to restrict transactions, on its platform, to using only their libre."

The chairman's face flushed and none before had seen him that angry.

"That's crap! It's simply impossible! And, even if I have to empty this room, I'll fire the next fucker who repeats anything similar."

And, recognizing that his anger lent credence to the pending disaster, the 'Bull of Wall Street,' reached forward and filled a Waterford crystal glass, with some of the pure spring water that had traveled many thousands of miles, from one of the bank's South Sea island investment properties.

Having composed himself, he spoke again.

"Have you canvassed the Fed? The International Monetary Fund? The World Bank? And...why hasn't this come up at the G8 meeting this week?"

The only woman and the least senior VP in the room, spoke up.

"No, they haven't. And, on my suggestion, because those institutions are all gutless. Either they won't know, or they won't want to know. And, if they do not know, and we do, we have some wiggle room. And the same goes for, if they do know and don't know what to do about it. As for what *we* do next, your grandfather didn't run scared when the Great Depression hit the bank. He didn't sell, he bought, and we should follow his lead. We should double down."

The chairman smiled.

"Thank you, Ms. Hsu. That, *Gentlemen*, is what I wanted to hear, because this, gentlemen, and I use the term loosely, is what investment banking is all about. Learn what other's do not know and then plunge the advantage through their hearts. If these projections are in any way realistic, then we will have to get close enough to ZEN to take it by the hand... so we can grab it by the throat."

"Now, everyone out of my office, and get back to me when one of you has a plan."

He turned to his *now* favorite.

"Lucy. You stay."

'The Bull' admired Lucy Hsu. Her department's numbers were always steady, if not meteoric, and she understood, and, always met, industry compliance. She was the right *man* for this job.

'The Bull' moved over to the sofa that overlooked the Memorial Gardens where the Trade Towers once stood, and he beckoned Lucy to join him.

"What do you see when you look out there, Lucy?" he asked.

"I see America's past," she answered coldly.

The chairman looked puzzled. "And the future?"

"That's out of the other window," she said, as she turned to face west, continuing, "Geographically speaking, first comes ZEN in California and then comes China."

"You take ZEN *that* seriously?"

"I take the influence, both positive and potentially disastrous, of their two billion OneWorld members deathly seriously. For almost twenty years, our industry has had the public by the balls. The Fed and POTUS played our game for us, and we've made billions simply by following orders to

pay less than one percent interest on deposits. Now, picture this. ZEN starts to pay, say, three to five percent interest on *libre* deposits. Sure, ZEN probably wouldn't immediately pick up the large depositors - or perhaps they would - but it would certainly attract Mike and Maria, who have a few thousand in savings and never *really* liked stocks and shares and were only in the market because people like us controlled the interest rates, lending at fifteen to twenty percent, but paying less than one percent on deposits."

She paused before continuing, to see how much her chairman was absorbing.

"The markets would tank, and there's no obvious floor. Not all the stock buy-backs in the world could support the drop. Then, what if ZEN, as projected in the figures that we were just shown, moved into running the back-office of *libre* credit cards? Which they would be crazy not to. Would you want shares in any of the existing card processors?"

The chairman smiled, but not with humor, "That's crap. The Fed wouldn't allow that to happen. ZEN would be legislated out of business before they got started."

But Lucy Hsu was having none of it. She was talking from her gut, and her gut had not been ruined by cigars and caviar.

"So why haven't they already put ZEN on notice? I'll tell you why. It's because they know that they are powerless to act. ZEN would turn the issue into a democratic movement, and, whichever politician was stupid enough to step into the argument, would suffer at the polls. Let's face it, you have been shooting fish in a barrel for so long that you've forgotten what it is to work for a living."

The chairman was keeping his annoyance under control, as he asked, "And your assumptions, which is what they are at this point, and they are alarmist, come from

where exactly? I take it that you are not some native scout hearing hoof beats, or are you consulting the *I Ching*?"

Lucy ignored the obvious racist slur.

"No, Mr. Saloman, it's simply that the writing is on the wall," thinking that the Arabic reference might mean something, if to only match his cliché, and she continued, "The world is ready to bifurcate - split in two if you like."

I understand the term, he thought, now annoyed, but he let it go.

"And the two parts are ZEN and China? The chairman asked.

"Yes! Lucy stated emphatically, continuing, "But Zen, at this stage, as they probably don't have a full game plan, can possibly be influenced, or even controlled; whereas China's global dominance was ruthlessly plotted seventy odd years ago. As we all know, China doesn't only *sell* globally, it also invests around the world, and with their 5G becoming *the* standard for communications, what's left for the US, but table scraps? Let's face it, it's more than possible that the democratic experiment that was America, is failing; weakened by too much democracy, too many opinions, and, subsequently, it has no solid direction. We are bound by too many rules and damaging legislation, whereas China exercises centralized, and, often brutal, control. You must be aware that, in the three months it takes America to process a building permit for a single town house, China can construct a city the size of Chicago. If China kills a thousand rioters, it just moves on, as it was simply necessary for the common good; whereas, if an American policeman shoots a single rioter, millions of Americans take to the street, and the media go into mourning."

Jack Saloman thought for a moment.

Had he misjudged, and possibly underestimated, Lucy

Hsu, and asked, "India? South America? Oceania? Do you think that the rest of the world counts for nothing?"

"Exactly, because without operating cash, or credit, no country is anything."

This time, he genuinely smiled, as he asked, "And you see ZEN as a country?"

"It's already almost twice the size of China, but with a major difference. It's an entity without national borders. If you're having difficulty focusing on its financial influence, try to think of it in political terms? Whoever christened ZEN's club, OneWorld, was a real futurist."

Lucy was surprised at having to explain to this world-class banking titan how many beans made five, but she kept a lid on her attitude.

Chairman Jack leaned over, and, inappropriately, patted Lucy's thigh.

"OK! You've got it. We're in. Notify the SEC that we are to purchase up to ten percent of ZEN, and I want what you've just told me laid out in a position paper. Just plain facts, and, then, you can add your suppositions. And, if you're wrong, which I still think that you are, we'll dump the stock back into the market and still make a turn."

As she snapped her laptop shut and moved to stand, she was told to sit tight. Chairman Jack, the 'Bull of Wall Street,' wanted to hear more about her ZEN insider, which she must have, to be so knowledgeable. He'd a new-found appreciation of this VP, and suspected that she knew a lot more about their plans than just their currency launch.

He then, fatally, asked for further qualification on why she personally felt that the financial markets would be affected by ZEN.

Lucy sat back deep into the sofa with a sigh. He might

not drink, she thought to herself, but for the chairman to ask such a question, the cigars must have cut the oxygen off to his brain a few times too often.

"Don't tell me that you *really* believe that the DOW would be as high as it is now, if the public could get a realistic interest on their deposits?"

The chairman fought his initial angry reaction. He and his cohorts had manipulated the markets almost single highhandedly for decades, which some said, saved the West from financial destruction. And, here he was, being lectured about the future of the American financial system, by a novice.

"I appreciate your intelligence, Ms Hsu, otherwise, frankly, you would not be where you are in the company. But let's not forget that it is *my* company, and if you don't want to spend the next ten minutes clearing your office, I'd drop the patronizing attitude."

Ms. Hsu subtly cocked her head to one side, as if she'd head a dog whistle.

"You're right, Jack," she had never used his last first before, and she continued even firmer, "But if I *have* been patronizing, my other option was to have been insulting. Because, I can't really believe that you can't see the danger that's heading, not only to Wall Street and London and Frankfurt, but to every financial institution. And, frankly, I'm appalled at your ignorance."

She paused and then stood, to her full five foot nine height.

"And, as for clearing my office, I don't need to. You can keep the lot - add it to the company museum, because that's what you will have when the shit hits the fan. And get that diamond ready, because you're going to need it."

As she waited outside for her Lyft to come, not being one for down time, Lucy added 'Watch ZEN for a potential takeover bid, as I predict fireworks' to her *Hsu Hsu's Petals* blog.

When the phone rang in the Oval Office, the president was in no mood to discuss finance. The Dow Jones Index had just dropped two hundred points, and each drop made it look unlikely that the re-election would go his way.

But, he quickly reconsidered, as Jack Saloman's call was always one to take, and it might even bring good news.

"Haven't seen you and Elizabeth in DC lately, Jack. What are you up to these days? No doubt just increasing your fortune."

The president forced out a laugh at the end of the sentence.

"Working hard to benefit the economy, as always, Mr. President. You know me. I never sleep when the DOW is in danger of losing a single point. And that's what brings me on the line to you. I won't insult you by asking what you know about the libre, as I know that your boys always have their finger on the pulse of such things."

The president, wondering what he'd missed, remained silent hoping that the topic would become clearer as the conversation progressed.

"We here at the bank, and we've had our brightest minds analyzing the potential outcome for some time now, feel that to allow it to proceed, and I mean in any form, would be truly disastrous. And not only bad for America's economy, but as a financial cancer that could destroy the world's financial system. And, I don't have to remind you of the damage that the sub-prime mortgage scandal did, and that would be a picnic compared to what the libre *will* do."

What the f... was this man taking about, was the president's first thought. It can't be alcohol this early in the day, and especially as neither man drank, so he dipped his toe into the conversation.

"Wait a minute Jack, the Fed has it's eyes and ears on everything these days. And I'm assured daily that there are no torpedos on the horizon. They learned to, after they screwed up royally last time, and it was only your New World Order rumors that diverted the public gaze from wanting to topple the government. God knows how you came up with that, but it worked. Everyone was so busy looking for the trillions that the international band of brotherhood stole, that they totally ignored what we were doing to patch the hole in the ship."

The president thought that he heard liquid being poured, as Jack Saloman served himself more mineral water.

"Just send me what you know, and I'll pass it to the Treasury. But, I'd be astonished if there was anything remotely as bad on the horizon."

"Will do. And, as long as you know that we are safe, Mr. President, I'm happy to leave it in your hands."

There was the sound of swallowing, as Jack Saloman put down the phone, and both men were left unnerved by what was not said.

Thirty minutes later a courier arrived at the Treasury Department carrying the president's hastily written notes.

When the president's phone rang later that day, there was obviously concern in the Secretary of the Treasury's voice.

"So tell me, John," the president asked, in a light-

hearted manner, having forgone any formal greeting, "Should this concern us?"

"Only if you want to save the US dollar from becoming redundant," came the sarcastic and caustic reply from the Secretary.

"Okay. This sounds like it should be a longer conversation, and I'm just about to leave for a diplomatic reception at the Ukrainian Embassy. Come over in the morning and let's discuss."

"Let's make it Friday, Mr. President, if that works for you. I need a couple of days to confirm some facts. And, I'm praying that I can come back to you before then and cancel, because this is all based on some sort of 'smoke and mirrors' marketing campaign, on the part of ZEN."

"Do that, John," said the president, and the line abruptly went dead.

As the call disconnected, the president, knowing that when it came to the economy, John Rosenberg was the conservative's conservative, read his notes again, and shrugged.

He then put the notes into the burn box.

## Chapter V

### **Back Scratching**

There is a time in a politician's term of office when, if

they are sufficiently receptive, they recognize the need for a sea change, and, as the Governor of California sat feeling betrayed, in the lobby of City Hall, such an awareness had struck.

And, it was because Alexa had used him.

Not that it had been a one way street, and it had been fun while it lasted. But, if Alexa was to throw him under the bus, to further her own ends, he had to decide what to do next. Should he just accept that his political career was over and go quietly, or should he, having been the governor of the great state of California, aim for the country's highest office. And, as he sat, watching people come and go, while waiting for his official car, Jim McMurtry, the third generation politician, decided he would make a late run for the presidency.

He mentally counted off who he could count on, and for what strengths they possessed. The unions would support him without question, and immigrant's would for the most part do the same, but what he really needed was ZEN, and that meant that he'd have to discourage Anna, should it be a showdown, from taking Alexa's side. After all It had become obvious that CALIFORNIA 20/20 was her now baby.

It was later that evening, fortified by a large single malt whiskey, that the governor made the call.

"You disappeared quickly, Jim and before we could talk," Anna spoke as the call connected, having seen his incoming ID on her phone.

"It seemed prudent, Anna. I'm not sure what Alexa was trying to achieve, but I couldn't let her ruin your moment with the mayor. So it just seemed more prudent to leave."

Anna was surprised at the explanation, as it had seemed that he had just turned and fled out of embarrassment.

"It *was* uncalled for, as was the journalist's attack," she said, adding, "I guess that they'd both had a bad night or something."

"Possibly? But my guess is that's there was more to it than that."

"How so?"

"Alexa has connections to Damien Hurst," The governor said in his most conspiratorial voice.

"Who?"

"The journalist that tried to get at me, or should I say us. And, I say that neither can be trusted"

And then the governor explained how, Alexa, being an activist, mixed in the same circles as the journalist, and he wouldn't be surprised if, whatever Alexa knew about ZEN's plans hadn't already formed the basis for an expose. Even the governor, as he was laying down the poison, thought it a long shot, but Anna seemed to take it to heart.

And, before she could comment, he added, "I know how much this all means to you, and I can tell that you and I share the same ambition of seeing society more level, but to make any real change, you will need real support in Washington."

"Are you suggesting that you become a lobbyist for our cause? You should know we already have the best of the best on J Street working for us."

After a five second pause, to add gravitas to his response, the governor made his move.

"Not quite, Anna. I was thinking higher up. A lot higher up."

Anna immediately realized that he meant the Oval Office.

"Now Jim, do you really feel that you have enough support for such a run? I know that you are well-respected nationally, but enough to get into the White House?"

Anna left her comment hanging, and, although she couldn't see the perspiration on Jim McMurtry's face, she could sense it, and, after a decent pause, she continued.

"Are you sure you want to propose this to me? We badly want you on our side to help complete CALIFORNIA 20/20, and what you are suggesting would occupy all your time, especially at this late entrance to the race. And, as I just said, what makes you think that you have a shot at the big one? Not to mention, what has made you feel that our aspirations go that far?"

"Yes, I do," he answered with confidence and "Yes you do," he said referring to ZEN, and he added, "With the power that ZEN has it would be inconceivable that you would not want to put someone in the White House. But you and I both know that there is not a politician that you could trust not to go their own way once they were elected, so it has to be someone from outside the Beltway. And, unless you have someone else waiting in the wings, you can't select anyone from inside ZEN's management, because none of you are American born - except for me, that is."

"Okay, Jim, convince me that you could win," Anna replied, sensing that not a lot of preparation had gone into this call.

Jim McMurtry went on to list his assets.

"I have the unions. I have Hollywood, and that should sound familiar when it comes to a previous governor making it to the Oval Office, and, this is something that you might not have thought of... because my family is a political dynasty..."

He paused, as a mental drum-roll sounded in the

governor's head.

"...I know where the corporate skeletons are buried."

Anna, realizing how this seemingly ineffectual man had swum with the sharks long enough to not only survive, but thrive, held out some hope to the supplicant.

"I need to discuss this with my partners, Jim. And, I will get back to you in a day or two. In the meantime, let's keep this conversation between ourselves."

It was not until the call ended that Anna realized that his parting shot, the reference to the bodies, included ZEN, so she called Amrit.

"You want to do what?" asked an exasperated Amrit, bordering on angry, continuing before Anna had time to answer, "You want me to delve into the Valhalla database information to get dirt on the Governor of California, because he might be threatening ZEN? You want me to resurrect the information that was gathered illegally, and that I was almost assassinated for; that you fled the country for, that you went in front of Congress to decry and..."

Amrit paused, and then raised his voice, as he continued.

"...and that Roger de Courcey died for? Are you crazy?"

"Yes, I do. Because if we allow ourselves into being blackmailed into supporting a candidate, then we are no better than all the other horse-trading politicians that have created this mess in the first place."

Amrit didn't have to think before responding.

"No Anna, you have it the wrong way round. If we *ever* resort to using Valhalla, *then* we are worse than the government that commissioned it. In their defense, *they* were, mistakenly, trying to protect their country, whereas we would be simply protecting ourselves."

Anna could not bring herself to reply. This was not the first time that she'd had issues with Amrit's understanding of the real world.

Then she said, "What if Valhalla includes terrorist information and by exposing the person we saved many lives?"

"That argument is beneath you, Anna. It can be used to justify restricting a free press, legal demonstrations, freedom of movement, asylum, immigration and even torture. You are going to have to go back to understanding basic decency if you ever want to make it as a decent political influencer, because none of what you have said influences me, and, as far as I know, I am the sole keeper of the Valhalla files. Now I must go, as I have been coding for over twelve hours, and this conversation is distressing me. But I will leave you with something to think about. Adam named ZEN because of its deep spiritual meaning, and I suggest that we all take that root to heart."

Anna let Amrit go, not wanting to tell him that the real origin of the company name, as told to her by Adam, the first time that they had sex together - he thought the name would be a chick magnet.

So much for spirituality, she thought.

John Rosenberg was as good as his word and called the president back on the day that they'd agreed.

"Good of you to call, John," the president started out cheerfully, adding, "I hope that you have good news for me."

"Well, Mr. President, it's rather mixed news. There's no doubt in my mind that many people would simply migrate to an alternative financial system if a better one was available, and mainly because millions of our citizens still haven't recovered from the 2008 downturn. Unfortunately,

most of the billions, known as Quantitative Easing, injected into society were lent to corporations to buy back their own stock, which had hit bargain lows. Only what little was left in the trough was lent to the public, and at interest rates that bordered on usury. So you will understand that, if ZEN lent money at anywhere near reasonable rates, say five percent and gave depositors say as little as three percent, then they would suck must of the life out of retail banking."

"That's garbage. Those number wouldn't add up. No financial institution could survive, let alone make a profit on that margin."

"Well, with respect, Mr. President, that's not strictly accurate, because the magic would be in the mix of who got which rate. And, as ZEN would not be just a finance house, as they'd also be selling goods and services to its member's that used only the libre to purchase, that business model could work on the basis of 'swings and roundabouts.' "

"How?"

"A case of make on one item to cover the lack of profit on the other. So to answer your question, ZEN's libre could indeed be a financial industry game changer. Also, over a decade has passed since the recession, but last year America's financial institutions were responsible of over forty percent of corporate profits, and even they understand that such a fantastically lucrative situation can't last forever."

So what do you suggest, John?"

"About what, Mr. President?"

"Are you being factitious?"

"No, Mr. President," the Secretary replied, "I did not understand the question."

"What do we do about ZEN?"

"Well, in principle, we can block a currency. But if it is dressed up as something else; say a token, or a cash substitute benefit, then we will have a problem. There is nothing in the Constitution that covers alternative payment methods, and, to create new legislation, even if unopposed, will take time. We would also face fierce opposition from ZEN's lobbyists, who are are nothing, if not combative. Then, just consider the collective power of their US-based OneWorld membership. We could possibly counter, if this is just a commercial idea, but if ZEN is on a mission, or crusade, then there is a real problem brewing. And, one that could only be fought by completely changing our existing financial systems. We would have to convince the bankers that they have to act kinder and gentler, and that could be even more difficult than harnessing ZEN, as they have become used to..."

The Secretary of the Treasury paused, as he thought to say 'obscene profits,' but, ended with, "...extreme profits."

"Enough, John. I have heard enough. I get the point. Thank you for your wisdom on the subject, as Secretary of The Treasury," the president said dismissively, as he replaced the receiver.

"As have I," came the reply to the dial tone.

But the president had moved on, having already dialed Jack Saloman.

"Jack, I've just had an alarming conversation with Rosenberg, and I'd like your opinion on it."

And, the 'Bull of Wall Street' was treated to a brief, but explosive version of what he'd just been told.

The response was as direct as Saloman was known for.

"That's a bunch of bull crap, Mr President. You just spoke to the wrong people. And, I may not be the right person either. This is a Fed issue. They must tie a knot in

Ms. Eisenberg and her socialist compadres. The Fed controls the money supply, and they control the interest rates, and everything else is just hot air. When you have the right chairman in place, inflation and employment percentages are as liquid as ice cream in the desert. Remember the old adage, 'Statistics, statistics and more damn lies.' It was either Einstein or Mark Twain that said it first, and it still applies. As I said, with the right chairman in place, the Fed will deliver whatever you want. Now, I'd like to talk longer, but I was on the other line when you called, so would you mind if I called you back?"

And, as he spoke, 'The Bull' dialed down to the desk to see how his purchase of ZEN stock was going. It wasn't. Not even non-voting shares were available.

The president placed a call to Richard Dauber, and, while he was on hold, he was thinking about who he'd next appoint as Secretary of the Treasury.

"Dick, it's been a while."

"Mr. President, to what do I owe this honor?" ZEN's VP of Compliance replied.

"I'm hearing great things about your new currency, Dick, and I thought that I'd call to hear how much the rumor mill has got right?"

"Probably nothing, Mr. President. That's why it's called the rumor mill. You tell me what you've heard, and I'll tell you true of false."

There was an angry edge to the response from the President.

"Tell me Dick, do you know who you're talking to? You may have left Homeland Security, but you're still an American citizen, and I can still have you taken out and

shot." The last part was said with laughter, in the Leader of the Free Word's voice, but it still caused the short hairs on the colonel's neck to react.

"Only joking, Sir, As I know you were. Now, as for ZEN, we are completely focused on CALIFORNIA 20/20. I've heard from Marec that the schools' migration program is coming along well."

"Schools, Dick, how are the schools involved?"

And, it was explained that the schools were being used as homeless institutions, and that the children were all at home learning though the internet.

"How are the working parents coping?"

"Where necessary, home helpers are with the children, Sir.

"Anything else, I should know about Dick, like free public transport." There was levity in the president's voice, which quickly dissipated with Dauber's response.

"That's also coming on well, Sir. It's keeping cars off the road, so the air quality is improving.

"Don't tell me Dick, ZEN is giving away free energy?"

"Solar panels are being installed on homes, in the thousands, as we speak, Sir."

"And the person you've chosen to run against me in the election, Dick? How's McMurtry doing?"

"He...." the colonel started to answer, but caught himself, "Not sure what you mean, Sir? You know that ZEN is apolitical. It has to be, otherwise the FCC would close us down in a heartbeat."

"Not if you just publish small gnawing articles, like it was his idea to provide free public transport, when all my administration wanted to do was to cut Social Security."

"Sir?"

"Don't fuck with me, Dick. I want you out here, and I want you out here yesterday, so we can do this face to face."

"Sir, I'd love to, you know how much I enjoy our visits, but I won't be of much use to you, as I'm really not that privileged when it comes to ZEN's future. Let me ask Douglas Wilde, ZEN's Development Director, to come out. He'll update you properly."

I'm in New York at the G8 starting Monday Dick, so have him go there. I also want his cute adviser girl to accompany him. And, Dick, don't assume that my previous comment was completely a joke."

And the phone was slammed down.

"Who were you talking to?" asked the First Lady, as she looked up from her newspaper.

"Richard Dauber. Why do you ask?"

"Because you seem to care only about how California's social activities might make you look bad, when isn't the real threat ZEN's new currency? Remember what happened in Germany, with the Reich Mark? Billion Mark notes were printed, and still a wheelbarrow full of those notes only purchased a loaf of bread. People in line waiting to buy just the basics found that the price had quadrupled by the time they reached the front of the line. Do you want that to happen to the US dollar."

The president looked at his wife, cracked a smile and said, "That would be one way of paying off the twenty-trillion dollar national debt. And it would serve some countries right that bought our loans and used the money to create their own economies."

As Richard Dauber heard the phone crash down, as glad as

he was to get out of the meeting with the president, he wondered how Douglas would do? Then, he realized that, if anyone could play successful word games with the man in the Oval Office, it was that smooth-tongued Brit. In fact, it might be a great experience for both of them.

"Douglas, how would you fancy a trip to New York?' was Richard Dauber's greeting to his fellow director.

"Love to. When and why?"

"I can have the company jet ready for an 8:30 AM Monday departure, and it's to go visit the president."

"OK, Richard, but first tell me what's gone wrong."

"Before I do, I should tell you that he wants Alexa to come with you. I know she'll jump at the chance for a follow-up meeting with the president, and I want you to really evaluate her performance. As, a lot may be riding on how she performs."

And, as the explanation to the banker of what the president wanted sank in, Douglas, who was not fond of lying, let alone to a president, decided that he could only describe their activities to date and be vague about the future. And, as the G8 were to be in town, he could play catch-up with some old friends.

"Certainly, I'll go. It's been too long since I was there. And, I'll get Alexa organized, so leave her to me."

## Chapter VI

### **All Roads Lead to Washington**

The days passed quickly and Douglas hadn't given much thought about the meeting, as, not knowing what the president's knowledge on ZEN was, or what his questions would be, he'd simply wing it. Alexa, on the other hand, could be more tricky, so he would have to caution her to choose her words carefully, as that was not a quality he'd noticed in her.

The car dropped Alexa off at eight AM, as arranged, and, from the way she was dressed, in a white gaucho blouse over long tan culottes and boots and carrying a wide brimmed hat, telegraphed that her focus was going to be on immigration. Fortunately, as they had some hours free before the meeting with the president, there was time for her to change into something more neutral.

"Have you brought anything not quite so ethnic?" Douglas heard himself say.

"You don't like my outfit?" Alexa asked in a child-like voice. Obviously playing with him.

He ignored the question, and steeled himself for what had the makings of a long flight.

As breakfast was served, the atmosphere became less fraught, and, as Alexa told Douglas how impressed she had been with the opening of the Jim McMurtry Homeless Center, it thawed completely.

After they'd eaten in almost silence, Alexa said, "When I first met you ZEN people," and Douglas was expecting a slamming, but she continued with, "I thought that it would be a case of nothing but publicity, and that's what I told Jim.

I'd assumed that no corporation, especially a high-tech one, would be that interested in anyone that couldn't, or wouldn't buy their products, and now I have to admit that I was wrong."

And, as she finished, she leaned over and touched Douglas' arm in a way that he found quite honest.

"That's understandable, Alexa. But not all technology companies are heartless. Of course there are those who are so bottom-line driven that they would stream executions if they could, but that's not ZEN's philosophy. Amrit and Anna are the most honest people I have known. When Amrit started ZEN, his aim his was to bring people together, not spy on them and sell their data, like they were just statistics, and that's why he was completely against Valhalla."

"Valhalla?" Alexa asked.

"The global blackmail project that was the subject of the Senate hearings last year."

Alexa's response astounded Douglas.

"Now, I remember. The president was to act as the Valkyries and decide who lived and who went to die in Asgard, or, in this case, disgrace."

"You read the classics?"

"Enough to know some of the more common references."

Douglas, thinking that it might not be such a boring flight after all, sat back in his chair, with a new found respect for his attractive co-conspirator. And, as the flight progressed over the heartland of America, Alexa opened up. She spoke of her early years as a product of controversially intellectual Venezuelan parents, and how, as a child, she'd been smuggled across the Rio Grande. As a teenager, with fake papers bought from an immigration lawyer, she

attended a university in California and went on to the London School of Economics and earned a Masters in Political Studies, with an emphasis on the Global Poor. At their suggestion, she'd lost contact with her parents after she'd moved to England, because they were wanted by the American government and that placed her in danger. She'd had affairs with many of the intellectuals she'd studied with, and now she preferred older men, as they knew their minds. She found conversation more stimulating than sex, but not to say that she didn't enjoy it."

What for Douglas could have been a difficult conversation was not. He found it easy to listen to this woman explain who she was, and what inspired her, and, if she was coming on to him, which he thought possible, he was flattered, but he was in control of his emotional boundaries.

"And you haven't heard from your parents since?"

"No, and they would be the first to say that that was okay. I would guess that they have seen my face in the media, so they know that I am working for *the* cause.

"And, of course your name is often mentioned."

"Yes, Douglas, but a name can be changed," she smiled as she spoke."

"So, Alexa?"

"That part is real."

"Cortes?"

"What better name than that of a Spanish colonizer and conqueror who began the first phase of the Spanish colonization of the Americas?"

"And you were born...?"

"Yes."

"Very humorous, Alexa. Where?"

"Does it matter?"

"More than you may know."

But she changed the subject to how they would deal with being interviewed by the president. After which, Douglas claiming fatigue from rising so early, smiled, as he explained that at his age, he needed to catch a couple of hours sleep.

Alexa picked up a magazine and smiled back, as she nodded in agreement.

Clearing rapidly through the executive terminal, the forty-five minute trip into Manhattan, thanks to an immigration demonstration, took over two hours. That left them no time to check into their hotel, and they barely managed to arrive where the president was staying, with a half an hour to spare.

Following a lengthy process of scanning and then re-scanning by the security detail, they were escorted to the door of the Presidential Suite."

"Alexa, how are you?" was the president's' greeting, followed by, "Doug, you and I have never met, but Dick assures me that you're a good man, so I'm sure that we'll get on like a house on fire."

"*Douglas* and I are at your complete disposal, Mr. President," and Alexa emphasized the name to show that he was not *Doug*."

"Come sit. And would you like a drink? Tea? Coffee? Something stronger, perhaps? I don't drink, but don't let that stop you. Doug, you look like a scotch and water man?"

"Thank you Mr. President. But no."

Alexa asked for a Campari and soda, which ultimately never arrived.

"So, down to business, Doug. But, Alexa, before we start, I just have to tell you how much I like your native dress. It's quite beautiful. Makes me quite hungry for a large Argentinian steak. Anyhow, Doug, tell me all about ZEN's plans, and why I should not be concerned about California breaking away from the Union. It's not enough that it has sanctuary cities, free health care for illegals, sorry Alexa dear, undocumented people and has legalized all kinds of dangerous drugs."

Alexa couldn't help but respond first.

"Well Mr. President, haven't you just described the founding principles of your great country? Does not Lady Liberty's huddled masses and the pursuit of happiness cover all that you have just mentioned?"

And before the president could respond, Alexa continued, "California is America, Mr. President, and not just geographically, and it will always remain so. Although Anna Eisenberg was not born in this great country, she espouses all its values, and she simply puts into practice what the Constitution offers. And, she has an income source that hopes to maintain the Founding Father's dream, a California reality. Don't you find it is admirable, that she plans to fund a solution for the homeless, carry out massive medical trials, construct and repair roads and bridges, and all sorts of other much needed social services?"

"And challenge the almighty dollar?"

Douglas recognized his cue.

"You have heard the rumors Mr. President, so now let me tell you about the program that the ZEN board, of which I am a member, has actually approved."

"Before you start, Doug, let me tell you that, although

you are not an American, you are talking to the President of The United States. Should any, and I mean any, of what you are about to tell me is bull-shit, pardon my language again, Alexa, then going forward your stay will not be a comfortable one, and may be either rapidly curtailed or extended past your wishes."

Douglas had long-adjusted to America's indelicate way of doing business, and he simply took the president to be upping the ante.

"I understand, Mr. President, and I thank you for your direct approach. Please be assured that nothing, that either myself or Alexa tells you today, will be inaccurate. Now, the libre, or currency, as you call it, is simply a payment system for gamers to buy add-ons like costumes or weapons in the Veritas online games arenas. A gamer will purchase a number of libre credits using their national currency, and then spend them in those games. Do you follow me so far?"

The president nodded, to show that he understood, but then he asked, "So it's just an internal system?"

"Well, Mr. President, "The libre will also be used to establish healthy eating habits among the homeless who we bring into the system. To fully control their diet, ZEN will provide each with a libre-based benefit card to buy food and supplies. We wanted to incorporate the government's SNAP food stamps program, but they wouldn't allow it, so we developed our own ZEN benefit card that will double as a health recording mechanism."

The president responded with, "Now you've lost me, Doug. That I don't follow."

"Well, let me explain it further, Mr. President. Everybody in our homeless plan will wear a WiFi-enabled bio-bracelet, which will record and transmit their vital signs to their virtual medical charts, on our servers. If their chart

shows, say, high blood pressure, then our software will automatically restrict their card from being able to purchase high-salt foods, and the same would go for high cholesterol, diabetic or other medical conditions. So, just think of it as being like SNAP, but tracked and analyzed."

"So you're telling me that SNAP purchases aren't tracked?"

"Not in detail, Sir. The holder of a SNAP card could buy lobster tails or caviar, and, as it's food from a grocery store, it wouldn't be questioned.

"Let me get this straight, Doug, Some people use SNAP to buy lobster tails?"

"Some might and some probably do. No one knows, because SNAP purchases are not itemized in detail and possibly not recorded at all."

The president thought for a moment before asking the obvious question.

"So why not set your system up to use dollars?"

"Well, because the federal government wouldn't allow us to use their SNAP program, let alone change it to itemize purchases, so we had to create a system from scratch. And, at that point, it made more sense to just connect it to the libre accounting system."

"I see," responded the president, instantly recognizing what should have been an obvious problem, and continued, "And the merchants have agreed to accept your *token* system?"

"Yes, they have already signed on."

"And the card processors?"

"The same, Sir."

"I see," said the president, assuming that the

merchants, not to mention the card processors, must have been well and truly leveraged to accept handling a new currency.

"So, now you know what the libre is."

"So, *currency* is a misnomer?" asked the president.

"Exactly" said Douglas, the ex-banker.

The president looked at Alexa and then back at Douglas and was about to speak when Alexa cut him off.

"More important than ZEN's accounting is what we can bring to your party in the upcoming election."

"And that is?" asked the president, hearing a subject that was close to his party's heart.

Douglas expected to hear Alexa promise votes, but she didn't, and he was impressed by the caginess of her answer.

"Influence, Mr. President."

"You really think so, Alexa?"

There was humor in the president's voice as he continued, "Don't you think that we've seen crazy ideas come out of California before? You are probably too young to remember the businessman who wanted to help his party by breaking California into three separate states. Or, the politician who, because of a temporary drought, wanted to ration water supply to fifty gallons a day per person. He was okay until it rained for forty days and forty nights."

And then the negotiator made her push.

"I am well aware, Mr. President, that no one has ever been in a position to guarantee votes. Sure some have promised, but when push came to shove, as you say in America, they've failed. Well, Mr. President, my people once controlled the land of California and soon, thanks to CALIFORNIA 20/20, they will do so again. *And*, I am not

talking decades. Jim McMurtry and I met with my people, county by county, to create an influence block that could bring every favorable politician in on a populist wave, or sweep undesirable politicians out, like a tsunami."

"Undocumented immigrants can't vote, Alexa"

"They can in local elections, Mr. President"

The president made a note on the blank pad in front of him, and he then asked, "And by *undesirable*, Alexa, I take it that means anyone that you don't agree with?"

Douglas was fascinated and could only sit and watch as this girl, went head to head with the President of The United States.

"I was thinking more of the people that we approve of, Mr. President."

And, Douglas just sat quietly, while the conversation ranged from what the federal government could do for the other forty nine states, in the way of education, healthcare, child care and infrastructure.

The president ended the meeting expressing his thanks to Alexa, for coming to see him, and that he hoped that they would meet again.

As he walked them to the door, the president added, "And I'd like to thank you for explaining your non-currency, Doug. And, as for you, Alexa. if you were a citizen of this great land, you'd be an asset to any administration."

Douglas and Alexa rode the lift in silence and only spoke when they left the building, to hail a cab to their hotel.

Well, Alexa, I am going to have to process what just happened, as I'm not sure whether you just made an enemy, or a conquest, of the most important man in the world. As for my part, as I was talking, I was watching the president's eyes, and it was a definite no-sale."

Douglas was on the money. As the meeting broke up, the president, while all smiles with Alexa, did not feel that way inclined to Douglas. It had not gone as well as the president had hoped. Side-tracked by Alexa's charm, although he believed that she was now in play, and for him, he'd failed to extract a promise from Douglas to severely limit the distribution of the libre.

Now alone, he picked up the phone and slowly dialed an outside number.

"Jack, I think that you will need to go ahead with your meeting."

He then dialed California.

Governor McMurtry was surprised to hear the president's voice when he answered his phone.

"I've had your girl in today, Jim, and she's really delightful, but she pretty much offered me both a stick and a carrot, and I'm not sure that sending her was the best way of keeping me as a friend."

"I'd no idea that she was in D.C., Mr President."

"I'm not in D.C., but anyway, I'd asked to see ZEN about their currency, and, for some reason she tagged along, and then she took over the meeting. I have to say that she's quite something, but you should keep her on a shorter leash, as she'll hurt you in the end. She's not a team player, Jim, but you probably know that already. Anyway, a word to the wise. She's trying to leverage me to implement all sorts of crazy things for *her* people in the other states, in exchange for my party controlling your state. She tells me that she can deliver the waitresses, cleaners, field workers and even the chicken-pluckers in your great state. Mark my words, Jim, she's poison, and she'll cut you loose when she reaches her goal."

The governor felt like telling the president that that

chicken-plucking wasn't a major Californian industry, and that he'd already reached the same conclusion, as to Alexa's fidelity, but he refrained.

"I'm sure that she meant well, Sir, so there must have been a misunderstanding."

"That's not the case, Jim. But, I have to admit that I admire her spirit, and if she ever finds a legitimate cause, then she'd be great. Anyway, I just thought that if you are thinking of running for office, you should know what you'll be up against."

The governor's mind did a double flip and he answered, "I don't follow you, Sir. You know that this is my second term as governor, so I can't run again this time."

Both men knew that the reference had been to Washington and both let it go. But the governor understood the president's inference that, 'if she's talking to me, without you, as part of ZEN, then where does that leave the governor?'

The governor looked around his office; the office that he would not be occupying a year from then, and he wondered if, all he'd done for California would be forgotten, or worse, overtaken by his association with a power hungry upstart?

"Thanks for the warning, Mr. President. I know that we have not always seen eye-to-eye, and it was not necessary for you to call, so I'm genuinely touched."

As the call ended, both men wondered what the other was up to. Was the president wanting him to cut Alexa loose? She deserved it, with her end-run around him, but then would that somehow be a gift to the president? The president wondered if Jim had really known about Alexa's mission for ZEN and was just playing dumb.

It had been quite a day for Jim McMurtry, and the president's call had just capped it. He'd already been

reduced to resorting to his emergency bourbon bottle, after a closed door meeting with the state's utility company, that had ended with an agreement to a deal that he knew was wrong. And now, after a couple of shots, he'd started to worry about not hearing back from Anna about Washington. While at the time, he'd congratulated himself on standing up to Anna Eisenberg, it now dawned on him that his comments just could have been taken as a threat against ZEN.

Anyway, he'd given her something to think about. He wasn't one of her employees that she could order around. He was the head of the third largest economy in the world, and, as he bathed in the glow of malt-inspired importance, he reached yet again for another shot of inspiration.

He'd call Anna back in the morning as, it might not be a good idea, having consumed more than a little too much confidence, to put up a good show, should the conversation turned into a tussle.

It was early morning when he woke, very groggy from his over indulgence, and, at first, not knowing how he found himself still at his desk, he remembered why. He put the empty bottle into the bottom drawer of his desk and made his way unsteadily out, past the night security guard, to the street for some fresh air.

The president had made four calls relating to ZEN that day. Having let loose Jack Saloman's dogs of war on Douglas, and unnerving the governor, he had then turned his thoughts to what the upstart had said to him, and, wondering how much of what she'd said was bravado, he decided there was only one way to find out.

"Alexa, this is the president calling."

"Good afternoon, Mr. President."

"I have a question for you, and please consider carefully before you answer. How much of what you said today was smoke and how much was real?"

Alexa was not one to hold back her punches.

"If you are referring to how much influence I can exercise over the poor, the indigent and immigrant population, I'd say that it was unequaled. And, with a past California election record of 18 wins for the Democrats and 23 for your party, I'd say that, in the current climate, unless a miracle happens, the Democrats are going to make it 19."

"And you are saying that you can change that?"

Conscious of the line being recorded, she answered, "I am saying that I can speak to my people."

"Where were you born, Alexa?"

"You are the second person to ask me that today," she said referring to Douglas' question, and she gave the president the same response.

"Well, I know that you were born in Florida, as your parents made it all the way to the US while your mother was still pregnant with you."

"I think that I'd know, Mr. President, if that had been the case."

"In which case you would know your real name. But you don't. Do you?"

Alexa remained silent.

"What, if I was to tell you that we have a file on you. And, that file includes a birth certificate, with your current name on it, issued in Dade County, Florida and that that information included your time at UOP and the London School of Economics?"

The president paused to let his words sink in.

"So, Ms. Cortes, speaking to you as an American citizen, here are my thoughts on what you can do for your country."

And the president explained in rough terms what her duties would be.

Detailed instructions were to follow, and, as a show of what the president called good faith, a certified copy of her birth certificate would be waiting for her, when she returned to California.

## Chapter VII

### **Island Fever**

When the phone rang in Douglas' suite, that evening a cultured female voice said, "Jack Saloman would like to invite you to lunch with him tomorrow, Mr. Wilde."

"I'd be delighted," he answered, as it was not every day that the banker's banker extended him such an invitation, and he was told that a car would pick him up at his hotel the next morning at 11:00 AM.

The next day at eleven sharp, a Maybach, the vehicle of choice of many despots, was waiting at the curb, as predicted. And, as Douglas sank back in the soft leather seat, he was amused what two hundred thousand dollars bought in refined travel. He thought that the massive James Bond-style, possibly Samoan, bodyguard in the front passenger seat, was also a nice touch. And, he did not argue when he asked Douglas to hand over his cell phone.

The Maybach elegantly made its way to the East River heliport and stopped next to Jack Saloman's private 'Bell Relentless' helicopter. Leaving the shoreline of Manhattan, they were in the air for just over an hour, before landing at what looked like a deserted island.

"Welcome to Gardiner's Island," said the chairman's executive assistant, as she greeted him in the voice that he recognized from the previous day. A tall, strikingly attractive woman in her mid thirties and dressed in what looked to Douglas like a Chanel suit, escorted the three to the main house and into an ante room.

"Jack will be with you shortly. Please help yourself to a drink," she said as she closed the heavy wooden door behind her.

Douglas felt at home, as he looked around the room. The furnishings and art work were European and very different from those of his new home in California, where everything, no matter how opulent, seemed modern-temporary by comparison.

As he was helping himself to a glass of wine, his host, the short and rather tubby cropped-haired banker, all but burst through the door, a smile on his face, with his hand outstretched in a greeting.

"I'm so glad you could make it at short notice, Douglas. You don't mind if I call you Douglas?"

"Not at all, Jack. It's not every day that I get such an invite. And, I am intrigued as to what I can do for you."

"It's what I, or rather we, can do for you, Douglas," said the 'Bull of Wall Street' and then he asked, "Do you know where you are?"

"On an island somewhere east of Manhattan, as far as I can tell - possibly, the Hamptons?"

"Good guess, Douglas. We are on Gardiner's Island. Technically the Hamptons, but in reality it's a private island."

Douglas was none the wiser, and his expression showed it.

"This was the first English settlement in New York. The island was settled by Massachusetts-born, Lyon Gardiner in 1639. He purchased it from the Montaukett Indians for large black dog, some gunpowder, shot and a few Dutch blankets. It was often a resting place for Captain Kidd, who hid his hauls on the island. Gardiner himself was a trader, and, like Anna Eisenberg, he had a vision."

Jack Saloman paused, before continuing.

"I know that you and Anna have a vision. But let's talk about that over lunch," and he led Douglas through double doors to the colonial dining room where a table of ten other guests, who, by their conversation, already knew each other.

While the obvious refinement of the room and that of the other guests seemed very much to be a standard business lunch, he found the four men in black suits positioned at the corners of the room, somewhat incongruous and added an interesting touch to the occasion.

"I'd like you all to meet Douglas Wilde. The man who is about to change our world."

Quite an introduction, Douglas thought to himself, but, as no one seemed particularly pleased to hear it, he wasn't sure whether to be flattered or not. The private conversations stopped, as, one by one, the international bankers, who were financiers to currency speculators, were introduced. Douglas recognized some by name and others from photographs that he'd seen, and he knew he was in the company of the United Nations of the finance world. There were, however, some at the table that were not introduced,

and that did seem unusual. Possibly just general factotum, he thought. But then why would they be at the table at all?

As lunch progressed, the polite conversation about art and culture was easy for Douglas. The colorful history of the island was brought up, to show the new boy that he was somewhere of importance. It had amused him to hear that at a party on the island, Jackie Kennedy-Onassis had pocketed a solid gold cigarette lighter, and, that legend had it, that Captain Kidd had secreted his treasure hauls somewhere near the main house, but they had never been located. Then, as the folksy conversation started to ebb, the real reason for the gathering started to show its serious face, and a question and answer session started.

A Franco-German financier, whose family had part financed the First World War asked if Douglas, without breaching any trade secrets, could describe ZEN's ongoing plans.

"I'm very flattered to have been invited, but I can't help feel that both my position in ZEN, and my furtherance of ZEN's plans, has been greatly overestimated. If you are looking for an investment, all I can say is that ZEN is to continue to grow, so your investment will be safe."

There was a murmur around the room, and Douglas heard someone ask why he was talking about investment? Had they all been dragged away from the G8 meeting on a wild goose chase?

"Now, now Douglas," said his host, "I know this not to be the case. You would not be here if we had not done our due diligence, so I feel that we should drop the charade and get down to business. Tell us about your plans for a new currency."

Expecting general questions about ZEN, as an investment purchase, Douglas now knew that that was not

why he had been summoned, and that either their plans had been partially leaked or some accurate guess work had occurred. He wasn't fazed by this open accusation, but he was intrigued as to how much of a fishing expedition his host was on, and how much he already knew.

So, he responded, "As potential investors, which I will still assume this room is, why don't you ask questions, and as long as I am in a position to answer, I shall do so."

The president of the Deutsche Commerzbank, and the Chairman of the Board of the Bank for International Settlements, and who was known to be a direct man if there ever was one, posed a question. And, it told Douglas all he needed to know, about his invite and explained the presence of currency speculators.

"Was ZEN aware what havoc an uncontrolled currency could wreak on to international finance regulations?"

Before Douglas could respond, the floodgates opened and many questions followed, and, although the tone in the room was respectful, the negative energy was palpable.

A Nigerian banker described the disastrous effect ZEN's plans could have on the Developing Nations.

A global currency trader asked what ZEN saw the fate of the world's other currencies to be.

An African woman in bright national costume asked if the rumors about the libre going to the gold standard was true?

Another in the room brought up the subject of libre-backed mortgages and car loans?

Others asked about interest rates, and if the libre was to comply with Federal Reserve policies?

While the room was demanding answers, there were none that Douglas could give, without giving away ZEN's

position. He wanted to say, 'I doubt whether there's anyone in this room who does not know that the financial world, sooner or later, is going to have to recalibrate. Since the global recession, the stock indices around the world have exploded, and we all know why. Interest rates are so low that the DOW has become nothing more than a giant Ponzi scheme. He concluded with, "We, and myself included, have had it too good for far too long, and, even if ZEN is not *the* disruptive influence, *the* game changer if you like, there's no doubt that some other company will be."

Even though the tenor of the conversation continued to be civilized, Douglas couldn't help but feel threatened by an atmosphere that he couldn't quite grasp. But, at least he knew that no one had been interested in CALIFORNIA 20/20, or any other domestic control ZEN might try to exercise.

And, no one inquired if, or why, ZEN was interested in becoming remotely political, let alone attempting to chose the next President of The United States. Those present simply seemed interested in keeping the status quo when it came to the flow of money. And, he was simply not prepared to discuss that topic. Instead, he talked about ZEN's plans to assist the world's third largest economy, so his answer was not what the room had come to hear.

He started dismissively by saying, "ZEN has no plans to upset the world's financial apple cart," and then continued, "Our current plans are simply to help Californians. Let me give you a powerful example of why that needs to happen. Some of you here today may have heard of the California city of Santa Ana. It has a population of around three-hundred-fifty thousand, and the average annual income of it's people is less than sixteen thousand dollars. Seventy percent of the people are forced to live in rented accommodation, and that rented accommodation takes over sixty percent of their income. In other words, in the

wealthiest state in the world's third richest economy, the vast majority of these citizens live below the poverty line. Now, I ask you, is that right? Because, we at ZEN do not. So, we are going to help these poor unfortunates and every other Californian in need."

He looked around the room at the disinterested faces, and he wanted to point out that the sale proceeds of any one of the paintings in the room could have fed a Santa Ana family for life. But, he knew that no one would have cared, so, instead, he attempted to placate his audience with half-truths.

He explained that he was not aware that ZEN's libre would be a full currency, as such, as it was more of a token system, and, as such, not a threat. But he did acknowledge that, should it be adopted by hundreds of millions of consumers, it could morph into something more important. But that would take time and give the financial world plenty of time to adjust. He then added an extra layer of comfort by suggesting that the libre may not be any more successful than the cybercurrencies, and hadn't the world's financial system absorbed that potential threat?

The room was quiet.

None of the legitimate bankers in the room wanted to admit that they had far from dealt with cybercurrencies, and that their own experimental dealings had led to disastrous losses. Deep down, all the room wanted to do was to keep setting the rules, as they had done for centuries. They may have started off as usurers and loan sharks, but now, with their cloaks of respectability, they simply wanted things to stay the same.

As the room remained silent, Douglas took the opportunity to address his host directly.

"My understanding of our meeting today, Jack, was that

*you* wanted to invest in ZEN. And, you would have been most welcome, that is, as long as it was not a prelude to a takeover. As for the subject of the *libre*, you should speak to Richard Dauber, ZEN's Director of Compliance. As America's ex Homeland Security chief, he would be more than diligent in following any law concerning ZEN."

As Jack Saloman saw Douglas back to the helicopter, his farewell was not as warm as his greeting had been. Extending his hand to Douglas for the second time that day, he said in a soft voice, "A word to the wise, Douglas. Don't fuck with things that you do not understand."

And, with those words ringing in Douglas' ears, the helicopter lifted backwards and banked to the left and set out on its journey back to Manhattan.

Initially it concerned Douglas that the Samoan stayed behind, but then he reasoned that the helicopter was worth more than the life of the Samoan, so he was probably safe. For that day anyway.

Back in his hotel room, Douglas started to process what the day had taught him. And, as he played back the conversation in his mind, two faces that had been in the room, but had been silent, started to come into focus.

A quick online search told him why he'd felt uneasy in a room full of financiers. Two of those present, and probably more, were crime bosses. One was New York crime boss, Salvatore 'three fingers' Bonano and the other, Japans' Jakuza boss, Kimici Kawasaki. He could not identify the South American in the room and had no real wish to. He had fortunately misread his audience and delivered, for ZEN, the best speech that he could have. His hosts' interest in the status quo had nothing to do with society - unless it included money laundering from the proceeds of drugs,

prostitution and people smuggling. 'The Bull's' warning had been on the money, and, had he told of ZEN's actual plans, he probably would never have left the island alive. It was time to speak to his partners about the jungle that they were about to enter. As for his own view, a mid course correction, and a quick one, was called for, as when he'd worked in Japan, he'd seen how the Jakuza dealt with trouble, and it had never been pretty.

He called Anna. It was time for another partners' meeting at Woodside.

"We are all going to die?" stated Amrit, as if it were a simple fact, to the five partners that were seated in ZEN's conference bunker.

"No, Amrit, we are not, replied Anna, quickly adding, "I acknowledge that the people who are against us *are* powerful...."

"And, they control governments. Let's not forget that," butted in Amrit "And they murder with impunity, because they deal with billions, if not trillions of dollars. They work with the world's largest banks, and, on that point, I doubt whether the bankers will be happy either, to see their golden clients' businesses dwindle.

"So, as I read the situation, "Marec said as he entered the conversation, "We are committed. Now, we have started CALIFORNIA 20/20, ZEN will not survive, as a company if we don't use the libre as a finance tool. So, we have three paths. One, we either forget the libre. Two, we just use the libre as a games currency, or three, we go ahead with creating the libre as a super currency, and we deal with the people that threatened Douglas."

"Deal with, in what way?" asked Douglas. "These people can't be dealt with because if they could, they wouldn't exist

as they do."

"Not so, Douglas," responded Anna, "And, now that we recommitted, there are only two ways of dealing with them. We defeat them, which I admit seems impossible, or we accommodate them, which is why they exist today."

"Accommodate how," asked Amrit.

Douglas already knew the answer, but Marec answered it anyway.

"We simply allow them to use the libre, as a currency, the same way as everyone else?"

"Can't be done," responded Douglas, "Because you *are* talking trillions, and that's even out of ZEN's reach."

Colonel Richard Dauber, who had been just listening, saw his opportunity to add his solution.

"Therefore we take them on, and we beat them. For decades, both in and out of the military, I've wanted to take on the cartels and the gangs, and now, if it's to be us or them, I say it's them. And, we do it with organization and with military precision. We continue CALIFORNIA 20/20, as planned, as we build out the libre network, and then, when everything is in place, we launch it as a full currency. This means that only us five, and I mean *only* us five, know the real plan, and that no other person who works on any part of this, knows more than their own job requires. No overlap whatsoever. If there is, we *will* all end up dead or worse. Amrit, you need to flow-chart every aspect of what we are planning. Marec, you need to keep the games' revenue coming in, so we can support CALIFORNIA 20/20. Douglas, I suggest that you tell our flat-nosed friends that we thank them for their advice, and that we will simply use the libre internally, and that we wish them well."

The idea of a fight against evil, ignited the flame in Amrit that had all but been extinguished by the SWAT

marksman, and he smiled his crooked smile as he then spoke.

"You asked me the other day, Anna, whether I had the Valhalla files, and if I would use them against someone. It did not feel right then, but it does now. Richard, we have files on most, if not all the people that run serious crime syndicates, as well as the politicians and institutions that support them..."

Amrit stopped with a meaningful pause and then continued.

"And, then, as we get ready to roll out the libre, we publish the Valhalla files on our enemies. But, my friends, and its a big but, we here today must all be aware and accept that, should the killing start, we are all likely to die."

Anna, completely ignored Amrit's dire warning.

"If you can't do it alone, Amrit, you need to bring in the people that you involved last time. And, I suggest that until, one way or another, we have a resolution, you live here at Woodside."

That settles it," said the colonel, "We do business as normal, and then, as Amrit just suggested, when the time is right, the media will hit them from every side. They will be so panicked by the information released on them that they'll have no time to react against us, and, if we keep our heads down and our defenses up, we will survive. I know that your Woodside home is secure, but I'm going to bring in some retired Navy Seals that I know, and we'll secure the place up to military-grade."

Anna, recognizing that Amrit was now back on the team, set the stage for the future.

"If what they want is a fight, we'll give them one."

Jack Saloman had been right. The world was about to

change. It was to be cleansed.

In the days that followed, Colonel Dauber turned Anna's Woodside home into a fortress. Not obvious to passers by, but trip wires, infra-red motion cameras and a fleet of autonomous drones waited, watched and monitored every blade of grass.

## Chapter VIII

### **The Drop**

As Mark Abboud and Damien Hurst were enjoying a craft IPA in their favorite bar, in the Castro, the conversation came to an abrupt halt, as Mark said, "I know how much you want to stick it to ZEN, Damien, but I just can't get involved. I've told you about all the good stuff they're doing for the city, and, apart from my being the Commissioner for the Homeless, I liked Anna Eisenberg. She seemed genuine, and no one else has come forward to help solve our homeless problem. All the council members are prepared to do is allow the problem to grow, as if laws meant nothing when it came to the homeless."

Damien found Marks' attitude infuriating, because he just knew that ZEN was up to no good, so why couldn't his friend see it. They were the only ones left in the bar, as Thursday night football ended, and FOX late night news came on. They both watched a filler story about a drone that had been shot out of the sky over Gardiner's Island in the

Hamptons.

'By the noise, I'd say a shotgun took it out,' said the surveyor, who was operating the craft. And, the same news article showed footage of the banker, Jack Saloman, greeting a group arriving on his private island, and one of them was Manhattan crime boss, Salvatore 'three-fingers' Bonano. And, an unidentified source close to FOX claimed that ZEN Corps' Director of Finance, Douglas Wilde, was also on the island today.

"Now tell me that ZEN is not dirty," Damien almost screamed at his friend, adding, "I'm going to get these bastards for killing my friend, Roger, if it's the last thing I do, and I need your help. I need you to tell me about every plan that they submit, and every comment they make, no matter how loose or flippant."

"They killed your friend? Come on, that's just too wild."

Damien stared at his friend.

"You can see that they're mobbed up."

"That's ridiculous."

"So, convince me. Tell me how they killed your friend."

And Damien told all that he knew, and that wasn't much, other than Roger de Courcey had been murdered in Rome. He brought up the transcript of the Senate Hearing on his laptop.

"See, look at the connectivity."

"But Anna's testimony goes against your theory. She claims that a government did it, to silence him."

"Sure, well, wouldn't you blame someone else?"

"I think you're fixated, Damien. What has ZEN ever done to you personally?"

"They've made billions advertising crap to people and

even more by selling their information to the government."

"So, you think anyone cares, other than you, that is? Everyone knew, or should have known, that something was paying for the service. Anyway, you've been here for decades and never bothered to become a citizen. Doesn't that mean that you've also been taking from the American people?"

"How's that? That's crazy."

"Is it, Damien? You've benefited from American security, enjoyed American culture, such as it is, and accepted American Freedom, while your mother country has been swallowed up as part of Europe. Does that make you a bad person?"

"Fuck you!" shouted Damien over the sound of the half-empty beer glass smashing on the table, and he stormed out into the rain.

"I guess I got your answer," Mark shouted after him.

When Lucy Hsu stormed out of Jack Saloman's office, as dramatic as it had seemed, apart from the exact timing, the move had long been planned. She had worked for the Wall Street titan for three years, and that was quite a tenure in an industry where success is fleeting, and potential disaster is always just around the corner. And, in those three years, she had become every inch the classic predatory commercial banker. No one, especially Jack, would have remotely guessed, from her Louboutin shoes and her Hermes purse, that she was a fully paid-up member of the Communist Party of China.

As she'd waited on the curb for a taxi to take her to her 5th Avenue apartment complex, she recalibrated what to do next. She knew that she should have stayed in her post

longer, but, in her mind, the conversation had become so ridiculous that she had no choice but to move on. After all, Jack Saloman was completely out of touch with where the world was heading, and that meant that she would be assisting him, and that was not her brief. Her job had been to learn the American, way so she could then help destroy it.

Placing a call to her handler, she received the instructions that she'd expected, and the contents included a number of cell phone numbers.

As the Airbus lifted through the clouds, Lucy was glad to be free of her Wall Street assignment. Educational, it may have been, but on a scale of one to ten it had a very low score for interest. Starting to drift off, having conquered her fear of flying, by swallowing the two blue tablets with her second glass of champagne, she half heard a voice from across the isle.

"I hear that you are also interested in acquiring, or at least taking a controlling interest, in ZEN Corporation?"

"I'm sorry, but have we met?" Lucy responded, as she acknowledged the comment. And as she spoke, she half turned to see a well-dressed South or Central American male, that she took to be a fellow banker.

"No, we haven't, but I thought that I should warn you not to."

"Not to what? You are going to have to be more clear. And, if you are suggesting that ZEN is out of bounds?"

"To make this easier for you to understand, tell me your plans, and I will tell you why they will not work."

Lucy couldn't help, but smile at the gall of the man.

"Perhaps, we should do this. You tell me who you think I represent, and I will consider continuing this conversation."

"Peking! You represent the People's Republic of China."

"Go on."

"You either wish to control ZEN, or stop it. You have not yet worked out which, and so you ride two horses."

"And your plans are?"

"The same as yours, Lucy."

"Assuming, you are correct in your assumption, why should we stand back?"

"Because if we go head to head, it is you that will get hurt."

"You are threatening the Chinese people?"

"No, just its government."

"That is insane."

"You think so. Ask the Mexican, Colombian, Venezuelan, or any other government. Even the US government can't defeat us, and they have poured tens, if not hundreds of billions of dollars into trying. Whenever one of us is killed, or imprisoned, another steps forward to fill the gap."

"You really are insane," replied Lucy, but she could not totally discount the earnest quality in the man's voice. And then she added, "You have just said that *you* cannot be stopped, and yet you believe that *we* can."

"For that, you will just have to take my word, Ms. Hsu."

There was almost laughter in her voice as she replied, "And exactly how would you damage the Chinese Government?"

"With a terror campaign to end all terror campaigns. No Chinese national or embassy would be spared, and your country would either give us ZEN, or be brought to its

knees. And, before you tell me that that is ridiculous, just consider that no country has ever defeated the drug trade"

It was at that moment that the flight attendant woke Lucy Hsu with the news of their imminent arrival into San Francisco.

The seat across the aisle was empty.

The red-eye from New York had been comfortably empty, and the ride into the city, with rush hour still over an hour away, was a breeze at 5AM. And, having slept for almost five hours, Lucy was wide awake by the time that she checked into the Intercontinental Hotel on Howard. Debating whether to take another pill, or go to the gym, the gym won out, and she was surprised to find others at early exertions. She had read how 'out on the coast' the high-octane high-tech entrepreneurs got up crazy early to work out while reading the on-screen Wall Street Journal, Wired Magazine, or some other mandatory publication, but she never believed that the stories were true. But here was living proof, so she joined the boys club to stretch out the muscles that had laid dormant for hours in the wide-bodied jet.

Looking around the mirror-walled room, she was amazed at the early morning intensity of the titans, and she wondered if getting up at seven thirty, like the rest of the corporate world, would have made them any less effective. After all, being pumped is one way to arrive at the office, but to arrive exhausted is quite another. She, herself had never felt the urge, or the need to go to such extremes to self-motivate, and she probably would have had to drag herself around for the rest of the day had she even tried. For her, quickness of the mind came easily, and, when she sensed that she was flagging, then a week in Bahamanian sunshine always regenerated her little gray cells.

As she gently peddled away at a steady ten miles an hour, she considered how her years at Jack's schoolhouse

had gone. Her existing knowledge, courtesy of her training by her government, had made her entrance into the company easy, and she'd found her task of learning the western ways of banking even easier. It was not difficult to take a clients' money and invest it, if there was no penalty when you got it wrong. The difficulty comes in when the market is static, or falling, and there is a need to carefully stock-pick. That's when the real traders show themselves.

So Lucy had been a good party member and learned her job. Until, ZEN threatened to overturn the apple cart, by launching its own currency. It was obvious to her analytical mind that all the rumors swirling around the company meant that ZEN had acquired more intellect than Adam Eisenberg had brought to the party. She didn't doubt that Adam's 'let's all be friends around the world' attitude had been hugely successful, but like every great company, sooner or later, to grow, the founder has to be benched. Or, in his case, jailed. But whoever was running ZEN now, has their eyes not just on the prize, but on the whole world.

Lucy had watched the Jim McMurtry's embarrassing FRONTLINE interview, and she'd guessed that he badly needed help to bring home his socialist vision. But she'd never had predicted that the help would come from ZEN. When the libre token system was announced, and she'd been forced that day in the bunker to sign the libre non-disclosure, she'd only kept the information from 'The Bull,' because she had assumed that the system would never see the light of day.

Now, with her brain slowed because of the sleeping pills, she methodically worked through the series of events that had brought her to San Francisco. It was obvious that when Marec Winger merged Veritas into ZEN, it was to introduce OneWorld members to his games. But if the libre was, as ZEN claimed, just a token system, then why strong-arm her, and others, into signing a non-disclosure? The

answer had to be because ZEN was going to impose it on anyone involved in CALIFORNIA 20/20, and it would simply become a *de facto* currency. What she'd tried to tell Jack Saloman had just come from instinct, but now she had a provable theory.

"Eureka," she heard herself say aloud.

And, that explained the message in her dream. No one would be allowed to supplant the US dollar, as it would be bad for the international drugs' trade. While Euripides had needed to cogitate in the bath, Lucy Hsu had just needed an exercise bike.

Although Lucy had surprised her sponsors when she'd called to say that she'd left Saloman's, and why, they trusted that her training had been sufficient for her to make the judgment call. When she suggested that the next obvious move was to meet with ZEN and propose a partnership, that too was accepted, which is why she found herself in San Francisco. Her appointment with Douglas and Anna was in four hours, and it would be a supreme test of both her Peking and Wall Street training.

Images in the press had not prepared the New York banker for what she saw, as the cab pulled up at ZEN's headquarters. The building was truly monstrous. Even from street level, it looked as if it had landed from outer space, and, as she entered the lobby to go through security, the curved hall seemed to extend forever.

Having handed in her cellphone, Lucy was subjected to a body search followed by a revolving scanner that resembled a vertical MRI.

Due to the separation of tasks that had been confined to smaller security controlled areas, the building seemed deserted, as the electric vehicle carried her to a meeting

room on the other side of the circle. As the sound of a door opening was heard, the vehicle stopped.

Douglas walked towards Lucy with his hand outstretched, saying, "So how's 'The Bull of Wall Street' these days?"

She answered with a laugh, saying, "As you would expect. As arrogant as ever."

After introducing Anna and Colonel Dauber, and the customary offering of coffee and tea, the discussion started in earnest.

"So, what brings you to our coast?" asked Douglas, in a nonchalant banker-to-banker tone. "I'd have thought that that a phone call, or simple online research would have saved you a trip."

His words let the visitor know that, while her presence was to be tolerated, she was not particularly welcome.

"I mentioned a prospective partnership over the phone and..."

Anna stepped in with, "We do not need partners, and, with great respect to Jack Saloman, which is why we are seeing you today, we thought it best tell you in person."

Lucy ignored the obvious edge to Anna's voice, as she replied, "That's okay, and you do not have to consider Jack's feelings, that is if you could find any, as I no longer work for Saloman. My new client, however, is possibly not one that you would wish to insult."

"That's quite a statement, young lady," responded Douglas, who had forgotten himself for a moment, continuing, "So who is your illustrious client?"

"A group of Beijing businessmen who see the value in bringing OneWorld to China."

"But we are already in China," responded Anna.

Lucy looked Anna in the eyes, as she responded, "Your pipe is already restricted for content, and that could close even tighter; bringing your presence to an end in my country."

The visitor's use of the phrase, 'My country' struck a cord with the colonel, but he internalized his reaction, not to let it show that he now knew exactly who her clients were. And, he now recognized where her confidence came from.

Both Anna and Douglas were puzzled when the colonel responded with, "Tell us what your clients are looking for, Lucy?"

"My clients would just like to assist you in the implementation of CALIFORNIA 20/20."

Anna responded first, "What makes your client think that we need assistance? Are your clients aware of what we are doing, and how the program is being financed?"

"Yes, of course, and that is where we can help. We can assure that your income stream stays intact."

The colonel understood the threat just issued from this twenty-something's mouth.

But, it was Douglas that responded.

"You are simply offering to allow your client's citizens to access ZEN's OneWorld gamers' rooms, in exchange for being able to buy into ZEN?"

"Not quite," Lucy responded.

And it was the colonel who ignored the threat, in favor of looking at the other side of the coin.

"So what is your client offering in exchange?"

Lucy thought for a moment before answering in a quiet, almost reverential, voice.

"I am pleased to inform you that my clients recognize the potential ramifications in your ground-breaking social program, and they simply want to assist. But, if you wanted to show your appreciation by allowing them access to your technologies, then that would be a welcome gesture."

The job had been done. The threat had been delivered. The visitor now sat mute.

Douglas stood, his face expressionless, before saying, "Thank you for coming all this way to see us, Ms. Hsu. Please inform your clients that we will consider their offer very seriously. We will have a car take you back to the city, and we will be in touch. If you would like to wait here for a few moments, a cart will be along shortly to take you to the main gate."

His partners also stood, and the three left the room without exchanging either words or glances.

As Lucy Hsu rode back towards the city, she was initially unsure how her offer had been received, but, by the time that the City by the Bay's sky line came into view, she no longer cared. She had delivered her ultimatum and enjoyed doing so. After all, it wasn't everyday that such a proposal was made and certainly not to a company that had such a powerful global reach. As the taxi exited the 6th Street elevated freeway ramp, she looked down on half-finished apartment blocks that now dwarfed the old city's landmark buildings, knowing that they would take a year to complete. She drew strength from knowing that her clients, in the same time frame, could have constructed several larger and more impressive cities.

Back in her hotel she called home to report in and having delivered the much welcomed news, she spent the rest of the day visiting the city's many upscale boutiques, until her evening meeting, where she was again to carry out orders.

## Chapter IX

### **A People's Republic**

Damien Hurst had been the first to arrive at Mel's Diner, which he selected because no tech people would likely eat there. And, he'd chosen a table at the back of the room, facing out onto Lombard Street, so he could watch the others arrive.

When Alexa and Lucy walked through the door together, Damien wondered if they already knew each other, but it seemed unlikely, as the two separated when they walked in, with Alexa initially looking around the diner. Lucy greeted him with a crazy-rich-Asian flourish, and then made a point of carefully hanging her Hermes bag over the back of a chair.

"Espresso," Lucy said to the waifish waiter, and, taking their cue from their host, the others ordered the same.

"We only have coffee," the waiter replied, only to be dismissively waived away by Lucy.

"Thank you both for coming," Lucy said to her guests, continuing, "You probably do not know who I am, and you must wonder why I invited you here."

"I know that you're part of Saloman's empire," replied Damien, followed by, "I'm just interested in how you found us and why you have asked us here together."

"I was with Saloman's until yesterday, and why you are both here will be made clear as we talk. As for how, I was given your cellphone numbers by a mutual friend."

Neither of her guests responded, so Lucy continued.

"I no longer work for Saloman. I quit yesterday, because the man failed to see what should have been as plain as the nose on his face. He failed to understand the likelihood of ZEN not just being *the* future of the internet, but becoming *the* future, *period*. And, we know differently, so..."

Damien interrupted her with, "And you see that as a good thing?"

"Go, on," said Alexa, who was more than interested in the reason for the meeting, but Lucy addressed Damien's question.

"Not necessarily, Damien, but not necessarily a bad one either. It just depends."

"On what?" asked Damien.

"Whether they do good or bad, of course," Lucy responded.

"Can you qualify those terms?" asked the journalist.

"I think we all can. And that's why I asked you here."

She paused.

"Damien, you are trying to open Pandora's Box, and Alexa, you are about to sell ZEN down the river."

Neither Damien or Alexa responded.

"So, I'd say that both of you are in a position to alter ZEN's history, but neither of you could possibly understand the ramifications of your actions. Or, more importantly, who else has a vested interest in ZEN, and what they might achieve, if they are allowed to thrive."

"And that is?" asked Alexa.

Lucy avoided the obvious word, the one that she had been trained to forget, as she said, "Global socialism."

Neither Damien nor Alexa could stifle their laughter.

"So, you expect us to believe that the world's largest data marketing company could be a force for good?" Damien asked.

Lucy simply answered, "Yes, if handled properly."

As Lucy spoke, she watched her guests' eyes for signs of disbelief and saw none.

Alexa asked, "Who are your *we*?"

"Does it matter?"

"Hell, yes!" Exclaimed the journalist, excitedly adding, "Because your *we* may be worse than ZEN."

"Let me just say, that they are just a group of well-meaning business people that want to see fairness in the world."

"As a Wall Street banker, you do know that fairness and business are an oxymoron and should not be found in the same sentence."

"Yes, and generally, I would agree with you, but this time it happens to be true. The bottom line is, if you attack ZEN, you *will* damage CALIFORNIA 20/20, and that will could stop the libre from being launched.

Lucy paused, and then added enigmatically.

"And, you should be aware that your lives have now become complicated."

"How so?" asked Alexa

"As you have both unwisely involved yourselves with CALIFORNIA 20/20, you are now between a rock and a

hard place. If you inflict damage on ZEN, and the project does not go ahead, my clients would become annoyed. And, you do not want to face their anger. However, if you now do nothing, and you let the project go ahead, you face an even more vicious enemy, because their very survival will be on the line if the project is successful. So, I suggest that you help us by doing nothing, and we will protect you."

Damien laughed, "So, a potentially world-controlling force should be allowed to prosper and grow, in order to save the world from evil? That sounds like a ridiculous Batman movie plot and you know it."

Lucy wasn't finished trying.

"You are both familiar with Valhalla?"

"Yes." Damien responded, while Alexa preferred not to answer

"So, what if I just told you that ZEN is going to attempt to use Valhalla to destroy the evil in the world?"

"I'd say that they're all dead," answered Damien.

"Exactly," responded Lucy, "And that is why I need your help."

"That suggests that *they* need help, not you, or your people, and, going back to your earlier statement, just how have you been tracking ZEN? And, more importantly, how do you know what we've been doing?" Damien asked, referring to himself and Alexa.

Lucy coolly replied, "Do you think that ZEN are the only people listening to phone calls, tracking email and internet searches and listening to voice assistants?"

It was Alexa that responded, "So you know all about us, and we know nothing about you, except that you have an expensive taste in clothes?"

"That's right, but I am prepared to share information with you *if*, and only if, you agree to work with me."

"But we don't know each other, so how are we to know that this is not a two-way set up, and that you are not interested in protecting ZEN, and you're really working for the US government?"

It was Lucy's turn to be amused.

"Two reasons. Firstly, If you think that the FBI or Homeland Security buys Hermes purses, you need to think again, and, secondly, because the US government fears ZEN," and she looked at her Cartier watch and said that she had to go.

"You two get together on what, if anything, you want to do, and I'll be in touch."

Alexa and Damien were left discussing how they felt about what they had just witnessed.

"What do you take from her performance?" asked Alexa, "I thought it all a bit too cloak and dagger."

"Not sure about that, Alexa. If you consider that ZEN is a multi-billion dollar company, I'd say that she was understated. And, I'd say that whoever we just spoke to represents some pretty bad people - mobsters, maybe."

"I read some of your columns Damien, but that suggestion is crazy, even for you. Mobsters aren't in the business of wanting to see fairness, and they don't describe themselves as business people. And, you may not have noticed, but she's Chinese?"

Damien thought for moment before answering.

"Some years back, I was a partner in a successful astrology business. Anyway, it was, until my partner turned down opportunity after opportunity to expand and so I quit...."

Alexa butted in with, "And your partner was Chinese?"

"...No. And if you stop interrupting, I'll get to the point. One of the offers came from a Chinese group in New York. I went to New York to talk to them to be met at the airport by a six foot two Chinese businessman who claimed to be the mob's financial astrologer, and that they wanted to use our astrology system to guide their investments. I found it mildly amusing, until when we sat down to lunch at Umberto's Clam House, he told me that a couple of years ago the East Side's Godfather was gunned down on the pavement outside. When I told him that my partner didn't want any outside investors, he said that they would *deal* with my partner. After lunch he took me to a dingy basement drinking club, and, an hour or so later I made my excuses and left. But instead of coming back to San Francisco, I flew back to London to think about things. When I got back to California, I quit the company and never looked back. So don't tell me about the Chinese."

"So all the Chinese in New York are mobsters?"

"Maybe Alexa, but do you know where Douglas went the day after you and he met with the president in New York?"

"He just met with potential investors."

"I'd hardly call meeting on a guarded private island, with mob bosses and Lucy's boss, Jack Saloman, *just* anything. And, I now realize why my past dealing with the Chinese surfaced. I think that Beijing is now involved, and that they don't want to stop it, they want to encourage ZEN and either absorb it, or, as they can't develop it themselves, steal its technology. Now, just imagine a OneWorld club of three-and-a-half billion controlled by Beijing."

He paused for a moment. Alexa was interested in hearing more of what this California Englishman thought.

"As Lucy said, that's where you and I come in. Between us, we both have the power and access. I want to hurt them, and, Lucy got this wrong, you want to work *with* them. This means, that while Lucy's people will tolerate you, because you might be able to feed them information that they can't otherwise access, I am probably in greater danger because I'll be seen as a spoiler."

Alexa, while, far from the panicking type, looked worried. And, it brought to mind, the president's offer.

It was the following day that Alexa called the White House, and, after a ten minute wait, she was greeted like an old friend.

"Well, my dear, I'm glad you called. I assume that you are interested in my proposition."

"Unless I missed something, Mr. President, you have not put one to me," came the response."

"I take it that you found the document that we spoke of?"

"Yes, Sir," Alexa answered, as the birth certificate had been delivered.

"Well, in which case, Miss Cortes, you *have* accepted, and you now work for me; not the party, but just me and reporting directly to me. As to your first task, you will be hearing from Colonel Dauber shortly, with the details."

"Thank you, Mr. President," Alexa responded, and the conversation was over almost as soon as it had begun.

If my parents could see me now, Alexa thought, as the call disconnected. They would have just one question. Would she be working to better their people? And, as yet,

she would have had no answer.

As for the president, as he disconnected the call, he asked for a California number.

"Dick, I've been thinking, and, regardless how this California 20/20 thing works out, I think that it's time that we should be more proactive; exercise more muscle, if you know what I mean. After all, the Homeland could be at stake, so I'd like you to explore any possibilities that you feel fit. I understand that you've been watching various players, and it might be a good time to involve them more deeply."

Colonel Richard Dauber, patriot, did not take long to acknowledge what his Commander-in-Chief was thinking and simply replied, "Yes, Mr. President. I understand. And, I think that you are quite right. I was sent a draft of an article by the editor of a free sheet over here that was attacking ZEN, and, frankly, had it been published, I think that it would have caused trouble for us all. We have also been listening to conversations between the journalist and a known Chinese operative, which again, if we don't intervene, could cause difficulties."

"So you know what to do, Dick. As my predecessor LBJ once said, 'Better to have them inside the tent pissing out, than outside pissing in,' so do what you feel is right. And, as far as the Chinese operative is concerned, they could be our ace in the hole, if you know what I mean?"

"Bring her in, and we can always expose her when we need leverage with our yellow cousins."

"Exactly, Dick. And, Dick, when I say act, I mean act NOW!"

And the line went dead.

Once a government man, always a government man,

and it did not take long for *this* government man to act.

"Damien, this is Richard Dauber at ZEN calling, and I wondered if you have a few moments to talk - say tomorrow?"

A hesitant, "Yes," came the reply, followed by, "Could you give me an idea what you'd like to talk about?"

"Not over the phone, Damien. But I can assure you that it would be to your disadvantage not to meet."

"Are you threatening me? You do know that I'm a journalist?"

"An unemployed one, yes."

"There was a pause."

"Where would you like to meet?"

"Why don't I treat you to lunch. Say, the Top of The Mark at noon? On second thought, if you have a moment now, do you mind if I ask you a couple of questions?"

"Not at all. Go ahead, Colonel," Damien replied, acknowledging that he was aware of who the caller was.

"I understand that you are not impressed with ZEN's plans to help California?"

"Who told you that?"

"Your editor passed me the story that you wanted him to publish."

"I'm not alone in my thinking, Colonel. Your actions will weaken what little remains of democracy in California, not to mention you will royally screw up the global financial system."

"And that worries you?"

"No. I don't give a rat's arse about the financial system. It's been corrupt for so many years, I lost count. But our social system does not need mending by a company that was set up by the government to spy on its people and still sells data to the highest bidder.."

"In which case, you will be pleasantly surprised at what I'm going to tell you when we meet. And, ask Lucy to join us."

Damien said nothing, while he tried to work out if he should admit knowing Lucy, and the colonel also gave him time to think, until he answered.

"If she's free."

"She will be, when you tell her who you're meeting. And, tell her that Alexa will be with me. So, noon tomorrow then?"

"Okay," Damien said as he hung up.

## Chapter XI

### **A Quisling**

Amrit was sitting with Marec listening to some recent Valhalla audio files, from cell phones, when they hit 'pay-dirt.'

The location was the boardroom at Saloman's in New York, and the recording had just been made the day before.

The sound file began with an unknown voice saying, "I've been told by the Treasury that it's not going to happen, and now, thanks to the Time Magazine article, the cat's truly out of the bag, the Fed simply can't tolerate the libre."

There was a murmur of agreement from around the room.

Another voice then said, "No one can stop it if it's registered in a place that does not care about world finance. Say, if Nauru, decided to accomodate ZEN?"

"Isn't Nehru dead? I thought the chap die in the 60's," asked a voice that sounded intoxicated.

"I think you'll find that Naura is the world's smallest island nation," qualified, a female voice, adding sarcastically, "It's just under a thousand miles off the Solomon Islands, and that's Solomon with three 'o's,' not Saloman as in Jack."

And, the room murmured again.

Then a voice that had spoken before said, "Anyway, if we're concerned, just imagine how worried our largest depositors are? I suggest that we leave the situation to them. After all, they, as an industry, if not as individuals, have survived for almost one hundred years, and I doubt that they're going away any time soon. As far as I'm concerned, any import-export organizations that dig mile long tunnels under borders, or use customized miniature submarines to skirt along coastlines, have already displayed the abilities when it comes to self-preservation. So, I would suggest that *our* only area of concern is that of Joe and Mary, or Jose and Maria's savings accounts, and those we could always keep control of by paying a couple of percent interest."

"What?" asked the half-drunken voice, continuing, "Pay a couple of percent? Are you completely mad? We have spent decades breaking down the public's aspiration of

giving high rates of interest on deposits."

"Not exactly giving and not exactly high interest, Baron," came a response.

"Well, the rot would start there, Sir Robert, and, before you can say, 'Jack the Lad,' you're paying five or more percent. I'm firmly against it, I tell you. I'd rather sell used cars for a living than pay interest to depositors."

A new voice said, "Let's not carried get away, Baron, and with great respect, Sir Percy, I do believe that the situation is being dealt with. Yesterday, the president asked me to deal with it, and I believe that the remedy is in hand. Needless to say, it will not benefit anyone other than those directly involved. In fact, it would be better for you all if this was never mentioned again. Now to change the subject slightly, but still on the topic of ZEN, who among us has a problem with CALIFORNIA 20/20?"

"Has anyone heard any construction statistics or any other numbers?" came a question.

When no one responded, the distinct voice of Jack Saloman was heard to ask "Jennifer, bring in the reports."

The sound of folders being placed at intervals was heard.

Then, someone said, "Well done, Jack," followed by, "Trust you, to have someone on the inside."

"Unlike your old empire, Sir Percy, the sun will never set on Saloman's," acknowledged the 'Bull of Wall Street,' making an unfortunate and rather snarky comment.

As the sound of pages being turned were heard, a lively conversation concerning the social value of the project ensued, and, although opinions greatly varied, the general conclusion was that CALIFORNIA 20/20 would be a toxic start to America changing for the worse, and what they had

all feared was not only clearly laid out, but quite feasible to accomplish.

"I'll now ask you all to turn to page nine, if you will, " Jack Saloman requested. "As it's where the mention of currency support is covered, because..."

There was a pause and his voice wavered as he continued, "Because, unless I'm mistaken, the libre is initially to be tied to the dollar, or worse, supported by gold."

A fresh voice stuttered as he asked, "But that would be incredible, Jack. It was one thing when gold was under forty dollars an ounce, but it's almost two thousand. If this comes to pass, not only will the libre itself be a danger, but the gold price would likely over quadruple. Not that it matters in itself, as we all know that gold is now just a commodity, but the public seem to judge it as a safe-haven-barometer. All those little people that hoard a couple of ounces or so will get very confused."

"Now Gordon, don't get yourself all upset," said Sir Percy, continuing, "None of this will come to pass. ZEN isn't the first, and probably won't be the last, to want to save society by building an alternative. Remember *Fordlandia*, Henry Ford's Brazilian village? Think of Disney's *EPCOT* Center, the alternative that simply became a resort. Corporations that believe they are godlike often try to create societal alternatives. None have worked so far, and the odds of CALIFORNIA 20/20 succeeding are equally slim, because no one ever takes into account that the human condition is greed. What is certain is that ZEN will spend billions; they might even attempt to use their own currency, but all that will happen is that after the dust settles, some people will have been employed. And, we will step in to pick up the pieces and reap the profits of the failure."

He paused, before continuing.

And, haven't we just been told that everything is in hand?"

"Now, who's for lunch?" asked a voice.

The room quietened as the food was wheeled in, and the conversation that followed would only have been of interest to what a sociologist might make of the true nature of the those present. Even the most benign in the room agreed that, if God had wanted the poor to not be poor, he'd have given them more intelligence. As for supporting the unhealthy, even though there were more stents in the combined gathering than would be found in a surgical ward, they simply should have taken better care of their bodies. The ignorant were not ill-educated, they were simply stupid. The minorities that could not get ahead would have been better off had they stayed in their own lands. If waving a magic wand could have done away with the surplus population, the room would have been a frenzy of waving. Dickens' Scrooge would have been proud.

As the recording stopped, Amrit and Marec were completely stunned.

They had a traitor in their midst

Richard Dauber had been as good as his word, as Anna Eisenberg's Woodside home was now a fortress. And, it was an obvious one, as made clear by the combat-uniformed sentries at the gate and the wire running the perimeter of the grounds.

As the weeks went by, Anna and Douglas were beginning to feel like prisoners in their prison without bars. The staff had been cut to a minimum of two, who were security checked in and out. The pool was out of bounds and full of leaves, as were the many terraces and the tennis

court. At the slightest wind, drones were launched to find whether the source of the the breeze had been made by interlopers. Burner phones had become the only accepted means of communication. The threat to their lives had been taken seriously, and, as the Mafia used to say, 'they had taken to the mattresses.'

Anna and Douglas were going stir crazy, and, after they confided in each other, they agreed that the situation was, in Douglas' word, untenable. And, it was no real comfort that that CALIFORNIA 20/20 was running to schedule, and that the Valhalla data on the mob's activities, was being leaked, in such a way that the sources were unknown.

"I'm not sure that either of us signed up for this, Anna," started Douglas, and he continued, "We both used to have lives, and now all we have is this luxury prison. Is it possible that we haven't made an enemy of Beijing after all, if that's who Lucy Hsu actually represents? And, what if the organized crime threat was also just a bluff?"

Anna thought for a moment before replying, "I've been thinking along similar lines. What would you suggest we do?"

"I have no idea, Anna, and that is what worries me. Before we met, and I do not wish to blame you, I lived in quiet semi-retirement in Switzerland surrounded by my art collection. A highlight of the month was my occasional lunch with the mayor. Now, I am living behind barbed wire and protected by drones. I am paranoid that death could be around every corner, and I break into a sweat every time the phone rings. I am beginning to feel that Amrit being shot, Adam being jailed and Roger being assassinated were bad omens, and that my enthusiasm for doing good had gotten the better of me."

Anna didn't reply.

She needed time to think, but then Marec and Amrit came through the door, with panic written all over their faces.

"I would like everyone to give me their cellphones."

"That's a little extreme Amrit, even for you," Anna said.

"Give him a minute and you'll find out why," Marec replied, and the phones, including his own, were handed to their bodyguard to take outside the room.

"Now, Anna," started Amrit, continuing, "It would seem that we have someone very close to us who is also working against us."

And Amrit outlined the taped conversation he and Marec had just listened to.

"You are sure that they had a copy of *our* CALIFORNIA 20/20 document and not just Jim McMurtry's first draft?" asked an angry Anna.

"They quoted pages and sections that weren't in the draft, it was our working version. I'm telling you we HAVE a traitor and it can only be Colonel Dauber."

It was now dusk, and, as the windows started to automatically tint, Douglas opened their second bottle of wine.

Anna took a sip from her replenished glass before she answered.

"I suggest that..." but Anna's voice was drowned out by shouting coming from the garden.

As Douglas went to the window to see what the racket was, he appeared to stumble after moving just a couple of feet. Perhaps, the second bottle had been a bad idea, Anna thought, as Douglas had looked exhausted, and that's when she saw the thin shaft of light coming through the now dark

green glass.

Unlike in the movies, most people don't react to a shooting with a scream, and Anna, now seeing the blood on the floor next to Douglas, calmly walked over to where he lay, to see if he was still alive.

Now in pain, which was fortunately lessened by the wine, Douglas was struggling to sit up. He was holding his left shoulder, and blood was gently seeping through his fingers, to color his white shirt crimson.

Having first pressed the panic button that had been installed in every room, Anna helped Douglas to a chair and waited for the security guards.

"It only looks like a flesh wound," said an armed guard, as he inspected the wound.

"You wouldn't use the word 'only' if it was your shoulder," replied Douglas. "It hurts like hell. Pour me another glass of wine, would you please, Anna."

"Is that wise?" came the reply.

"Yes, I need some pain relief, until the doctor gets here."

"You may not need a doctor, Sir," said the guard. "I can disinfect it and then bandage it. You'll be fine."

"And, you're also a doctor?"

"Second year medical student, Sir," answered the man that Douglas thought to be in his late twenties. The man added, "I just do this to pay for medical school."

"Before then?"

"I was a Navy Seal, and I can tell you that shot was just a warning, Sir."

"That's a very definite statement."

"Whoever it was, probably had a clear shot, so my guess is that is *was* a warning.

Douglas thought for moment.

"Not if their vision was obscured by the windows starting to self-tint?" he asked.

"Possibly," replied the ex-soldier. "But my money would still be on that they'd have killed you if they'd wanted to."

"How comforting!" said the banker, which he followed with, "Anna, if its not too late, we need to make a deal."

Before Anna could respond, Colonel Dauber rushed into the room and without any formal greeting he shouted, "You need to leave, and you need to leave *now*. There is a van at the back of the house, and I want all four of you in it *as of now*. Leave everything, there's nothing that you can't get where you're going."

As Anna, Amrit, Marec and the wounded Douglas went to the covered portico at the back of the building, they could hear the sound of machine gunfire coming from the front of the building. Stepping through the open double doors of the dark-windowed van, they found the vehicle had been fitted out as a corporate limousine, complete with a bar and television.

Now seated, the group atmosphere was that of worry, but stoic, with more than one of the group silently thankful that their escape plan had been in place all along. Amrit felt especially guilty that Richard Dauber had been excluded from the meeting to discuss the eavesdropping on the financier's meeting.

After less than twenty minutes, the van pulled up at a series of Nissan huts, by a makeshift landing strip, and the ZEN directors were escorted through a door in one of the huts.

The room was bare except for a desk and five chairs.

Each was seated and then the door was closed.

"What the hell is going on?" asked Marec, who'd been in similar rooms in his own country; suspecting that he knew what was to come next.

The door opened, and, flanked by two armed men in camouflage outfits, Colonel Richard Dauber entered and sat behind the desk.

"Amrit was right," Marec said to Anna.

"No, I am not a traitor, I am here to help."

I would like you all to sign these documents, and he handed blank share transfer forms to one of the armed men to distribute.

"No. No way," Marec said - the only one to react.

Then Anna asked, "Why Richard. Why should we?"

"Because we can't let you go ahead with what you have planned. Some parts of 20/20 will go ahead, and some aspects of the libre will also see light of day, but not as you have all planned it. The idea was a great one, and *it* will bring in social change, but your method upsets too many people and too many established principles, so we just can't allow it to happen."

"Who are *we*, Colonel," asked Douglas, his arm still throbbing badly.

"It doesn't matter, Douglas, and I *am* sorry that you were shot. That was not us. Your evacuation was genuine. We just had to bring it forward when we heard Amrit talking about the recording, because of his discovery. And, I'd say it was lucky for you that we did."

Marec was growing angrier by the moment until, with a lightening reaction, he reached over and grabbed a pistol

from a sentry's belt.

Pointing the gun at the colonel, Marec said, "Now you tell us, Colonel, the truth about what happens next."

"That's easy, Marec. And, that is loaded, so please return it to its owner."

"Don't push me Dauber, or this will end worse for you than it will for us."

"I will ask you one more time. And, as he spoke his eyes moved to the sentry."

Marec started to speak again, "If you think that you frighten me, then you can..."

And there was a sudden explosion in the hut as the sentry shot Marec dead.

The noise and the odor from the pistol being fired made Douglas retch, while Amrit and Anna just sat petrified.

The colonel then spoke as if nothing had happened.

"Douglas, you will be returned to Switzerland. Anna, your stay in the US is canceled, and you will be sent back to Italy. Amrit, you will stay to work with us on the revised project to ensure its success. And now, Douglas and Anna, you will leave here as soon as you have signed the paperwork."

There were no further words spoken, as one by one, they signed share transfer forms and were handed to a sentry.

As Anna and Douglas were escorted to an unmarked jet, Anna turned to see the unescorted figures of Jim McMurtry and Alexa enter the hut that still housed Amrit. Simply relieved to be away from Marec's corpse, Anna said nothing to Douglas, who also sat quietly, as, when peering through his window to watch the take off, he caught site of a row of

tanks and the parade ground where a squad of soldiers were drilling.

Then, as the jet half-circled over the runway on its way to the south, they both saw the parade ground below painted with the Stars and Stripes and then the Boeing 747, with the distinct livery of Air Force One.

It was then that they both realized that a California Coup had taken place....

# # #

## **Epilogue**

In Richard Dauber's Presidio home, which he had kept as an investment property, the last few days had been chaotic, as the secure military installation that had been removed when he retired to join ZEN, was now put back, as he had been reappointed to his old post as Homeland Security Chief. And, by the time that the installation was complete, the room looked pretty much the same as it had those months before, with even the photographs of his wife and children once again sitting on the corner of his desk.

Come on in Adam, "Id like you to met your new partners at ZEN."

And one by one, he introduced ZEN's new management team.

He started with, "Everyone here will know Adam Eisenberg and Amrit Kahn, the founders and Co-Chairmen of ZEN Corporation, who will be carrying on the good work of implementing California 20/20 but an 'improved'

version."

"Damien will be in charge of ZEN's Media Outreach Program.

"Lucy Hsu will be the Chief Financial Officer and responsible for the libre roll-out."

"I, myself, will be in charge of the VALHALLA project."

"And, last but not least, Alexa Cortes, I would like to announce that the president and the GOP will be giving you their full support, in the next election, as the future of our party, and, as not only America's first woman, but first Hispanic President of the United States..."

# # #

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