

Inversion: The Relativity of Wealth

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CHAPTER 1

Countries are defined by borders, currency and, by themselves anyway, constitutions. Those documents over the ages have been written on paper, stone, papyrus and, in the case of very small countries, the hearts and minds of the citizens. Such was the Country of Hartunia, a once sprawling 18th Century Carrebean island of several hundred runaway slaves, as many free-capitalist pirates and a handful of displaced English Lords who negotiated sales of good with the mainland. In the 19th Century, the spirit of Revolution drove the Hartunians away from the island, but a few returned. Those that did hosted Confederate sugar planters who knew as much about planting crops as they did about how to whip the Yankees into surrendering to the Stars and Bars. After the crops failed, the rains came, then the winds, then a hurricane that established Mama Nature as the real boss of Hartunia.

The next wave of human settlers to the island were Hippies who tried to establish a Commune just like Cuba, but with a more tolerant policy towards human rights and without requiring their Presidents to wear military fatigues and beards. For that purposea they imported a philosopher-king. His name was Rikona, a highly-educated and well-traveled East Indian Monk who took the throne in the year of Most Everyone's Lord 1970, at the tender age of 20. Rikona was not only a pillar of old wisdom in his young body, but an effective negotiator with the outside world. His ability to get the son of a high level American Diplomat out of a Mexican jail, and into Buddhism rather than a Satanic cult after his release, resulted in a string of calling in favors that got the General Assembly of the UN to recognize Hartunia as a sovereign and independent nation.

Rikona's ability to use White Man's guilt to extract money from their wallets resulted in Hartunia getting foreign aid from countries on both sides of the Iron Curtain, with no strings attached. None that were pulled anyway. Rikona initiated a strict policy on Hartnia that whatever is earned, is spent, and where barter was valued more than dollars, ripples or drachmas. Indeed, each citizen of Hartunia gave according to their abilities, and took according to their needs, and when those needs exceeded what they could barter with, a portion of the Hartunian treasury was given to them. The sum of the grant was known only to Rikona and the grateful recipient on the island that grew its own food, built its own houses and even created its own music, though none of the tunes composed by Hartunians ever made it to the Top Forty charts, anywhere.

But alas, the American expatriate Hippies who were officially Rikona's subjects grew up to become Yuppies. They eventually left the island, particularly when their girlfriends on

the mainland got pregnant, or their boyfriends got rich selling Peace and Love paraphernalia on the stock market then becoming stay-at-home CEOs of the companies that made them rich. By the turn of the 21st century, the Utopian Paradise of Hartunia was forgotten by the world, as well as the last white-haired hippie readers of the Very Last Whole Earth Catalog. Rikona grew older and wiser, remaining on the island after most everyone else left.

Rikona didn't need human company to give him purpose, or pleasure. But he did need someone to take care of food, shelter and other biological necessities, as the aging Rikona still needed a body to come back to after astral projecting into Nirvana on good days, and parallel universes of lesser virtue on bad ones. And that once-strong body had grown old, weak and frail, in need of someone to feed it, shelter it, and force medicines down its throat when it got sick.

Providing such services was Carlos, 40 years-tired jack of all mechanical trades (and master of non-metaphysically) who had lingered on as Rikona's assistant in his 'temporary' position for nearly a decade. Such suited Carlos on most days, as it beat mowing lawns for 21st century 'green is great' yuppies in Miami. Or working for his know-it-all Pharmacist uncle in Mexico City as an assistant manager in one of his many chain stores. And it certainly beat living through even the best of days with his ex-wife in Houston, who, thanks to Hartunia not having an extradition agreement for alimony payments, couldn't milk him dryer than she already had, economically or psychologically.

It was just another Tuesday morning on Hartunia, population two, though which day of the week it was didn't seem to matter. Every day was one of work and play. Nature had seen fit to allow everything to grow on the island to sustain human life, and this day was no exception. The multicolored flag featuring a black and white field mouse flew freely and unabtrusibly on the pole in front of Rikona's hut, the largest still-standing roofed structure in the country. The other fully functional building consisted of a house built more according to standards of the mainland. Though it was more solid than the hut, Carlos' house seemed less impressive than the hut from the outside. Both were powered by a generator that the hippies left behind and Carlos maintained, run by a mixture of solar power from the sun and gas from the mainland. That generator powered two television sets, a satellite dish, and two computers. One of those computers Carlos mostly used to try to find an online mate who could deal with who he was in real life. The other in Rikona's private temple behind his living quarters, which the Old Master utilized from time to time to download esoteric texts about the ancient world and mathematical physics journals from the evolving one, as well as to check on world news, most particularly how well the Indian Soccer team was doing.

On that soon-to-be-eventful Tuesday, Carlos gathered eggs from the chickens that feasted on the renewed vegetation that now covered most of the island. The size of the eggs were acceptable, even better than acceptable, with the exception of one which was half the size of the others. Carlos picked it up and shook it, to see if there was anything inside of it that wanted to come out. As he did, he heard a chicken cluck. "No babies,

this time, Rosita,” Carlos said to the runty bird that usually laid eggs that rivaled her fellow avians in size. “But, I know, you're tired, and as long as you make eggs for us, we won't make chicken salad out of you.”

Rosita clucked out a protest to Carlos, or so it seemed to the overworked and, in his mind anyway, under-appreciated sole citizen that made up the Hartunian work force. The aging chicken clucked her way to his pocket.

“Alright,” Carlos said, pulling out the mango he was going to have for breakfast. “We'll share it,” he said as he offered the hen a generous chunk from the top of the fruit, only to have her snatch the main body of the mango.

She ran away with it, hiding in the bush. Chasing her would be futile, today anyway. But, someday, when she outlived her usefulness, she would welcome being caught, decapitated and cooked. So Carlos thought about Rosita, himself, and Rikona, who sat on his open aired throne reading a newspaper from the mainland. And worrying about what he was reading this time. Carlos approached and read the headlines as he unloaded the eggs into the refrigerator, saving four of them to make breakfast for Rikona and himself.

“The National Debt on the mainland is rising again,” Carlos easily surmised from the headlines. “But everyone on the mainland who has money seems to be getting richer, while the poor, remain...underpaid or unpaid,” he strongly related. Carlos looked to Rikona for a response. He didn't get one.

The Master was lost in a world of his own, far beyond the understanding of the Servant. Rikona put down his newspaper, but remained fixed by whatever he was looking at in what to Carlos was just empty space.

Carlos cracked the four largest eggs and scrambled them in a bowl, then scraped around the refrigerator for something that looked interesting and smelled edible enough to put into them. “The dollar, yen and Euro decreased in value today, again,” Carlos read. “So what is increasing in value?” Carlos asked Philosopher King Rikona, who still remained distantly silent. Carlos loudly closed the refrigerator, then mixed the ingredients for the days' breakfast in a thirty year old pot which, according to rumor anyway, was converted into utility by none other than John Lennon himself. “And with this debt that every country seems to have....Who owes what and to who? Besides me owing you a tasty and nutritious ommlette and you owing me a trip to wherever you go between your ears?” Carlos gently blasted into the old man's still distant eyes as he put on the two element hotplate and poured the mixture into a frying pan. When pan met heat, the first emanations of aroma emerged very quickly. Carlos pushed them towards Rikona's still non-responsive face.

The mixture of pepper and wild basil broke through the Old Man's trance. He smiled, then looked at his humble servant, and good friend, and after a deep breath, said to him, “Comrade Carlos, each gives according to his abilities, takes according to his needs.

And as for money, it is a tool to get what you need. Just one of the tools.”

“Well, what if I need to have more money? And want to have money?” Carlos demanded to know.

“You have all you need, don't you?” Rikona replied with an even wider and warmer smile made all the more profound by the wrinkles in his weather-beaten face. “Food, shelter, purpose, challenge, and, appreciation. From me, Rosita, the other hens, and every animal on this island. And every other living thing here bearing fur, scales or leaves.”

“But I need understanding,” Carlos pointed out, leaning in towards the Old Master.

A glow came over the old man's tired, brown eyes, as he seemed to feel that the young man finally came up with the question that would give him all the answers he would need and want. A victory for the Old Man until the young man said, “I need to understand why I am not making any money here. And why everyone on the mainland is richer than me. AND you! I've seen how much is left in the National Treasury,” Carlos continued, pointing to the hole containing the treasure chest left by the original pirates who settled the island. “That chest is worth more than whatever dollars, pesos or shekles are in there!”

“I know,” Rikona sadly replied with a voice gone raspy and strained. “But at least we don't owe anything to anyone, except to each other,” he smiled back between mild coughs.

“Yes, but...” Carlos shot back, as he looked at the shimmering shores of the American mainland to the West. “In Florida, there are rich people! Lots of them! Richer than we ever were, or will be! No matter how much they pay me to fix the plumbing at their resorts, build roofs on their casinos, or take them out for fishing trips with their mistresses! AND they can go to ANY doctor they want because they are RICHER than us!”

“Are they richer than us, or do they just have more money?” Rikona challenged, through another painful cough, looking at his frail, and once again shaking arms that he used to pick up the newspaper again and hide behind it. “Are they rich just because they have money?”

“That doesn't make any sense,” Carlos countered as he futilely tried to get between the Old Man's eyes and the newspaper. “Just like me working for all of them on the mainland, and them, ALL of them, owing ME money, doesn't make any sense.”

“All of them?” Rikona asked, putting down his newspaper, genuinely surprised.

“ALL of them!” Carlos barked back. “Which is why I don't own a single shirt that doesn't have holes in it,” he said as he demonstrated his claim with the over-worn garment covering his well-conditioned but still aching body. “Why I'm cooking eggs for

YOUR breakfast instead of steak and sausages,” he continued, smelling the same morning meal he had cooked for himself and Rikona, day in and day out, for the last 5 years. “And why we both live in huts instead of houses like the rich people on the mainland do!” he barked as a burst of wind blew three strands of straw into the ommlette.

“They aren't strong enough to live as we do, Carlos,” Rikona said as he took the smaller portion of the ommlette for himself.

“And we're supposed to be smart enough to live the way THEY do!” Carlos barked back. “I deserve more! And so do you!” he continued, giving the old man most of his own breakfast.

Rikona smiled, then laughed. Then coughed, blood coming out of his mouth this time.

On most days, Carlos would run to Rikona's aid, giving him something to ease his pain, But on this day, it was time or the old Sage to get a dose of his own medicine, by mouth. “You laugh, and even though you're dying, the way YOU want to die, you still keep me as the poorest citizen in MY country!”

“Forgive me,” Rikona said, spooning out the lion's portion of the ommlette onto Carlos' plate, taking care to give him the portions that didn't contain the manure-stained straw.

“I don't want what's yours, just what's rightfully mine!” Carlos shot back. “And what's rightfully mine, and yours, from them, on the Mainland! And particularly on this day which marks...a, well...it doesn't matter anymore,” Carlos continued as he picked up his tool belt and boxes. He headed towards a single boat tied to a single pier on the only remaining harbour on the island just down the hill from Hartunia's capital 'city'.

“You do deserve something more than a bigger share of the ommlette for breakfast on your birthday, Carlos,” Rikona said just as the servant. “You only turn forty once.”

“Thankfully!” Carlos barked out as he loaded up the weather-beaten but never sea-defeated modified mini-Viking longship which was the laughing stock of every fisherman, the source of quaint pictures from the tourists on the mainland, and the envy of every University trained small craft designer who saw it. “I'm going to work now,” he grumbled. “On the mainland. Where I get paid in dollars instead of proverbs”

“Not without this!” Rikona blasted out. With a voice that sounded as if it came from a proud young lion rather than an old, aging dinosaur.

Carlos wondered if maybe Rikona had indeed finally transcended, returning to this life as a Herclean ghost who walked the earth like superman. Until Carlos saw the old man hobble to the dock waving a fistful of papers.

“With this, you will transform the world, and yourself,” the old man said to the young one with a sense of affirmation, and finality.

“Another one of the manuscripts willed to you by your guru in India, or that you want to will to me?” Carlos sneered.

“Just shut up, read then, and deliver them, to the five people they are addressed to,” Rikona said. “Due today. Final notice. No excuses, or there will be international repercussions.” he continued, taking out a stamp from his pocket, pressing each of them with ink with more boldness than Carlos had ever seen from the Old Philosopher King. “Time for them and others to finally learn a valuable lesson!” he proclaimed.

“By making them pay me for fixing their toilet, repairing their roof, patching up their boat, driving their mistresses to the airport, and----”

“Demand payment for it today. In cash. No credit cards or checks,”

“And if they want to pay me in chickens, who lay bigger eggs than Rosita, and shit out less farts that I have to clean up? Or maybe renting me one of their mistresses, or wives, for a few hours?” Carlos asked, with a warm smile.

“Cash. To YOU and YOU only. By the end of business day today! No exceptions, or---”

“---I know,” Carlos said, looking at the invoices. “The severest of economic and international consequences. From the country of---”

“Hartunia!” the old man proclaimed, sounding like a young one. But hobbling like an old one as he sung the National Anthem that was once the pride of his island kingdom on the way to his throne, where he sat down and waved Carlos off to the mainland.

Like every other Tuesday, or any other day of the week for that matter, Carlos had to be content with the old man's advise. Though Rikona was at this point a deluded old fart half way to his next incarnation, he always did mean well. And, truth be told, he was the only friend Carlos had left in the world. Yet, a friend who still had more money than he did, and therefore, a boss. Not because he had any army to back him up, or police force to exert his authority, but because he had more money than Carlos had. Until, perhaps Carlos could collect on the debts the Old Man threatened to exert on the mainland. A small gift for Carlos' 40th birthday, but it beat a peck at the ankles from Rosita and her fellow hens, or a shit delivered onto the head by a seagull flying over him just as he hit the open water.

CHAPTER 2

Carlos landed his one man motorized Nordic dingy on the mainland amidst large yachts to his left, and over-stocked supply boats to his right. Though they all seemed to be

built by the same designer, the flags on them were all different. And by the look of the overfilled parking lot at the Five Star Hotel Floridian beyond the peer, and the line of limos letting out old men in dark blue suits and young women in little black dresses, there was something going on that seemed ominously---big. "What's going on?" Carlos asked one of the dock workers offloading a box of unlabeled cargo labeled Product of Mexico. "I don't remember anyone inviting so many guests for my birthday," Carlos mused in his Native tongue to his countryman. "Or maybe yours?" Carlos offered him a cigar.

"I'd rather that you help me get this box to the truck than give me a cigar," the dock worker grumbled. "Or tell me why getting a college degree from Mexico earned me the right to offload a boat owned by an Anglo High School dropout from Dallas."

"An Anglo who had a rich father, or a lucky stockbroker?" Carlos replied while helping his new Compadre lift the large wooden box off the cargo ship onto the tailgate of the Hotel Floridian transport truck, feeling something biological move inside the box. "Who maybe imports KGB hitmen as enforcers for his oil companies in Texas."

"Ukrainian strippers for his son's bachelor party," the dockworker said with a smile. "Who can be just as deadly to a business deal as any mobster," he continued as he pushed the box towards the back the the truck, then covered it up. "Thanks for the help," he said to Carlos. "Andrew Jackson thanks you too."

"No, I won't take that," Carlos said regarding the twenty, offered to him.

"Then will you take this?" the dockworker said, discretely pulling out a voucher for another forty greenbacks at the Floridian Casino. "Or this?" he continued, upping the tip to \$60 dollars.

"Your boss must be rich," Carlos commented, noting the company name on the underside of the box, which matched that on the cargo ship behind him and the well guarded yacht to his left. "Yes, Mister Ross is very rich, and very much involved in all Bildeberg Group decisions," Carlos continued with an envious growl as the owner of the super-pleasure craft emerged from the cabin with a bottle of champagne under one arm and a hot babe in bikini hanging on his left.

"Those who work for Mister Ross are well paid," the dockworker said, upping the tip to a hundred bucks even with a voucher for a free lunch at the hotel Executive Dining Hall of the Floridian. "Especially those who are smart enough to stay out of his business."

"And brave enough to collect money that is due for services rendered," Carlos said, motioning for the dockworker to put away his money. He pulled out one of the invoices handed to him by Rinola. "I only want, and demand, what is mine," Carlos said, handing it to the laborer who, by the look of his snakeskin shoes and the tailor-made black satin shirt under his overalls, was certainly no laborer. And perhaps not a graduate of a Mexican University either. "By end of business day today, in cash, for services

rendered on his boat that I did over the last 3 months, and never got paid for. From Mister Ross himself.”

“Two hundred and twenty dollars?” the dockworker said, laughing at the amount.

“And thirty one cents, from his pocket, not yours, by the end of the business day. In front of the hotel. Cash into my pocket. My boss' orders,” Carlos delivered as he walked away from the truck, the yacht and whatever, or whoever, was in the box.

The dockworker, whoever he was, seemed amused with the courage that peasant-plumber-mechanic Carlos displayed by delivering him the invoice. Amusement turned into terror when he looked at the Royal Hartunian stamp at the bottom of the page.

For reasons Carlos felt but couldn't define, he felt important. Not because he was important, but because he was scaring important people. First the dockworker, then his boss, Mister Ross, when he looked at the paperwork. “By the end of business day today, in front of the hotel. My boss' orders. In cash.” Carlos delivered with his back turned to the pale faced Mexican and the even paler faced Gringo.

They were in shock, the armed guards behind them asked Mister Ross what to do, then his Mexican Leutenant. Before they could answer, Carlos escalated his confident walk to a brisk trot, then ran quickly to the front door of the Floridian. He disappeared behind a fresh line of limos bearing international flags, opening the door for a regally-clad woman out of a car bearing the Union Jack before the bellhop could get to it.

“Mucho gracias,” the blonde-haired, blue-eyed woman said to Carlos with a Scottish accent through a pleasantly-respectable smile.

“Nay probs,” Carlos responded, with a courtly bow and an outstretched hand, recalling one of the ten phrases in Highland Scottish he knew. “If ye be wantin' ta shake a wicked hoof after eats, this be a bonnie place fer it, der ye kin?”

“Aye, I kin,” the lady replied with a boisterous and friendly tone to Carlos as her large framed very English body guards surrounded the small framed Latino. “That means 'I understand', and 'shaking a wicked hoof' is dancing,” she informed them in Oxfordian English. “Which I intend to do tonight, after we conclude our negotiations at the Bildeberg Conference. With this fine Latino gentleman,” she said as she smiled at Carlos. “If he agrees to doing so of course.”

“Only after I conclude my business with your boss, according to instructions from mine,” Carlos smiled at the middle aged Scottish woman who seemed to be more of a bonnie lass than a business woman. A lass who reminded him of his wife when she was satisfied with sharing Carlos' heart, and not demanding to own his soul. But, as this was a day of doing business before pleasure or passion, Carlos did what he had to do. “For your boss,” he bowed to the lady as he gave her one of the invoices. “For the repair of the plumbing on his beachhouse, and----”

“---discrete transportation for his party guests,” she read on the royally-stamped papers.

“Payment due by five o'clock in front of the hotel, in cash. Orders from my boss.”

“Which I will convey to mine, so...” the woman said, looking up at Carlos. “Maybe tonight we can be free of all of our bosses?”

“That would be nice,” Carlos replied. “You can teach me to do a Highland Reel.”

“And you can teach me how to..... hmmm,” the rich woman's stare immediately went to the poor man's hole ridden shoes, slowly moved up his muscular legs. Then it migrated to the intersection between his legs, followed by a loving stare into his eyes. “I don't think I'll be needing this tonight,” she said, taking off a diamond ring from her left fourth finger. “And besides, you can use it more,” she continued, placing it into Carlos' hand. “I have many like it that I use for business purposes. And what happens at the Floridian stays at the Floridian?”

“As long as someone pays me to shut off the surveillance cameras and see that the lights go on and off in the hotel rooms when they're supposed to,” Carlos thought, but didn't say. “It's going to be a very interesting night after this day is over,” he said with his mouth, sensing that he was channeling something very prophetic. And with that flash of imaginings which he could not define, he proceeded to the hotel lobby, to deliver the rest of the invoices.

Carlos strolled past a dining room where commoners brought food they could never afford to eat to rich guests who were too important to carry around money, or any worry about how to get it. All races were represented here, every hue of human flesh clad in the same designer clothing. They paid for everything with credit cards, affirming how powerful those sheets of imprinted plastic were with authoritatively delivered signatures.

A young Asian girl sang the Buffalo Springfield tune 'There's something happening here, what it is ain't exactly clear' on the Karioki stage. She didn't appear to understand the words, and conveyed none of the the subtext of that song. A song that was once the most popular tune in Hartunia when it was the best kept Utopian Paradise secret in the world. And soon, perhaps, would become something completely different.

Carlos couldn't take his eyes off of the young girl from his vantage point outside the dining room at the front desk of the hotel. Not because she was so beautiful, but because she was so naive. And being stared at by some 'gentlemen' he knew as his own clients. And others, male and female, who did didn't recognize but knew where shitheads with clean, confident, well groomed faces.

“Carlos,” one of the clerks at the hotel front desk said to him. “I got some new guests who can pay top dollar, and I know ya'll need the dollars more than I do,” Jack Johnson continued with a Southern drawl as he handed him a list. “I hear things are tough on the

island for ya'll."

"The newspapers I take out there as litter for the goats, chickens and pig say that it's tougher here on the mainland, for you, Jack," Carlos replied, handing the list back to his Anglo redneck buddy. "Your kid, Clyde, should go to college so he can get an education, instead of learning about international politics from your ex-wife's new KKK boyfriend."

"If Clyde don't know right from wrong by now, no college egghead's gonna teach him," Jack replied, handing the list of rich clients who needed working class schleps do do their hard, and dirty, work back to Carlos. "These new arrivals are the ones that control the economy of the world. They have the kind of meetings that Presidents and Prime Ministers ain't allowed into. Unless they serve the Bildeberg Group coffee and donuts."

"Then maybe you can serve the Bildebergs moonshine and pie," Carlos replied, pushing the list back to his once-redneck friend. "And while you're at it, serve them these also," he continued, unloading a fistful of the invoices in front of Jack. "Legal papers, according to my boss anyway."

"Your friend you mean," Jack said with an empathetic smile. "A friend who thinks he's a king of his own country," he chuckled as he looked at the Royal Seal.

"King of My Country!" Carlos observed himself asserting back. "Who demands payment, in full, for his servant, who....well," he continued as he caught a glimpse of himself in a mirror. "Is going to get what's coming to him, for once in his life," he said to whoever was really behind his own reflection.

"You sure about this?" Jack asked Carlos. "Pissin' off rich folks is the easiest way for us poor folks to wind up tossed into places a lot worse than a desert island. An island where yer on the bottom of a totem pole that ain't more than a foot off the ground that---"

"----Five o'clock, in front of the hotel," Carlos retorted. "Cash in my hand for all services rendered. Or else---"

"---I know," Jack said, reading the ultimatum hand written on the invoices. "'The full wrath of King Rikona will be inflicted upon you and those connected to you with severe international consequences!'" He allowed himself to enjoy a respectful chuckle. "Sound like a proclamation from an old mouse who still thinks he can roar like a lion."

"Gotta die of something, right, Jack?" Carlos offered.

"True enough," replied the descendant of ancestors who had fought valiantly on the losing sides of at least four wars that they had lost. "I'll deliver these to the appropriate parties," he pledged, stuffing the invoices into the pocket of his Hotel Floridian jacket, which was no more his than Carlos' boat. For the moment anyway.

CHAPTER 3

With the papers having been delivered to the appropriate parties though his buddy Jack, Carlos pondered what to do with 6 hours that remained till the Gigantic Gater clock struck 5 pm in the Floridian Hotel Lobby. Every pleasure available to man, woman and experimental souls in between, was either at the Floridian, or in the town nearby which it owned. But such pleasures required money. From the taste of warmed up tacos made three weeks ago at the 'Fresh and Festive' food stands. To the Mediteranean Message Emporium, where a sore back made so by a hard day at work or a hard-assed lover at home was healed with intense gymnastics between the legs as well as a tendor stroke on the cheek by young women who would make the beauty queens in Miami look like washed out middle aged nuns.

Carlos wandered around town, going to his old clients, asking if they needed anything done. None of those working class people had any work for him. Not any work they were willing to pay for anyway. Each one of them told Carlos that economically it was a bad week, a bad month or a bad stage of life. He believed them, as there was not one small shop or one family house (sheltering at least two families) which looked kept up like the Floridian and the chain stores it annexed. And though Carlos offered to help each one of them, his services were declined. Respectfully, so it seemed anyway. Or so he provisionally chose to believe.

Carlos felt like going back 'home' to Hartunia, but he had to remain till 5 PM. Having nowhere to go where he felt useful, he decided to spent what remained of the day on the beach. He looked at the yachts moving in and out of the harbor in the water. At the birds swerving down to the water to eat the fish. At the fish diving deep below the surface to eat the snails. Then at his cell phone, as he dialed up Rikona, for the fifth time that day. And just as it had been for the last four calls, Rinona didn't answer.

“He always answers my calls, or leaves a message on my phone,” Carlos said to a lone seagull that hobbled its way towards him. “And he never goes to Nirvana more than 15 minutes at a time,” he continued to his newest avian friend. “Unless this time when he decided to fuck off to whatever world he visits inside his head, the door closed behind him after he becomes...” Carlos couldn't even think the word, never mind saying it.

“Dead?” the gull seemed to say to Carlos in bird talk. “Like I wish I was,” he continued, hobbling over to the jack of all trades mechanical, and biological.

“Not today,” Carlos grunted with determination as he fed the bird the dried bisquits in his pocket. He looked at the bird's leg. “It can fix that if you want me to,” he said to the gull.

Whoever he, or she, was the gull seemed okay with Carlos taking off his shirt, throwing it over its wings, and pulling it towards him. Faster than you could say 'Jonathan Seagull should have been written with some realistic edge instead of hippie dippie fantasy so it can survive the cynicism of the 21st century', Carlos had fashioned a splint for the leg.

One that gave the bird enough support to walk away from him, hop on a tree limb above him, caw proudly, then lay a wad of bird shit onto the 'good doctor's' head.

“OK, I get the point, Rikona,” Carlos found himself saying to the bird as he wiped the white manure off his forehead. “If I would have opened my mouth when I was talking to you instead of listening, I'd be eating shit instead of wearing it.”

The bird looked at Carlos, giving him no reply. Except for a 'thank you very much for doing your job as I fuck off to do mine' stare, followed by a flight up towards the clouds, then over the sea, disappearing into an incoming cloud coming in from the direction of Hartunia.

“Another coincidence,” Carlos said, feeling the hard ground under him and a sprinkle of real rain drops from another passing cloud. “JUST a coincidence!” he yelled up to the cloud. Trying to believe his assertion, but unable to.

CHAPTER 4

By 4:55 PM, all Carlos could think about was his stomach, the seagull having eaten the lion and lioness' share of his lunch. How empty his stomach was, and how full everyone else's were. He thought about how he could keep his body alive and his mind alert so that he could creatively and colorfully complain about his stomach, particularly when a very angry Mister Ross approached him in front of the Floridian Hotel, backed by by four very big, and very armed bodyguards. And the Mexican 'dockworker' whose name Carlos still did not know, who spoke for the congregation.

“Carlos,” the dockworker who was now dressed more like a dock owner said with a courtly bow. “Mister Ross has approved that you acquire one or all of these,” he continued, handing Carlos three newly taken photographs. “They certainly will be more comfortable and reliable than that Viking dingy of yours that has probably already survived more than its fair share of storms that---”

“---I may want a new boat, or a new fleet of boats,” Carlos said. “But I NEED cash. Two hundred and thirty dollars of it.”

“The boats in these photographs are worth a a hundred times that,” Ross said with a condescending grin, behind which was an ocean of fear.

“Then you sell the boats within the next five minutes, and get the cash to me, that you owe me, and the Hartunian government,” he barked back. “Two hundred and thirty dollars---”

“---Which your President said is due by 5 pm or there will be severe international consequences, as you have informed us,” the dockworker interjected. “But, Carlos, be reasonable! Good business is about good horse trading. Give and take. Everyone

owing everyone else.”

“Which stimulates economies, son,” Ross added as he checked his cell phone. “Which can topple at any time if even one player in the game doesn't play by gentleman's rules,” he continued as his anxious eyes became scared, then terrified.

“The honor of my country is at stake,” Carlos replied, his pride or perhaps anger overcoming a tidal wave of fear that was about to swell up. “And if you dishonor our honor, there will be---”

“---severe International consequences , we know,” the dockworker said with a condescending eye-roll. Seeing that Carlos was getting a kick out of watching Ross squirm, the dockworker approached him. “What do you want, really? Women? Girls? Boys? Designer drugs? Jewels?”

Carlos smirked.

“MY watch!” the dockworker said, ripping it off his wrist. “Which is worth five hundred dollars. Or, you sly bastard....” he continued, flashing on the point at paw. “You want that boat you repaired and didn't get paid for yet. Which I'm sure I can get for you if you'----”

“---So, you and your big shot boss don't have two hundred and forty dollars,” Carlos surmised and said.

“NO one on this island carries around money! Especially at a Bildeberg Group conference!” Mr. Ross' well paid right hand schlep asserted.

“Maybe some do,” Carlos said, recalling the very negotiable greenbacks the Chinese businessmen in the lounge handed over to the peelers, after which they merely inserted their business card and hotel key. “You tell Mister Ross, after he's trying to save his stocks from tumbling, that he should go to Mister Wang and get the two hundred and forty dollars from him.”

“Mister Wang doesn't carry around money either, you idiot!” the dockworker whispered to Carlos through gritted teeth and a forced smile he showed to a group of ENG reporters passing. “And neither does anyone else on this island, where the real movers and shakers are managing the world economy so you can, eventually, get your two hundred and forty dollars. And if you keep making a scene---”

“---You'll have me killed, drugged or abducted, I know...,” Carlos said, glancing at the four bodyguards who threw threatening stares his way, while discretely putting their hand on the concealed weapons under their coats. “But I have my orders. And the President of Hartunia will be very upset if I don't come home with the money you owe me, and him, in cash, FROM Mister Ross. It's a matter of honor, and fiscal responsibility.” Carlos felt important saying 'fiscal responsibility'. Important enough to intimidate the dockworker

into conferring with Mister Ross. And for Ross to look up from his phone and address Carlos with respect.

“I guarantee as the most successful businessman on the East Coast, and the future President of the United States, that I will have your money tonight, by 8 pm. Two Hundred and forty dollars,” Mister Ross pledged.

“Two hundred and ninety dollars,” Carlos smiled. “Which includes interest for delayed payment. And extra pay for me to have to talk my President out of----”

“---We know,” Ross and his first lieutenant said in unison. “There will be severe international consequences.”

At Ross' prodding, the dockworker threw Carlos an envelope. Upon opening it, he saw that it was a pass with an open expense account to the most exclusive lounge in the Floridian. “I can pay anyone I want to sing happy birthday to me, and make them mean it,” Carlos said to himself as he sauntered into the hotel, clad as a beggar, with a pass that demanded he be treated like a king.

CHAPTER 5

At 5:10, Carlos walked into the Executive Lounge at the Floridian and presented his Super Gold Platinum pass to the consigiere while the bouncers prepared to toss his peasant ass out on his big, and still open, ears. At 5:15, when the waiter finally came his way, he ordered a beer and a burger, passing on the 200 year old brandy and filet mignon, as well as the other items on the menu described with English words he could not understand. When it finally arrived at 5:40, Carlos offered, with a warm smile to his fellow diners, to buy a round for the house with his card. “A peace offering between classes, as we are all in this world thing together,” he said by way of explanation, in celebration of his surviving till the age of forty.

But none of the super elite, and very international (by the sound of their accents and languages anyway) businessmen or business women accepted his offer. When he turned to his meal, and drink, from the corner of his eyes Carlos could see the eyes of his fellow diners stare at him with pity, distain, or condescension. With his well developed sense of hearing, the Mexican-born peasant from Hartunia heard them share jokes among themselves about him, as well as the Latino and Black gardeners outside the one-way window.

Carlos ate his burger quickly, then nursed his beer slowly. To take his mind off the stares and giggles directed at him, and his fellow schleps outside, he looked at the TV monitor. On it were two newscasters relating the business news of the day. They were as baffled with Dow Index and Anex numbers as Carlos' fellow diners would be when dealing with an oncoming storm in a one man boat.

Carlos listened to the tone of the authoritative babbling on the big flat screen tv over the bar rather than the numbers. The aged man with tired eyes, deep wrinkles and slicked back dyed hair carried himself off as an appointed king, whose every word must go down as historical note in the book of books, but to be fair, he looked like he was about to be deposed as a king by a vicious and undeserving monarch. Next to him was a younger woman in the low cut black dress which she used to show off breasts that matched her 'sexy power pitch' tone of voice. Both broadcasters disgusted Carlos, not because of their arrogance, but because of their ignorance. These two voices 'for the people' had never faced the abyss. Never dealt with not having. Never felt the agony of losing, or the pain of loss.

The broadcast went on, delivering routine info to the elitist diners, The most superior of them did the least minimal movements of their arms, fingers and eyes. The underlings were the ones who took out the cards and paid for food and drink. Those under the underlings distributed the culinary and intoxicating treats around the table once it was delivered by the servers. Those waiters and waitresses did all of the sweating.

“The elite never sweat,” Carlos said to himself as he realized what he had never noticed about them. “But neither does Rikona,” he thought. “Maybe that's why he hires and takes care of me, to do the sweating for him?” he mused to himself as he took a healthy gulp from his beer and felt fluid come down his face. “But,” Carlos continued in the dialog in his head as he looked over the gathering of movers and shakers who ruled the people who did the news, and the news itself. “What if these kings and queens who have learned how to get what they want and need without sweating, couldn't get what they want, or need?” he pondered.

It was too much of a birthday gift to to realistically expect. So, he settled in to the reality of temporarily enjoying a burger and beer in the kind of place where he could never even get a job washing dishes. Then a newsflash was delivered to the two 'business as usual' broadcasters on the tv screen. They looked at each other in shock. As they did, the most elite of the diners, whose assistants had just got the information on their phone, began to worry.

Casual conversation among moguls and condescending remarks about who wasn't one of them came to an abrupt halt. Every one of the kings, queens, princes and princesses had shocked looks on their faces. And something on them that Carlos had never thought he would ever see.

“Sweat!” Carlos noted, and almost said. After which the explanation for this unexpected birthday gift came over the airways.

“It seems that the day we all fear is at hand,” the older gentleman said, having no time to read the teleprompter. “Markets all over the world have fallen. Due to, apparently, someone from an unknown source, calling in a debt, which is causing a chain reaction,” he said with a lamenting and terrified voice.

“And what a chain reaction it appears to be, Roland!” the young, attractive power bitch next to him said as if proclaiming it as the greatest and most exciting entertainment event of the season.

“This is not a Hollywood premiere or a publicity hoax, Brenda,” the old man admonished the young wench, on the air. “That dreaded event in which creditor has caused debtor to pay up has started, and everyone it seems is a debtor with regard to real currency. This is going to be the most destructive economic event since the Crash of 1929, and by the numbers coming to us, it appears to be worse,” he said as he got a message on his ear bud. “Terri, tell us the details,” he said to the cameras while Barbie bitch Brenda threw an angry 'you hold back my advancing career, I'll destroy your legacy' stare into the veteran broadcaster's face.

Carlos couldn't make sense of the numbers, but he could clearly see that the day of reckoning for a credit addicted world was at hand. From the concerned look on the broadcasters' faces, and the panic in the eyes of the moguls in the lounge who, apparently, were paupers now. As to the why of it, that did make sense to Carlos, thanks to Roland's common speak distillation of all the econ-cyber-babble. “We've been living in an age where everyone owes everyone else, and forgot who owes what to who, but apparently, every country has been living in the red,” the old but not yet defeated newsman said to the camera.

“Living in the red?” Carlos barked out with a confused look. “The world economy is collapsing because everyone's getting sucked up into working with or under Communists?”

“Living in the red means living in debt, you idiot,” an old German woman with an overly botoxed face and grey roots under her long, red hair said as she walked past Carlos' table, along with most of her colleagues, or perhaps competitors.

“I'm the idiot who doesn't owe anyone anything! And none of my fellow Hartunians owe anything to anyone either!” Carlos barked at the once rich and now struggling herd of international 'success stories'. “But I, and the people of Hartunia, are owed two hundred and forty dollars by Mister Ross, and around the same amount from nine more of you.”

“Which one of us?” a Chinese gentleman in a white suit sporting a pony tail inquired of Carlos.

Every one of the elite businessmen, and women, looked at Carlos. Not with condescension but fear. “I'm not at liberty to say,” he said with a satisfied smile as he leaned back on his chair, then drank the rest of his beer, assertively slamming the glass on the table and summarizing his opinion regarding the ultra-refined moguls with a burp, belch and fart.

“You are a citizen of Hartunia, then?” came from one of the British mogul's assistants,

who, as a very happy accident, he recognised.

Carlos looked at Scottish woman who he helped out of her car a few long hours ago. “Yes, I am a citizen of Hartunia,” he nodded to her with a proud smile.

“Hartunia, the most enlightened country in the world, so I heard,” the Scottish attachee continued, in full view of her English bosses and their fellow Bildebergs. “And you occupy what position in that country?”

“I am second only to the President,” Carlos said with a bold smile to the woman who propositioned him at the hotel after he helped her out of her car.

“A President who is more like a Philosopher-King, which would make you a Philosopher Prince,” she continued. “Who, as I recall, offered to teach me how to dance Latin style.”

“As long as you teach me how to do a Scottish reel,” Carlos smiled back. “While...your bosses all learn a lesson about life.”

“We tried to keep the economy balanced!” a chisel-chinned South African man in a blue shirt and white slacks said. “How is it that you, on Hartunia, aren't being destroyed by this economic collapse!”

“We take care of our own,” Carlos explained as he invited the Scottish attachee to sit next to him, putting his arm around her with gratitude and pride. “Each of our citizens gives according to abilities, and takes according to their needs. And never spends what they don't have.”

“ALL of your citizens?” a Russian mogul wearing an emblem of his own private company as well as his country demanded to know.

“It's easy for you to be a democratic socialist country with a population of...how many are you these days anyway?” the very American ambassador to the Economic Conference asked Carlos..

“Three thousand souls,” Carlos replied, not bothering to say that he was counting four as well as two legged dwellers on the island that hadn't received a visitor in three years, except for a few boatloads of Cubans refugees who thought they had landed on the coast of Florida. “Five thousand during peak growing season,” the Philosopher-Prince continued, estimating the number of birds that came to eat the wild berries on the island, the crops he planted, food he left for King Rikona to eat after he came back from transcending to different dimensions, the birds leaving behind their thank you's in the form of feces that he often had to clean up himself. “And our King was also elected President,” he boasted with the most joyous of smiles.

“That can't be true!” the South African gentleman replied.

“If the Philosopher Prince says it is, so it is,” the Scottish woman whose name Carlos still did not know affirmed on his behalf. “Countries like yours, gentlemen, and ladies, which are about to be bankrupt, should respect kingdoms like his, and learn from them.” She wrapped her arms around his bent elbows, saying with her eyes to Carlos that she was his, in any way he wanted to assume ownership.

Several of the Captains of Industry and World Economics desperately asked Carlos about what the President of his now powerful country wanted. At the same time, others wanted to know if they could seek aid from him. Simultaneously, another mismatched contingent tried to warn Carlos of the impending treachery of the aforementioned groups.

But Carlos was concerned with one thing. The love from the Scottish woman's eyes, and the question that he knew had to be asked of her if he were to access any of it. “What is your name?” he inquired of her amidst the banter around them.

“Anything you want, my Prince,” she replied. She then kissed his hand, caressed his cheek, and stroked his thigh. “What is your pleasure tonight?” she inquired. “Nay, your Passion.”

“To take care of business before pleasure or Passion,” he whispered to her, finding that indeed all of this adoration for his 40th birthday hadn't gone to his head.

She said 'happy birthday' with her eyes, in ways that no other woman had ever done so with words, card or deed.

“Gentleman! Ladies!” said to the desperate leaders who now begged to follow him wherever he would lead them. “And experimental souls in between!” he continued. “That was a joke,” he explained.

The congregation laughed. Whether it was sincere or not, Carlos accepted it.

“I will be taking care of my country's legal business in front of the hotel starting at 8 pm!” he proclaimed. “Then will depart to bring back the new queen-elect of Hartunia, queen Dolcinea!” With that, Carlos burst out into song from his favorite musical, *Man From LaMancha*. Usually the chickens didn't mind it, and King Rikona endured it. But everyone here in this room loved it. So Carlos believed anyway.

CHAPTER 6

Everyone in the Floridian and the town it owned was Carlos' friend that night. Except for the 10 debtors who paid him the money, in cash, owed to him for his hard working handyman and confidential transportation services. From Mister Ross, who coughed up two hundred and eighty greenbacks for fixing the plumbing on his favorite yacht. To Mister Chen, who came up with four hundred and ten bucks for taking Mistress number one to the airport by the shortest way possible after she announced that she was pregnant

and for taking Mistress number two on a half hour boat ride that took 6 hours after the engine mysteriously broke down while Mrs. Chen was on the mainland with her husband.

They came to arranged meeting places at the appointed hours, dressed as beggars or busboys, with dark sunglasses. All were very apologetic for being late in paying, and told Carlos that they are now broke. Carlos wanted to believe them. Dolcenea assured him that he could, showing him the latest values of their most valued stocks on her phone.

“The stink shoe's on the other foot now,” she said to the last in line at 8:40 pm with a thick Scottish-Cockney accent coming from the lowest classes of working class stiff's residing in the harshest regions of the Highlands and the smelliest neighborhoods in Edinborough. The last of the debtors who showed up to pay the overdue bill while emptying her purse tried to make herself look like a hot 35 year old bombshell, but after he make up was washed away by sweat of desperation, even a horny blind man could see that she was a washed out 55 plus gold-digger. “Sleep your way up the mountain, slide yer way back down into the gutter, simple mathematics, Queen Veronica,” Doleneia, dolled up past the nines, sneered in lower caste Scottish to the now broke English mogul who also held the most powerful cabinet position in Parliment. “We little people bankrupt your business and your country, by being who we are. Basic Mathematics.”

“Which will catch up with you too, Maggie,” she shot back to Carlos' new girlfriend.

As soon to be deposed Queen Veronica left, King Carlos could see see intense worry in the ever-deepening lines of his beautiful and trusted new co-Monarch. “Maggie?” He asked her, noting that hearing her real name made Dolcenea feel small and consider her self ugly. “You have personal history with that stuck up English bitch who made me polish her toilets after she broke the plumbing in her bathroom that she shit all over when she got drunk with her boy toy the weekend when I was called to----?”

“---She was my friend once, became my boss, and now is our,.hmmm....”
Dolcenea-Maggie interjected.

“Responsibility?” Carlos said as he looked at newest fistful of money in his hand, then stuck it deep into his pocket. “The rich are supposed to take care of the poor, and since, by what you and everyone else is telling me, I'm the richest man in Florida now.”

“And the world,” Dolcenea-Maggie said to Carlos, showing him the latest stock reports on her phone. “By being the only honest link in the world economic chain, you've caused a chain reaction that...here, just look the Dow, Nastec and Asian Market numbers yourself.” She ranted on with the excitement of someone whose one thousand to one plug horse had just won the Kentucky Derby, absorbed in her own numbers, and the world where they made sense.

Meanwhile, Carlos discretely dialed, for the twentieth time, his 'boss' and only other Hartunian citizen, Rikona. He surmised that the old coot with failing health on this side of the rainbow was probably busy doing something else on the other side of the Reality

line, in a region of Nirvana that had no cell phone service, yet again. Maggie ranted on, in Veronica's Upper Crust English diction now. She summarized the result of the new world economy in numbers again, putting the phone into Carlos' face for him to see it.

“Can you tell that to me in language I understand, and connect to? Something in Mexican Spanish, or Scottish slang?” Carlos asked Maggie.

“It means that you and the Kingdom of Hartunia now rule the world,” she said. “A world which you will need someone to help administrate, I suggest, King Carlos.”

Carlos had never heard 'King' and 'Carlos' in the same sentence. It felt good, and overdue. Part of him knew that being a King means that you have responsibility for all of your subjects. But, that was for tomorrow. For tonight, King Carlos was the ruler of the Floridian and the world that is served. As long as he had more money in his pocket than anyone else on the peninsula, of course. Something that Maggie had told him would not be the case if he gave into to the temptation to dole out ten bucks to debtor number three who re-materialized, begging to get cabfare to the airport to rush home, before the news of his bankrupt businesses and country reached the privately contracted pilot at the runway.

But, there was something else Carlos needed to give to Maggie. Behind her eyes he imagined, then saw, the best parts of his ex-wife, his three almost wives, and even his mother. While the streets leading to the Floridian overflowed with once rich folk walking rather than being driven to their boats, condos or soon to be repossessed cars, he took her hand.

“I don't know who I am supposed to be now, but I know you are not Maggie anymore,” he said to her, having surmised that the common name connected her to a commoner past she had learned to be ashamed of. “You are and always will be Dolcenea.”

“And you, Carlos, are not Sancho Panza anymore,” she informed Carlos. “You are a servant to no one, even me.” She led him down the avenue towards the beach, the swaying of the palm trees in the wind providing a rhythm to the songs from Man of La Mancha that again went through Carlos' head.

“My President says that there is master in servitude,” Carlos said as he looked out towards the small blimp on the horizon that had been his home and homeland for the last 12 years. “But, he also said that it is time that the world, and others, learned a lesson. Who is 'the others'?”

“Us?” Maggie interjected, looking in the moonlight and feeling even more beautiful than Sophia Loren or whoever the actress was in the 'so last century' film version of 'La Mancha'. “Us,” she gently asserted, as she turned around and let herself get lost in his eyes.

“Yes, us,” Carlos said, letting himself get lost into hers.

CHAPTER 7

Carlos slept like a king that night, with a queen by her side, in the Presidential suite of the Floridian. The rising sun woke him up. Dolcenea remained in blissful slumber. Carlos put on his pants, finding that he still had to put them on one leg at a time, and that the pockets had the money collected the previous night. All \$3,638 dollars of it, which felt good to be holding in his hands. A bird greeted him at the window.

“No, this is for me. To keep,” he said regarding the cash. “According to what Dolcenea said last night, I'm the richest man in the world now. Everyone else is busy trying to collect debts from everyone else. Every country in the world is calling in debts from the countries that owe them, and no one can pay any of those debts. And no one has \$3,638 of real money in their pocket that isn't spoken for by someone else. Every dollar of this is it mine. And I didn't have to spend any of it to get everything any man would want for his fortieth birthday,” he said with a proud smile. “I'm the most powerful man, from the most powerful country in the world, and that feels....” he said, looking towards Dolcenea. “Uneasy.”

The bird cawed a 'what the fuck do you mean by that, you lucky, ungrateful idiot?' at Carlos.

The handyman who was now being waited on hand and foot by everyone in the hotel who, 18 hours ago, he had served with a smile, bow and nod, took into his shaking hands a portion of garlic bread from the late night steak dinner that had been specially prepared and delivered. He offered it to the bird.

The avian didn't accept it. Carlos smelled it. “Too much rich spice, I know,” he said, recalling that he enjoyed the company he broke bread with the previous night far more than the flavor of the mini-loaf. “Is there anything I can do for you?” he asked the bird. “I am the richest man in the world now, and the most powerful, which means I have everything that everyone else wants...that is, if I can figure out what everyone else wants,” he concluded. “And rich people have lots of servants,” he continued, looking at the invitation for him to be honorary Chairman of the Hildeberg Group Meeting in 3 short hours. “But do they have any friends?” he asked himself, looking again at the woman he bedded the previous night, wondering what she would be in the morning.

He looked at the money in his pocket, and took a deep, relieved breath. “She could have stolen this \$3,683 from me last night, bugged off to the conference, and declared herself the Queen of the world. And the richest person in all of Florida, since the banks have declared that they won't release anyone's money, and finally admitted that they didn't have any money in their vaults anyway, and that the currency of Hartunia is the only stable currency on the market anywhere, and will therefore determine how valuable any dollar, Yen, Euro or Peso is worth,” he noted. “But,” he stopped himself. “What is the currency of Hartunia?” he considered. “The hippies said that Love and

Synergistically-constructed barter were the currencies that made everything happen on the island, but the most that Rikona ever had in hard cash, for anyone, was..."

Something hit Carlos straight in the third eye. The most he ever saw in the treasure chest in Hartunia was maybe \$2,000, which had no leans against it. "So, now, I'm not only the richest man in the world, but the richest man in Hartunia!" Carlos observed himself saying.

"Yes, you are, so it seems," Dolcenea said, as she woke up, sounding and looking more like a Maggie. "Come back to bed, my king. I command it," she smiled.

"But the meeting with the bigshots is in three hours!" he said. "Don't we have to prepare a presentation to them?"

"YOU are the bigshot now, King Carlos," she replied. "It's you who say what everyone is supposed to do."

"But what about what they SHOULD do?" he shot back. "I don't know how to run the world!" he said.

"He did," Dolcenea replied as she got up, then pulled a paperback book from her shoulder purse, and threw it into Carlos' face.

"The Prince', by Machevelli," Carlos noted, opening it up. "In the original Latin," he said when looking at the font.

"Italian," Maggie said as she got up and put on her power business suit. "I can translate whatever you need to know from it."

"Or what you WANT me to know," Carlos thought, but did not say. "Gratsi," he said with a smile.

"Prego," she replied back with a wider smile, which Carlos allowed himself to trust, but knew he shouldn't. He looked outside at the bird, reaching in his pocket for the plain bisquits which every avian who ever visited him enjoyed. But the bird turned its back to Carlos, taking flight down into the trees, then the streets, which were now littered with morning garbage. Trash that maybe would be collected, if the sanitation workers were being paid, or, as it was most important now, if they believed they would be paid.

CHAPTER 8

Carlos answered every question posed to him as the newly elected President of the now enlarged International Bildeberg Consortium. Some questions he knew the answer to, and advised common sense and compassion as the way to solve them, often verifying them with quotes from Jesus he found himself recalling from his childhood and Buddhist

proverbs he remembered from Rikona. Such answers made the audience made of the elitist of the elite think.

Other questions that Carlos didn't have the answers to were taken care of by secret hand signals from Dolcenea, which he translated with great ease. Or quotes he had quickly memorized from The Prince that she had pre-numbered for him, anticipating that they would be needed. Those answers made his subordinates agree with Carlos enthusiastically.

Other questions couldn't be answered by either hand signals from Dolcenea, (or Maggie), common sense or Machevelli quotes. When the audience demanded answers to those questions, Carlos made up an answer that had nothing to do with the question. Those answers yielded wildly-approving applause. When Carlos looked to Dolcenea for the explanation for his new popularity, she mouthed 'bullshit baffles brains.' So, Carlos continued to bullshit with his new followers, wondering if Docenea (or Maggie) was bullshitting him.

CHAPTER 9

After Carlos made a speech about how the world should be to the suits, shirts and skirts in the conference room, they gave him an award, which he accepted. Doclenea accepted all of their business cards. Jack Johnson, who had been the hotel clerk, was now the owner of the Floridian. As part of the hotel's new policy for its most valued guests, Carlos was given a detachment of bodyguards. Some of them had worked for Mr Ross, some for Mr. Chen, and some for Ms. Veronica.

Everywhere Carlos went on the island he was followed. By the bodyguards, the now broke moguls, the tourists, the working class stiff, and the tv cameras. All of them wanted to know what the Kingdom of Hartunia would do to save the world, now that it was the richest country in the world.

“But rich in what?” Carlos asked himself, and never said. “Rich in chickens? Rich in unpolluted streams? Rich in wisdom that King Rikona brought back from the other side of the rainbow? Or...rich in illusion,” he finally concluded.

As Carlos stood on the beach by his usual mooring spot, Maggie by his side, posing for more pictures, his eyes were focused on the island which was a hiding place for the last decade, but finally he felt it was his home. He was now the most popular man in Florida, and probably the world. Certainly the most sought after. But not the most loved, according to what was NOT in the eyes of the working class stiff who had always been his friends on the mainland. Even Jack Johnson, who was more interested in the cameras seeing him with Carlos than looking at Carlos straight in the eye.

“Better to be feared than loved,” Maggie reminded him with a whisper into his ear, no more than three seconds after he pondered the value of love vs respect. As another

picture was taken of the new King and Queen of the financial world, she continued the discourse. “The only reason why there isn't an armada of ships ready to invade Hartunia is that it's become the new Switzerland. Hartunia is connected to everyone behind the scenes, the mastermind of the new world game,” she whispered to him.

Three Hollywood Celebs and two major producers sneaked up to the Royal Couple, offering to move their studios to Hartunia, promising futures in the Entertainment Industry to all of its citizens.

“I'll have to put it by the Tribal Council,” Carlos replied, quickly adding “I mean Presidential Tribunal. We're very cooperative with each other in Hartunia, and still think of ourselves as a tribal family.”

“Who are not inbred with each other,” Maggie added, eliciting a laugh from the people behind the cameras, and more shots of King Carlos and his Queen. A Queen who he liked, even loved, but didn't think he could trust. It was just a feeling. One that he wanted to confirm with Rikona, who he tried to contact on his phone again. This time, Rikona answered.

“Come home now,” the Philosopher King of Hartunia texted. “Miracle lesson one learned,” it continued.

Indeed there was something miraculous going on. No, not the fact that King Rikona had finally learned how to text, as he considered that 'just the facts, and/or initials for the words' medium as the root for future illiteracy, and an easy excuse for lazy thinkers to avoid using the left and right sides of their brains to formulate ideas within statements, and statements within ideas. Maybe Rikona had succumbed to brain killing vibrations embedded into the county music tunes in the commercials between soccer games he enjoyed watching. Outlawing those tunes would come later. For the moment Carlos texted back “What is miracle lesson two?”

Before Carlos could say 'Nirvana', another text came back from Rikona.

“Come home, alone, tonight,” came back to him.

“And what to do the rest of the day?” Carlos asked Rikona.

“Endure being powerful and rich,” came back.

Indeed, the old coot was right. Carlos felt miserable. Alone. Unable to trust anyone, since everyone wanted what he had. Or what he thought he had. He looked at his watch, noting how much time it would take till it was dark, and he could slither his way back home along the route he had taken for the last ten years out of habit. For all Carlos know, there really were demons and dragons that would swallow up any boat other than his if it deviated from that course. Maybe the stories about electromagnetic fields implanted around the island to keep away unworthy visitors which Carlos had made up

were really true, and that was the reason why the shores of Hartunia were still only accessible to him. But with Hartunia being the most popular island on the planet, such would not be the case very much longer.

CHAPTER 10

Carlos let Maggie, whose last name he still didn't know or want to know, do all of the talking to the press for him for the rest of the day. She had stopped becoming Dolcenea, the dream woman of Don Quitote, and became something else to Carlos. What, he didn't know. But she knew how to protect Carlos, and seemed to like doing it. Just like Don Quixote wanted and liked protecting Dolcenea from black knights and evil dragons in times of yore. As if knowing how to protect Carlos from his potential enemies now posing as likable allies, she fed the former movers and shakers of the world economy more bullshit stories about Hartunia, painting it sometimes as a country, sometimes a kingdom, sometimes a small commonwealth. What Hartunia would do with the world economy, that would be up to the King's Presidential Council, which would convene when Carlos returned home.

Still, those moguls and ministers had other eyes that would be watching Carlos, with ears tuned in to hear everything he was saying, or thinking. By 'coincidence', each of the ten bodyguards who volunteered to protect the new Prince of the Global Economy had been under the employ of the aforementioned moguls and ministers. All came with glowing recommendations from Jack Johnson, a friend of Carlos when he was just Carlos, and the most bonded employee of the Floridian Hotel, which he now owned thanks to Carlos deposing his former boss.

Carlos asked Jack to keep his security detail occupied somewhere far away from him, so he could have time alone to think. In actual fact, Carlos was looking for the boat he had used to transport goods to and from the island for the last ten years. The distinctive maroon-black wooden craft modeled after a Viking longboat, but with a small image of the Virgin Mary at the stern, was still at the pier he had landed it on the previous morning, surrounded by the yachts and tankers owned by the big shots and big shits. All of them were up for sale. With no buyers to be seen. But what Carlos did see, as the sun started to dip towards the horizon, was the contingent of security guards, led by an apologetic Jack Johnson.

"I told you to keep these guys off my ass, Jack," Carlos whispered through a forced 'thank you for looking after me guys' to his new private army.

"They voted me out as their leader after I led them on the tenth wild goose-chase to find you, and came to me all at once, saying they're honor bound to protect you, especially from people who want to do you harm," Jack said as the security guards surrounded Carlos' boat, and its anxious owner.

"You tried to get these protectors who I'm trying to protect myself from laid at the Pink

Pellican lounge, like I told you to?” Carlos asked his, perhaps still trustable, friend Jack.

“Two of them are gay,” the apologetic explanation as Jack eyed the two most macho men. “And one is a religious freak with a medical vocabulary who scared everyone from the diseases and demonic energy of the ladies at the Pellican, and the boys.”

“And when you tried to get them stoned?”

“Weed isn't what it was when the hippies were still on Hartunia,” Jack replied. “And those brownies at Alice's Restaraunt have more nuts in them than hash. Nuts that gave one of these buzz-cut goons a real allergic reaction.”

“And when you slipped your homemade moonshine into their drinks at the Fritilo Food Factory?” Carlos asked. “The kind of moonshine that makes common folk redneck white trash live down to their reputation?”

“Trash comes in all kinds of colors, 'King' Carlos!” Jack barked back.

“I did have that coming,” Carlos said, seeing the elitist Latino pig he was about to become, or perhaps had become. “So why did they find their way here?” Carlos asked.

“They can smell out a Philosopher Prince faster than I could push bullshit up their nose, I suppose,” Jack speculated, his eyes to the ground.

It was the first time Jack had spoken to Carlos without looking him in the eye first. Maybe it was because for the first time ever, Jack had failed his good friend Carlos. Or maybe the first time he had betrayed him.

“What do you want me to do?” Jack asked Carlos, still not looking at him. “To make this whole thing, right.”

Carlos took in a deep breath, looked up into the darkening sky, then at the walls of boats around him. He counted them. “Ten boats, ten new captains, that is what I see. And since I am the richest man in the world now, I declare each of these one dollars as the price of each of these boats in my new fleet,” he said to Jack. “Would you be so kind as to get me those for sale signs?”

“Gentlemen!” Carlos announced to his protectors as Jack scoured his way to each of the boats, tearing down the for sale signs. “The new Hartunian Navy needs boats, which will be moored on this new base. Each of you will be a Captain. Operating the boats that you used to protect, and now own. Does that suit your aspirations and desires? If so, declare each of these ships your own, in His Majesty's Hartunian fleet!” he continued.

Carlos couldn't believe it. This final gamble worked. The eyes of each of the former goons for the moguls and ministers lighted up. They took to their new boats like wives did to their husbands after they had been discovered with their mistresses.

Two of the new members of the Hartunian Navy stepped behind the steering wheel and just stayed there, imagining that they were traveling to places they had never been. Two just stood on deck with their hands on their hips, declaring themselves Captain of the ship. One took out his knives and carved their own names for their new vessels on the hulls. Another climbed up to the highest point on the mast and took a piss onto the deck, straight into the picture of his former boss, Mister Ross in particular. The rest enjoyed their own private ritual, in of course their own languages.

“So, these boats will stay in port for the night?” Carlos asked Jack.

“Only if you make me Admiral in charge of all of these Captains,” Jack smiled back. “Out of practical necessity, for all of them to hear.”

“Yes, of course, out of practical necessity,” Carlos replied, deadly serious to his old friend. “Gentlemen!” he announced in a loud Princely voice to the newly-promoted body guards. “My Captains! Admiral Jack has the authority of the King of Hartunia to grant you commissions in his Navy on any terms that suit you, within reason of course. Please go down below and write out the terms that you desire so that we can review them.”

All of the Captains obeyed their new Prince, going down below into the offices their bosses had written checks from barely 24 hours earlier. Checks that were now irrelevant in a new world economy.

Carlos stepped into his own humble Hartunian Viking craft, feeling with his feet the only solid ground he had experienced all day. He pulled out a bottle of trademark Hartunian Rum from a hidden compartment of his boat, pouring a cup for himself and one for Jack. “To old times and true times,” he toasted.

“To old times, and better times,” Jack smiled as he shot back a gulp the rum into the back of his throat.

Jack felt the punch of Hartunian Rum, and didn't fully realize its secret ingredient, the one that Carlos put into it anyway. Thanks to a special brand of LSD developed to convert vicious sharks with hungry bellies into peaceful back floaters who hungered only for hugs, Admiral Jack was off on his own trip. A necessity that Carlos had to employ if he was to get back home to Hartunia alone, as instructed to, so that he could find out who his real friends were. And who he really had become. Or was in the first place.

CHAPTER 11

The evening currents turned into jet streams, and the night breezes evolved into brisk winds under a cloudy sky. Both moved Carlos swiftly back to the shores of Hartunia. Faster than he ever had, with no one following him. He was greeted by Rosita, cackling

hello to him from the shoreline. “Get back into the pen!” he grunted through a whisper at the old hen with the ruffled, wire-torn feathers as he picked her up. “Don't you know that I put you in that chicken house so that the sea hawks and wild foxes don't take you back home to theirs for dinner?”

Carlos looked up at the sky to see if indeed there was anything bearing feathers, or metallic wings, that was watching over him and his least favorite domesticated fowl. One which bit a scratch into his flesh with each step he took under the dim light of the Temple lanterns on the way to the chicken house. “There!” Carlos said, throwing the bird in with her fellow Hartunian avian citizens, after which he laced the wire mesh four twists tighter. “Stay there, and be quiet. The world out there is a dangerous place,” he reminded the Union of Avian Egg Manufactures. “As is the world in there,” Carlos surmised, as he looked into the, for the first time, un-shaded windows of 'The Temple', the hut where Rokona chose to do his most serious meditating. A place where the Old Master did his 'astral hopping', during which, according to the stories related by the last hippies who left the island, Rikona would convert body mass into energy so efficiently that his body would become weightless and float around the room, kept from floating away above the clouds by the roof. A roof that now vibrated so intensely that it seemed like it was about to burst open.

“Hey, Rikona!” Carlos screamed out as he tried to get into the front door, noting that the windows were too small for entry or exit. “You told me to build that roof strong so that when you went astral hopping, your body would find its way back home. I'm not ready for you to leave my home yet,” he pleaded as he futilely tried to open the door with his screw driver. “The center of OUR lives,” he continued, with tears running down his cheeks. “And now the economic center of the world, that I'm stuck ruling if you fuck off to whatever Higher Plane you want to, and probably deserve, to go to!”

From inside, Carlos could hear a strange other worldly whirling. It sounded and felt like something other worldly. One fearful and two terrifying breaths later, he felt then saw above him a big, bright light. White Light from the Heavenly Planets or maybe some other Extra Terrestrial Porthole. Or, he thought, maybe it was a drone, built by a very earthly military power who sought to take over Hartunia by force instead of persuasion.

“Get out of here! Whatever or whoever you are!” Carlos yelled up to the light, waving at it like it was a sabre and he was the noble Don Quixote protecting the realm of good from the realms of...everything else. “If you want to take my friend, it will be over my dead body, or de-materialized astral body!” he screamed.

“A noble gesture,” Carlos heard from behind him in a clear, and very human voice with a Slavic accent. “But the moon doesn't seek to do us any harm, so why should we seek to harm it, him, or her?” it continued.

Carlos quickly turned around, recognizing the speaker's face, but not his voice, or diction. “Ranika?” he asked of the figure that seemed more ghostlike than real.

“Yes, it's still me,” the Old Master confessed to the Young Defender, in his normal diction, taking Carlos' arm, and placing it on his very real, solid and still thinly muscled arm. “I tried to hop again, but all I remember doing, with my eyes closed, was tumbling out of my chair, then the chair falling into the computer equipment, and blocking the front door, which I crawled out of the back, into a pile of white feathers left on the bushes by the chickens,” the white ghost continued as he shook the feathers off his chest, arms and legs.

“But that flying saucer sound coming from inside, and the vibrations on the roof!” Carlos said, still seeing the roof undulating back and forth while the sound of a saucer about to catapult into space got louder and louder.

“Oh, that,” the Old Buddhist Master smiled. “I was doing some experiments with vibrational sound tuned into the molecular bonds between carbon atoms in wood. A Teslian design implemented with Einstein's formulas, corrected of course with the contemporary Holz Principle coefficient.”

“ E equals M c squared, cubed and cay-bashed, makes perfect sense?” Carlos replied with an angry eyeroll, as angered at Rikona's still being in bodily form as he was relieved.

“Actually, it makes intuitive sense, as I can clearly demonstrate with the most universal language known to man, woman and everyone in between,” Rikona smiled as he led Carlos to the back door that his falling body had made in the temple, demonstrating his claims with three large walls upon which were scrawled equations he had been working out.

Carlos understood nothing about the math, but pretended to follow it. He faked understanding every step of the numerical gibberish while his eyes confirmed that the temple was also a laboratory. Never had he seen so many holy scrolls and paintings intermingled with as many scientific manuals and equipment. Last Century Equipment that could have been put together better by Carlos than by whoever patched them together.

At the end of the enthusiastically delivered mathematical explanation for how mass and energy could be interconverted at will, and how it could explain worm holes as well as Higher Planes of Divine Consciousness, Rikona invited Carlos to ask him three questions, which he would answer clearly, and honestly.

“Question one,” Carlos stated, looking at the parchment on the wall bearing Buddhist writing amidst the academieze Latin. “Why did you not tell anyone on the island that when you came here, that you had doctorates in physics, mathematics and astral string theory?”

“No one asked,” the Old Man shrugged. “They visited me when I was doing my metaphysical studies at the monastery, so that is what I assumed you wanted here. A metaphysician. Next question?”

Carlos considered carefully as he started to stroll around the room, knowing that there was a lifetime of secrets Rikona had hidden from the Hartunians who hired him to rule the island, as well as the world that he was now, in effect, Lord and Master of. Economically and politically. “All of these connections you have with world leaders who control the world. You seem to be ahead of all of them, economically. The world economy is a strange beast. How have you been able to control it?”

“Such a simple question,” Rikona smiled as he strolled over to a fresh board and took chalk into now non-shaking hand. “With a simple mathematical answer. You don't control economies, you observe then calculate, how they naturally continue, which can be formulaically describes as the differential of y to the---

“---Enough numbers!” Carlos interjected in the middle of the third formula. “I want to know about people. Real people. And how I can become one of those real people again.”

“A real king?” Rikona asked. “Who, if you know these formulas, can rule the world.”

“By collecting three thousand, eight hundred and thirty eight dollars and setting up a chain reaction that is teaching the world a lesson,” Carlos stated, as a statement, so that it would not counted as his third question. “Which would set up a reaction that would make everyone in the world rethink the real value of money, if indeed money has any value. In a world where everyone's asking who really owes what to who, and they have to figure out that the only thing anyone owes anyone else is everything they can GIVE and that the only thing anyone is owed is what that person NEEDS to be able to be themselves and thus be able to keep giving, to the best of their ability and in keeping with their most Natural Spiritual Calling, and...” Carlos took a deep breath, having exhausted his brain, soul and wit more than it had ever been used before. “Alright, I'll ask the question. Can you or anyone use this economic formula and whatever stock brokers and bankers you've been communicating with for the last 40 years to just....ya know....”

“Make you a servant who has trusted friends instead of a king who has none of them?” the old man asked the young man.

“Yes,” Carlos answered.

Rikona hobbled his way to the third board in the room, looked over the equation, scratched his overly haired chin, and nodded. “Such is possible, but it will involve factoring in another person into this equation. Someone who, maybe...”

“I can give this three thousand eight hundred and thirty eight dollars to?” Carlos said, pulling out the wad of money from his pocket. Feeling a toxic knife pulled out of his aching soul. Then assessing the real cost of his abdication. “Is there someone who I could give this to who I would not destroy by giving it to? Someone who I would not kill by making him the richest man in the world.”

“Or woman?” Rikona suggested, with a smile. “Who I would like, very much, to know more about.”

Carlos smiled, feeling the solution brewing behind the Old Master's eyes. A solution which was as inevitable as the mathematical equation that became the world economy that started when the first hungry Aboriginal hunter put more value on a shell called wampum offered by another Aboriginal than the slain deer slung over his shoulder.

CHAPTER 12

Carlos called in the coordinates to Maggie, requesting that she arrive alone, and in a craft well below her new station the next day at noon. However he didn't tell her how much below hers station. Not that it would have mattered anyway. And as for coming alone...

“I asked you to come here alone,” he said to Maggie as her new yacht pulled into Sheltered Island, a twenty-foot long colony of Hartunia which materialized as a sandbar when the tide was right.

“I did,” she replied, pointing to the peons crewing her new boat. “These former bosses of mine, and yours, were shithead assholes three days ago, and now they're craphead nobodies,” she smirked. She pointed Carlos' attention to the lowest member of the crew, Mister Ross, carting buckets of shit from one end of the boat to the other. “Unless we want them to be somebodies, of course, Carlos,” she smiled.

Carlos didn't smile back. She asked him why.

“There's a proposition I have for you, Maggie,” he asked, with eyes turned downward, bending one knee on the marshy island 'ground'.

“I don't think it's a proposal I'd like if you addressed me as Maggie,” she frowned.

“You'd like it less if I addressed you by your other first name, and the last name that you've been hiding from everyone,” he said. “Your buddies in the Bildeberg Group, the law, and me?”

“A girl has to protect herself,” she replied, looking nervously at the papers Carlos pulled out of his dufflebag. Papers that looked very official in many languages. With real stamps from real law enforcement organizations. “Those are warrants for my arrest?”

“No,” Carlos smiled. “Pardons,” he smiled, uneasily, after which he handed a thick stack of papers to her. “The King and me did some research, pulled some strings, and got you off the hook. All the stealing, extortion, fraud, kidnapping and things you did to others that are not reversible in the same lifetime---”

“---Were things I did to them before they could do them to me!” the Scottish Lady shot back in a very American West Texas twang. “The rule of the real world outside them walls you, yer king and whoever else is MAYBE hold up on yer Island Paradise fortress hide behind says thou shalt take or be taken from, and if you've been taken from as much as I've been, you do thangs that---”

“---Are all forgiven, and forgotten, according to the law, anyway, Lorriane Tremont, if that is your real legal name that is,” Carlos shot back, hiding his anger at the woman who was once his trusted queen, and lover. And his grief of losing her from himself.

“He who owns the gold owns the law,” the middle aged West Texas grifter spat back at Carlos with a loving smile. “And since you and yer king own all the gold in the world,” she continued, nuzzling her way into his arms again. Unbuttoning her blouse. Allowing Carlos to see her newly bought breasts with his eyes. Then to feel the better than natural texture of them with the fingers on his right hand. Then feeling his left hand place a ball of even more valuable paper into the depths of her cleavage.

“What's this?” she said, pulling out the money.

“The most valuable thirty-eight hundred and forty one dollars in the world, with the original serial numbers on the bills,” Carlos said. “The money I collected that was owed to me, and my country, which I now give to you, Lorraine.”

“Which would make me the richest woman in the world, Carlos,” she said, eyes with open with wild abandonment and glee. “Not owing anythin' ta anyone.”

“And me the poorest, or rather brokest, man in the world, Lorraine,” the now fully liberated Prince of Hartunia replied, with a solemn smile and a contemplative heart. “Owing something to everybody.”

“That makes you a sucker, ya know,” Lorraine replied.

“A connected sucker, who...maybe still can be connected to....you?” he asked his once beloved Dolcenea. Hoping that she could perhaps become an even better fantasy, and more loving reality.

“Maybe,” she replied, looking at the money. Then the men in the boat who had been her domineering bosses, or, perhaps worse, by the way they sneered at her.

“What did they do to you?” Carlos asked, his Soul filled with compassion.

“Not half of what I'm gonna to back to them bastards,” she grunted with a heart poisoned by hatred. “We can still get back at them together, Carlos. It'll be fun.”

“Till you decide to get back at me for something they did to you,” he replied, a heaviness

in his chest. “If I'm wrong, tell me.”

“Yer wrong,” she smiled.

“Suppose so,” Carlos replied back. “If you say so,” he continued, having learned the most valuable skill one needs in the world of the powerful--the art of the lie. And to recognise when you're being lied to. “But, I've got some business to take care of back home,” he said, walking back towards his humble boat.

“Which is what?” Lorraine asked, desperation behind her vengeance-possessed bloodshot eyes. “Please, I'd like there ta be at least one truth said between us before we become....ex's.”

“Feeding chickens, making ommlettes, and cleaning shit,” he smiled back.

“Shit's shit. Ya can't make dirt clean once it's been dirtied, Carlos,” she affirmed, losing her last ounce of humanity when Ross finally dripped on a rope pulled by his former lackie and fell into a bucket of manure and vomit. She laughed. Carlos lamented her fate, and Ross'. And with that, Carlos returned to Hartunia.

CHAPTER 13

Days past, then weeks. There was no need to go to the mainland. And the mainland had no need to come to Hartunia. Economies balanced themselves again, somehow, and after two months, it was business as usual. Prince Carlos had declared himself a Monk, and in the interest of showing the world the model for a sustainable economy, he donated his services to whoever wanted them on the island, accepting donations for services rendered, only if the receiver of said services wanted to and could afford to pay him. Some did, most didn't. Queen Lorraine screwed up the world economy again, sending it back to its 'normal' state, leaving the Bildeberg Group feeling like they were in control of things again. Through contacts still unknown to Carlos, for his own good, King Rikona asserted that Hartunia was an independent state that had no reason or desire to conquer anyone else, and even less interest in joining the world economy, even as its leader. So he said, as he of course manipulated the accounts world wide so that his Island and friend would be left alone.

As for Rosita and the rest of the Union of Egg Layers on Hartunia, they continued to contribute what they could, and got whatever chicken feed they needed to do so. Carlos tended to them, and the chickens that they gave birth to. And on the day when King Rikona finally took a one way ticket to Nirvana, Prince Carlos took his place. But not before interviewing another citizen to maintain the island. Jack Johnson's son. Who swore to tell his father nothing about his new job, President and Purpose.

