

The background of the cover is an abstract composition of vibrant, wavy, translucent shapes in shades of yellow, blue, and orange. These shapes overlap and flow across the frame, creating a sense of movement and depth. Scattered throughout the entire background are numerous small, clear water droplets of varying sizes, some of which are in sharp focus, adding a fresh and organic feel to the design.

One Man Embassy

Mark Bailey

MARK BAILEY

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Chapter 1

Hequa came out of travel-sleep as his vessel entered the unfamiliar planet's atmosphere. Too tired to be exhilarated, he fumbled with the controls until he was sure the vessel would land in deep water, then ejected himself so as to land on dry ground while the ship crashed out of sight. The ship itself, like the parachute that delivered him gently to the ground, would rot into nothing in a matter of weeks, masking his arrival from the inhabitants of this world.

Landing in an uninhabited meadow surrounded by forest, Hequa gathered the parachute into a large bundle and stuffed this under the exposed roots of a fallen tree. There, ambient moisture would activate the enzymes necessary for rapid decomposition, and the parachute would become an increasingly unrecognizable blob of chitin and cellulose with every passing day. Satisfied with this task's completion, Hequa laid down on the lumpy forest floor, looking up at the sky through the leaves, and considered what he'd done.

There, laying on an alien planet's ground, his stolen ship beginning to rot at the bottom of an alien sea, Hequa grappled with the enormity of his transgressions, but did not lament

his choices. In his mind, there had only been one choice, and Hequa had chosen to stay alive when The Order came for him. Staying alive had meant hiding, and stealing a ship, and leaving his world behind forever. It had meant traveling for hundreds of years to a place The Order didn't care about, and would soon mean attempting to blend in with a native population that Hequa knew almost nothing about. He knew that they were human, but unlike humans from his home world, they had no magic, and rarely lived even a hundred years.

As afternoon became evening, a cloud of biting insects interrupted Hequa's thinking. He got to his feet, trying to slap the tiny creatures away, but they stung every part of his exposed skin no matter how he tried to fend them off. Having never experienced anything so maddening, Hequa started running towards the nearby settlement he recalled seeing from the air. He stumbled and fell more than once, collecting scratches and bruises on his exposed face and hands as he scrambled through the dim forest. Finally, he arrived at a paved road, and the whine of those insects became quiet enough that he could stop and think.

Itching his neck absently, Hequa stood in the middle of the road watching the sunset. His plan had been to spend his first few days on this planet in a remote area, away from people entirely, so as to get his bearings. But those horrid bugs made this plan obsolete. So he stood, unsure of what to do, until he heard the noise of an engine approaching. When a vehicle with bright headlights appeared, Hequa did not get off the road, and waved his arms in the air so as to get the vehicle's attention.

The vehicle, a rusty silver pickup truck, slowed as it approached Hequa. The driver rolled down his window and waved. Hequa approached the window with a confidence he did not feel, and found a wrinkled man with short white hair sitting behind the vehicle's steering wheel.

"You lost?" asked the man in a language Hequa didn't understand.

Rather than risk speaking, Hequa threw up his hands, shook his head, and pointed to the forest from which he had emerged.

"Well, hop in then. I'll get you to town," said the man while gesturing towards the back of the truck.

Smiling an acknowledgment of the easy-to-follow instructions, Hequa climbed into the back of the truck, finding a place to sit between what appeared to be two crates of corroded tools. Having never ridden in such a vehicle before, Hequa found the ride too noisy for comfort. Nonetheless, it was thrilling. After a short while, the vehicle passed from the darkness of the unlit road into the lights of the settlement he'd seen from the air. Looking around, Hequa saw structures and vehicles and a great many unreadable signs. As the truck eased into a stop at what appeared to be an important crossroads, Hequa leaped out of the truck, waved to the driver, and began slowly jogging towards what he hoped was a tavern or inn of some sort.

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Opening the building's main door, Hequa's senses were assailed by a great many noises and scents he didn't recognize. Looking around, it was apparent that the place was a tavern. There were people drinking and eating and playing games. But this was not like any tavern Hequa had ever been to. The place was like a parody of a tavern. It had no obvious Overseer, everybody appeared to be fully clothed, and there was no fighting cage. So Hequa's plan of stripping naked and fighting for a meal was out, and he had to improvise.

"What're you supposed to be?" asked a slurring, sneering man from a nearby barstool as Hequa approached the bar.

Guessing by the tone that the comment was insulting, Hequa bared his teeth at the man, then turned to find the barkeep staring. Using his hands to gesture that he'd gotten lost while driving, Hequa pointed at random bottle behind the bar and shrugged. The barkeep shrugged in turn, then poured Hequa a comically small glass of the liquor he'd pointed at. Assuming this tiny glass was a free sample, Hequa downed the shot, and sputtered furiously when his senses were overpowered by the mingled tastes of alcohol and some flavor that made his nose

tingle.

“That’ll be three bucks,” said the barkeep, smiling.

Hequa shook his head no and pointed at another bottle.

“Three bucks,” said the barkeep, loudly and without the smile.

In unison, the tavern’s two dozen inhabitants stopped what they were doing to look in Hequa’s direction. Not knowing what his offense had been, Hequa felt animal fear well up, tempting him to do something irrational in this critical moment. Should he run? Should he fight? He did not know. Fortunately, before his panic became uncontrollable, a stocky man in a brown jacket and green hat interceded.

This approaching stranger slowly looked Hequa up and down, then slapped Hequa on his flight suit’s armored shoulder. “Motocross! Yeah!” the man bellowed.

“Yeah!” bellowed Hequa in response, not knowing what else to do.

The man in the green hat appeared immensely pleased by Hequa’s enthusiasm. “I got this guy’s drink. And let’s get another shot for my new friend here, too,” he said to the barkeep. Then, slapping Hequa on the shoulder again, he asked, “What’s your name? I’m Steve. But my friends call me Big Stevo.”

“Big Stevo!” said Hequa, hoping the trick of repeating the last thing said would work a second time. It seemed to.

“That’s me. And you are?” asked Big Stevo while pointing at Hequa’s chest.

“Hequa,” said Hequa, accepting another tiny glass of liquor from Big Stevo before following the larger man to a table.

“You foreign or something?” asked Big Stevo once they were seated.

Hequa put up his hands to show confusion, nodding his head to show that his confusion was complete. Big Stevo smiled big, muttering, “I knew it. Well what are you then? Spanish? Middle Eastern? Mexican? What?”

Sensing the conversation getting away from him, Hequa tried to bring Big Stevo back to an easier subject. “Hequa Motocross,” he said, thumping himself on the chest.

Big Stevo frowned. “Well, whatever you are, it’s good to meet you,” he said, holding his hand out for a shake.

Hequa looked at the extended hand for a moment. He was about to pinch the hand lightly between his thumb and forefinger to politely indicate that he did not wish to have sex with this new friend. But, just in time, he noticed a couple of other tavern patrons shaking hands, and copied the procedure to Big Stevo’s satisfaction. “Meet you,” said Hequa.

While they shook, Hequa’s head started to swim. His vision blurred, and he suddenly felt very feverish. Then, he felt himself falling. His head hit the table, and he slid from there all the way

CHAPTER 2

to the grimy tavern floor, knocking over his chair on the way down. “Help,” he said in his own tongue, weakly, before losing consciousness.

Chapter 3

Hequa came to on an uncomfortable bed surrounded by machines. Someone had implanted something in his arm, and there was a tube connecting this implant with a bag of fluid hanging next to the bed. His flight suit was gone, and in its place someone had dressed him in a light gown. His temples throbbed with fever, his mouth tasted like he'd been chewing on zanzi leaf, and the light under which he'd been placed radiated a color he'd seen The Order use to weaken the wills of rebels before torture.

Had he been captured by The Order? Hequa did not see how that was possible, here on this far flung planet. But everything around him suggested that he was being prepared for torture. He had to find a way out, but had no idea how much time had elapsed since he lost consciousness, and so couldn't reliably guess at where he was now. Plus, without his flight suit and the supplies this contained, Hequa doubted he'd survive for long in this alien world.

Interrupting Hequa's thoughts, a uniformed woman entered his torture preparation chamber. "Oh good, you're up," she said. "Let's get you some water while I check your vitals."

“Stay away from me, torturer,” said Hequa in his own tongue.

“What’s that? Around here we speak American,” said the woman, handing Hequa a plastic cup of water.

Hequa accepted the water and drank it greedily. As the woman then placed an inflatable cuff on his arm and began pumping this up, it dawned on Hequa that he may be in a medical facility. Why anyone would design a medical facility like a torture preparation room was beyond him, but this woman was definitely behaving more like a nurse than a torturer. So he allowed his temperature to be taken, consumed the tiny food capsules that were offered, and drifted back into sleep.

Upon waking, he saw that a display panel on the wall had been activated. There were people talking on it, and many jarring transitions between the people talking and the stories of objects. The stories of vehicles and food capsules were the most prominent, and Hequa found himself wanting both while he watched. Perhaps, he reflected, that was the point.

For days, Hequa drifted in and out of sleep, submitting to vitals checks, watching the display panel, and attempting to use this planet’s bizarre bathrooms. Eventually, the nurse arrived with a clear polymer bag containing his flight suit. She removed the implant from his arm, handed him the bag, and said, “Let’s get you discharged. You’ll need to stop by the desk on your way out to fill out the paperwork.”

Hequa nodded an understanding he did not feel, and eagerly accepted the bag. He rose quickly, shed the light gown over

the nurse's protests, and put his suit on in mere seconds. Once properly clothed, he spent a minute checking over all his suit's supply caches, finding everything intact. Feeling immense relief, he grinned broadly at the nurse. "Paperwork," he said.

"Right this way," said the nurse, motioning for him to follow.

They walked down a long hallway, around a corner, and through a heavy door. There, a large man sat behind a large desk, watching display panels and pushing buttons on control devices that were unfamiliar to Hequa. "Here he is," said the nurse to the man. "He's all yours."

"Sir, I just need you to fill these out," said the man while handing Hequa some kind of tablet with papers on it.

Hequa took the tablet, studied it for a moment, and said, "I the Hequa."

"Hold on," said the man sharply. "Sir, do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I'm saying," said Hequa.

"Nope. No, this isn't going to work," said the man. "He doesn't even speak English, Patty. Who's going to pay for this? What the hell am I supposed to do with him?"

Hequa didn't know what the problem was, but he could tell by the man's voice that there was a problem, and a big one at that. "Patty," said Hequa, looking at the nurse.

“Well, we can’t keep you here,” said Patty, taking the tablet from Hequa and a pen from the desk. “All you need to do is sign here, and we’ll fill out the rest,” she said, pressing the pen against a line on the paper on the tablet.

Accepting the pen from Patty, Hequa understood that he should inscribe his glyph. So he drew his formal glyph, three triangles and an ellipse, and handed the tablet back to Patty. “Oh whatever,” said Patty upon seeing the glyph. “Now, do it here and here as well,” she said, indicating other places where Hequa was to sign.

On his way out, Hequa noticed half a dozen people in what appeared to be a waiting area, each studying their own tiny display panels intently. The sight reminded him that he’d seen several people at the tavern doing the same thing. He did not know what it meant, but it seemed important. And it made him less self-conscious about activating his own computer interface display, which was secreted in a panel on his left forearm.

The display told Hequa his own path of travel from where he’d landed in relation to magnetic north. Apparently, he’d been brought a long distance south, away from the sea where his vessel landed. Attempting to reach the sea on foot now would be folly, but he remembered that a large river passed near his current location, and headed off in that direction.

Freshly rested, Hequa walked along rarely used roads for several hours. Many vehicles passed him, but none stopped. When he finally reached the river and saw starlight reflected in its black water, Hequa felt a peace come over him at this small

victory. And when he climbed down the steep embankment to the river's edge, feeling the bite of one of this planet's horrid insects on his neck, he ignored the sting, and fastened his suit's breathing mask in place. Then he waded out into the river's swift current, eased himself into a prone position, and let the water take him.

Chapter 4

Hequa drifted down the river for three weeks, eating his fill of bugs and grubs whenever hunger arose, turning his fresh experiences of this planet over and over in his mind for clues as to what his next move should be. By the time the river joined another, larger river, Hequa had decided to head for the nearest big city, which he estimated to be no more than a day's walk from where this larger river would take him.

Floating down this river, when he wasn't climbing around dams, Hequa kept his mind busy replaying all of the words he'd heard since landing. Fully submerged in water, he brought these words into learning-trance, and held them there until they started to make sense. Some words were hopeless, for they referred to completely alien concepts. But, by the morning Hequa emerged from the river under a massive bridge, he felt confident enough to say his name or admit that he was lost, should anyone ask.

At the top of the bridge, there was a town filled with vehicles and shops and people milling around. Catching the rhythm of the town, Hequa slowly wandered down the street, looking

for a place that might have less conspicuous clothes for him. Eventually, he found a shop that appeared to have some of everything, and went inside. A small bell rang as he opened the door, and an aging woman with a pleasant expression on her face looked at him from across a glass-topped counter.

“Something I can help you find?” asked the woman.

“I am the Hequa. Looking for clothes,” said Hequa.

“Well, all we have is antiques,” said the shopkeeper. “But if it’s antique clothes you want, we do have a few things.”

While she spoke, Hequa spotted a large, rust-colored garment that appeared suitable. Pointing to it, he said, “This clothes. This one.”

“You want to buy that kimono?” asked the woman. “You know, that one’s from Occupied Japan. I’m asking four fifty for it. You got that kind of money for a kimono?”

“I no understand money,” said Hequa sadly. “I no American.”

“Well, now, that’s okay,” said the woman patiently, gesturing along with the words. “Just give me your card, and I’ll swipe it here. Cash is fine, too, but I doubt you’re carrying all that on you.”

While she spoke, Hequa glanced at the items in the counter display, and something caught his eye. “How many bucks?” he asked, pointing to a small metal coin.

“Three grand even, for that coin,” said the shopkeeper. “It’s real gold, about eight hundred years old.”

Hequa studied the token a moment longer, then retrieved a small handful of gold disks from one of his suit’s concealed pockets. “How many bucks?” he asked, holding one of the disks out for inspection.

The shopkeeper’s expression changed from pleasant to suspicious when she took the fishing weight. “Is this gold? It can’t be,” she said.

“Same made as yours,” said Hequa. “How many bucks?”

“Oh, bother,” said the woman. “I guess I can test it quick.”

Nodding assent, Hequa watched while the woman delicately performed some kind of rudimentary chemical test on his fishing weight. “Well, I’ll be,” she said when the test was complete. “Well fine. You give me those and the kimono is yours.”

Laughing aloud at his luck when the meaning of the shopkeeper’s gestures became clear, Hequa handed over his fishing weights. The shopkeeper got the kimono down for him, then began weighing the fishing weights and writing down the weights on a pad of paper. Putting the kimono on over his flight suit, fastening it closed with the large sash that was also apparently part of the deal, Hequa found himself very pleased with the new garment. It was soft and light and warm and concealed his flight suit quite effectively.

Leaving the store, Hequa noticed that no one else on the street was wearing a kimono, and that everyone on the sidewalk was giving him an unusually wide berth. This bothered him, but as he walked, a far more bothersome thought blossomed into his awareness. Until that moment, all the talk of 'bucks' and 'cash' and 'pay' he'd heard had made no sense whatsoever. But now, seeing all the numbers on shop signs and items on display in windows, he began to understand that all of it pertained to trade. Apparently, the people of Earth were trading constantly, for every little thing.

This realization was so bizarre, and so frightening, that Hequa had to stop and throw up. On his home planet, nations had long ago traded with each other, but in his lifetime the only people who traded out of necessity were prisoners. Had he escaped The Order only to end up on a planet of prisoners? Would he now have to learn to trade for everything? Looking at the contents of his stomach, he resolved to learn the ways of this world, no matter how repugnant.

"Excuse me, sir. Sir are you okay?" asked a uniformed man whose approach Hequa hadn't registered.

"I have big cash problem," answered Hequa.

"Yeah, you and me both, buddy," said the uniformed man. "How about you move it along."

Chapter 5

A large river cut through the city. Hequa slept suspended in this river, floating in his flight suit, with a foot anchored to a log so he wouldn't float away. For a hundred days, Hequa had followed strangers, listening to the words they spoke. One of these strangers had led him to a glass and steel fortress called a 'library', where he'd started to learn the written version of the native tongue. At the end of each day, after filling his belly with bugs and worms from rotting logs, Hequa rested in the learning-trance for some hours, then fell asleep for the night.

Today, upon waking, Hequa decided that he knew enough to try procuring a new set of clothes. He needed shoes, pants, and a shirt, for occasions when neither flight suit nor kimono was appropriate. He knew he had to obtain money to acquire these garments, but wasn't at all clear on how to do this. So he stashed his flight suit – minus the boots, which he wore – in the underwater hole he'd dug for the purpose, braided his hair, donned his kimono, and hiked up the steep riverbank into the city.

Walking fifteen or so blocks to what seemed to be a major

shopping district, Hequa found a store where artificial humans wearing the kind of clothes he was after stood in a window display. Standing near the store's door, he waited for someone to come by and give him some money. "Hello person. Do you have some money for me?" he asked the first pedestrian who passed by in front of the store.

Hequa's inquiry was ignored. So he tried again with the next passerby, an elderly woman carrying a large shopping bag. "Hello person! Where can I get some money for clothes?" he asked.

"No thank you!" said the woman, tightening her grip on the shopping bag.

The next person who passed was a young, sick looking man in a puffy blue jacket. "Hey buddy, you got a dollar?" this man asked Hequa.

"I have no dollars, and I need many dollars for new clothes," replied Hequa. "Where can I go to get some money?"

"Shit. Rich people got all the money. You got to get it where you can," answered the man.

"Where do I find these rich people?" asked Hequa.

"Where do you find 'em? You know they all over, hiding in these tall buildings," replied the man while walking away.

As the meaning of these words sank in, Hequa realized he

needed a different plan. So he walked into the store and began searching for the clothes he wanted. He quickly found a long-sleeved black pullover shirt that seemed like it would fit. For the pants, he found some in a shade of green that he liked, then located a store attendant, a young, bored-looking woman. "Store person, how do I know what number of pants is for me?" he asked.

"You don't know your size? Here, try these on," she said, handing Hequa a pair of pants.

When Hequa began pulling off his boots, she stopped him. "Not here," she said, rolling her eyes. "In the dressing room, you clown. Over there."

Following the store attendant's eyes, Hequa quickly realized what she meant. He brought the shirt and pants into the curtained dressing room, tried them on, and found they fit perfectly. Looking at himself in the mirror, he decided he could pass for an average Earth person. He also decided that he wasn't going to bother with finding dollars to pay for these clothes.

Emerging from the dressing room holding his kimono in a bundle, Hequa walked quickly to the exit, and was startled by a loud alarm bell when he passed through the door, which caused him to break into a run. "Hey! You there! Hey wait! You have to pay for that stuff!" yelled the store attendant behind him.

Hequa ran several blocks, turning to head back towards the river once he was certain that no one was giving chase. While he ran, he noticed that both the shirt and pants had large

plastic devices affixed to them. Back at the river, after carefully examining these devices, Hequa found that they were designed to be removed with some specialty tool that he did not have. And when he forced off the device on the shirt, it leaked violet ink all over the shirt and his hands.

After rinsing the shirt and his hands in the river, Hequa decided to try a different approach with the device on the pants. He withdrew one of his molknives from a boot, activated the blade's ultrasonic mode, and very carefully cut the pin joining the device's two halves through the pants' fabric. This time, there was no ink spilled, and Hequa put his new pants back on feeling very pleased with himself.

Chapter 6

With a set of regular clothes to wear, Hequa found it much easier to blend in with the city's people. He also found that, nearly everywhere he went, someone would ask him for money. People asked him for money in the library entryway, and on the sidewalk, and even, once, while he hiked through the wooded area along the river on his way to the city center. The stores asked for money. The restaurants asked for money. The public transport vehicles asked for money. To Hequa, who still had no clear idea where money came from, it began to seem as if preoccupation with money was the glue that held this society together, which he found disturbing.

More disturbing than these financial apprehensions was Hequa's growing loneliness. Nearly all of his interactions with other people on this planet were brief and superficial. He hadn't so much as shared a meal with another person since he'd arrived. And, as time passed, he found the urge to socialize weighing on more and more of his decisions. One late summer afternoon, this urge became unbearable, and Hequa set out determined to have at least one real conversation with another person.

Not far from the river, Hequa found a cafe patio crowded with people. Spotting an open chair at one of the tables, he approached the young couple sitting there, and asked, "Can I sit with you here? There are no other open tables."

"Uhh, I guess," said the man.

Sitting down, Hequa looked at the pair and said, "My name is Hequa. I'm not from America."

"Cool. Where are you from?" asked the woman.

"The planet Jhanya. I've been here for less than half of one Earth year," said Hequa.

"Fine, don't tell us," said the young man. "I'm Dan and this is Constance. Are you a student here?"

"I study at the library," said Hequa. "And I would like to study more. Are you students?"

"Is it that obvious?" asked Constance. "Yeah, we both go to the U here."

"What is the U?" asked Hequa. "I have heard people say this, but I don't know what they mean."

"The University. Of Minnesota," said Dan flatly, watching Hequa's incomprehension. "Seriously? Nothing?"

"As I said, I am new to this world. I know the word 'university',

but do not know what exactly this is. It is a learning place, yes?" asked Hequa.

"That's right. It's a school. A college," said Constance patiently. "I'm studying computer science. Dan's studying medicine."

As she spoke, new awareness flashed in Hequa's mind. "What if I want to go to this school? Where do I go to do that?" he asked.

"Well, you can't just go," replied Constance. "There's, like, an admissions process, and tuition, and all that. I'd start by going to the website."

"The ... website? This is another word I've heard, but I don't really know what it means," admitted Hequa.

"Ha, you really are from another planet!" exclaimed Dan. "A website is a place on the internet. Everything has a website. See?"

Looking at the University of Minnesota's website on Dan's phone, an idea occurred to Hequa. "Constance, you said you study computer science," he said. "I have a small computer from my home planet. Would you know how to modify this to receive the internet?"

Constance laughed. "Wow, you're not breaking character at all. I love it," she said. "I personally wouldn't know where to start with an alien computer. But someone in my department might. Maybe one of the professors?"

“Is there a professor who is very skilled at growing parts for computers?” asked Hequa.

“I’m not sure I understand,” admitted Constance.

“Sorry. My language is poor. Is there a professor who talks to the computer part creatures better than the other professors?” clarified Hequa.

“Computers aren’t made of any kind of creature,” said Constance, laughing.

“What?” asked Hequa, dumbfounded. “You mean this planet’s computers are dead? All of them? How could that even work? Where do they get their power? Does every one get its own draath crystal?”

“They get their power from batteries, man. Batteries!” said Dan, who started to laugh as well. “But whatever you’re on, I want some!”

Although he knew they were laughing at his expense, Hequa found the laughter infectious, and joined in. “Does that mean that no one here waters their computers?” he asked. “Until now, I assumed people put their phones in water overnight. Is this not the standard practice?”

“Oh you’re too funny,” said Constance. “Everybody knows that water and computers don’t mix.”

“Now I know this too,” said Hequa. “But I still plan to water my

computer.”

As he spoke, Hequa was, for reasons unknown to him, overcome with the urge to prove to these people that he was from another planet. By the time the laughter died away, he had come up with a plan to do this. Subtly removing a molknife from his boot, he looked at each of his companions in turn, then asked, “Will you believe I am from another planet if I can cut this drinking glass clean in half?”

“Woah there, buddy. No need to start breaking stuff,” said Dan.

“Let him do his thing,” said Constance, not taking her eyes off of Hequa.

Activating the molknife, Hequa gingerly sliced the glass in two. Then he carefully set down the two halves, put the molknife away, and waited for a response.

“How. The fuck. Did you do that?” asked Dan.

“That’s one crazy trick,” said Constance. “Do you do parties?”

“Parties?” asked Hequa.

“You know, your performance stuff. Pretending to be an alien,” Constance clarified. “Can I, like, pay you to perform at one of our parties?”

“You want to give me money to go to a party and be myself?” asked Hequa. “That sounds very good.”

“This Friday? What’s your number?” asked Constance.

“This Friday. Yes. My number is thirty-four,” said Hequa, beaming.

“Thirty-four? I mean your phone number!” said Constance.

“Oh. I have no phone. Is there a way for you to tell me where to be, and when?” asked Hequa. “Oh, and how should I dress? I have a flight suit, a kimono, and what I am wearing now.”

“Definitely the flight suit,” said Constance. “But maybe bring the kimono, too. And I’ll write down directions for you. What do you charge?”

“I can charge on log bugs before I arrive,” said Hequa.

“How about fifty bucks, plus tips?” asked Constance.

“This sounds like a good number of bucks,” agreed Hequa.

Chapter 7

Having chosen to wear the kimono with no sash over the flight suit, Hequa arrived to the party shortly after dark. The first thing he saw was a bunch of young people on a patio clamoring for a turn at their barrel of drink. Approaching the building's crowded entrance, unsure of where to go, Hequa felt suddenly self-conscious. Were it not for a voice that cut through the din in that moment, he might have turned around and went home.

“Oh my god you came! This is the guy!” exclaimed Constance as she approached Hequa with a handful of others. “Hequa, was it? From the planet Jana?”

“The planet Jhanya,” corrected Hequa. “Thank you for having me at your party.”

The introductions with those in Constance's coterie proceeded smoothly. In short order, Hequa was given a drink in a large red plastic cup, and led into the building. There, in a room with wooden floors and a large table in it, he cut a beer bottle in half the long way with his molknife, much to the amazement of his new friends. He then cut a series of other small durable objects

in half with the molknife, which further delighted his hosts.

“Hey! Fair’s fair,” Constance slurred into Hequa’s ear after he cut a bike lock in half. “Here’s fifty,” she said, handing him two twenties and a ten, all crumpled up.

Looking at the cup of beer he held, and taking in the wad of cash that Constance placed in his free hand, Hequa grinned until he felt dizzy. “I have bucks!” he shouted. “I have bucks at my first Earth party!”

“Hey now. Someone’s having fun,” said Dan, who had appeared next to Constance while Hequa was reveling.

“Very big fun,” said Hequa, tucking his cash into a flight suit pocket. “Do you want to see my computer?”

“Your alien computer? Sure, let’s see it,” said Dan.

“Don’t be a dick, Dan,” said Constance. “Of course we want to see your computer.”

Hequa exposed his computer’s display panel, activated the device, then extended his arm for Constance and Dan to inspect. “This is a map of everywhere I’ve been since I landed,” he said.

“So, it’s like a smart watch?” asked Dan.

“I don’t know. Here, here you can see the landing trajectory calculated for me,” said Hequa after adjusting the device’s controls until its screen changed.

“Wait, that looks ... real,” said Constance. “Is this some custom raspberry pi thing?”

“It is real. You are seeing it. This is the computer I want to connect to the internet,” said Hequa.

“Oh, like a custom wearable? That’s so cool! You should totally show Sallycat. She’ll love it and she might be able to help you. She knows way more about this stuff than I do,” said Constance, before darting off into the crowd.

“So if you’re an alien, why’d you leave your home planet?” asked Dan while Hequa returned his computer screen to his sleeve.

“Survival. I left because I had to, to survive,” said Hequa solemnly.

“Are you like, the last of your kind?” asked Dan in a way that revealed his intoxication.

“In a way, yes. And in a way, no,” answered Hequa. “There are many more people where I come from. But I am the last of my kind of person. Understand?”

“So wait. You’re not going to invade or something, are you?” asked Dan.

“There is no invasion. It is just me,” replied Hequa. “Can you tell me how a person goes about finding a building to live in?”

“You need a place to crash? Just crash on the couch,” said Dan.

“Or anywhere else there’s room when things die down.”

“Who is dying down?” asked Hequa suspiciously.

“Ha! No one’s dying. It’s just an expression. It means becoming more calm,” explained Dan.

“Will you sleep here?” asked Hequa.

“No. Me and Constance have a place. But no one will give you any trouble if you need to crash here tonight,” said Dan.

“Thank you. But I have a place in the shallows of the river while the weather allows it,” said Hequa. “My question was about finding my own building, or part of one.”

“I see. In that case, how much do you have to spend? You’ll need about three thousand bucks to get started,” said Dan.

“I have fifty bucks,” said Hequa.

Chapter 8

Although Hequa had planned to return to the river after the party, he'd been urged by drink into an uncomfortable slumber on a large soft chair. Waking up to the sound of video games coming on next to his head, Hequa found a glass of water for himself, then exited the building. "Fifty bucks," he said aloud, walking into the morning. Although he still had no idea how to find a building for himself, he'd managed to get the fifty bucks and the contact details for Constance's friend Sallycat, which was more progress than he'd made in weeks.

Despite these victories, Hequa's head hurt mildly from dehydration and hunger. So he returned to his spot by the river directly, and began consuming scraped handful after handful of bugs from a choice rotted log. While he ate, he reflected on the party, feeling mildly disappointed that the music had been too loud for him to exchange more than a couple of words with most of the guests. Then, interrupting these thoughts, a large brown dog ran up to him and started barking.

"Willie. Willieee," called a bespectacled man after the dog. "Willie, you leave that poor fella alone!"

The man was graying, and carried a stick to help him walk. When he called out, the dog left Hequa alone and returned to the man's side. Having seen many people with their dogs by this river, Hequa went back to scraping bugs from broken chunks of rotted log. But instead of proceeding on his way, the man approached Hequa, frowning mightily.

"You there. Sir. Can I ask what you're doing?" asked the man.

Hequa pointed to his mouth to indicate that it was full. Once he finished chewing, he replied, "Hello person. I'm eating log bugs. Are you hungry? Would you like to join?"

The man's eyes looked to Hequa, then to the partially broken up rotted log, the back again. His face paled when comprehension reached it. "Good god, really? Don't you have anything else to eat?" he demanded.

Still wearing the kimono over his flight suit, his hands full of wood pulp and log bugs, Hequa looked long at the man, wondering what his problem was. "I had to trade my fishing weights for this kimono," he said. "But this river's fish do not taste so great. So I eat the bugs, which taste fine."

"But how ... nevermind. Listen, my wife made me a sandwich that I don't really need to eat. Do you want it? It's egg salad," said the man.

"A sandwich? I've heard of those," said Hequa. "Yes, thank you."

The man handed the sandwich to Hequa and watched him

intently while he took a bite. "See, there's no need to be eating bugs," he said.

"This is good. Thank you," said Hequa between bites. "What kind of eggs is it made from? Bird? Snake? I have never had anything quite like it."

The man laughed. "Chicken eggs," he said. "My name's Tom, by the way."

"I am Hequa," said Hequa as he finished the sandwich. "And I thank you for your gift, Tom."

"No problem," said Tom. "Not to pry, but are you homeless? Do you live down here?"

"I sleep in the river, yes," replied Hequa. "I am trying to find a building to live in before it gets cold. But I have fifty bucks, and need more bucks to do that."

"Is that so? Well, where are you from? You don't sound like you're from around here," said Tom.

"I am from Jhanya. It is very far away," said Hequa.

"Never heard of it. But I guess the world's a big place," said Tom. "Listen, we've got a garage that we turned into an apartment, and our most recent tenant just left. Normally, we rent the place out by the week over the internet. We'd have to charge you something – let's say six hundred dollars a month – but might be willing to waive the deposit for someone in your situation."

Trying to process this information, Hequa closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, he asked, "You are trying to give me a building?"

"Yes. An apartment," said the man. "But only if you pay the rent on time and keep the place clean. And no drugs, period, but if you're an addict, you can still rent from us if you get treatment and stick to it. We can go see the place now, if you like."

Hequa could see that Tom was sincere, and couldn't believe his good fortune. "I have heard of drugs, but do not know what this is," he said. "And you will have to explain rent to me. This sounds complicated, and I am not sure of its true meaning. But, yes, I would be honored to see the apartment you offer. Should I change into my regular Earth person clothes before we go?"

"Boy, you are something," replied Tom. "Come as you are or change, it's your choice."

Chapter 9

Hequa could hear Tom and his wife Betty talking about him in the kitchen while he waited in the entryway. “I think he’s a refugee from the Middle East or something,” said Tom. “I caught him eating bugs down by the river. Bugs and grubs. Big handfuls of them, like he was starving. His mind seems half gone, but I think he’s basically harmless, and Willie liked him. I think we should give him a chance in the garage. If nothing else, we can keep him from freezing to death.”

“You know I don’t mind renting to an illegal, Tom,” answered Betty. “But we don’t know anything about him. What if he gets violent, or trashes the place? And where do you suppose he’s going to get the money for rent? Does he have a job? Did you even ask?”

“If he says he can pay, I trust him to pay,” said Tom. “Hequa? Hequa, you can come in now.”

“Hi Hequa, I’m Betty,” said Tom’s wife. “Tom tells me you want to rent the garage.”

“Hello person Betty,” said Hequa. “I am looking for a building to live in when the weather gets cold, yes. I am told the river will freeze, and ice will cover the land, so I need a building.”

“I see what you mean,” said Betty to Tom. “Young man, can you pay us six hundred dollars rent every month, and not cause us any trouble?”

As it dawned on Hequa that rent meant an amount of money to be paid on a schedule, his heart sank. “I have fifty bucks,” he said. “This was given to me for entertaining guests at a party. I could entertain many more guests at many more parties, but I do not know what the future holds, so it would be foolish for me to promise to pay six hundred bucks rent every month.”

Although Betty appeared about to speak, Tom spoke up first. “How exactly did you entertain these party guests, Hequa?” he asked.

Hequa shrugged. “Mostly, I cut things in half with a knife I brought from my home world. The guests found this very pleasing,” he said.

“What kind of things did you cut in half? Can you show us?” asked Tom.

“Things of glass and metal. Hard things, that your planet’s knives cannot cut,” said Hequa. “I will show you if you want.”

“How about this?” asked Tom, pulling a quarter from his pocket.

Accepting the quarter from Tom, Hequa removed a molknife from his boot, activated the knife, sliced the quarter in two, deactivated the knife, and left this resting on the table where the couple sat.

“Wow. Can I see that?” asked Tom while pointing to the knife.

“Yes. But be very careful,” said Hequa. “Do not touch the blade at all, and do not touch the small button on the bottom of the handle, or the blade will become activated.”

Tom inspected the knife carefully. Its three inch blade appeared to be some kind of glass, its handle appeared to be some kind of polymer, and its overall craftsmanship was exquisite. “What do you mean about the blade becoming activated?” he asked when his examination of the tool was complete.

“I don’t know all the words for it,” said Hequa. “There is a light in the handle that strikes the blade and wiggles it. When the blade is wiggling, it is activated, and can cut through almost anything.”

“That’s amazing,” said Tom, his expression changing to something that made Hequa feel vaguely uneasy. “Isn’t that amazing, Betty?”

“Sure is,” said Betty absently.

“Is this knife your invention?” asked Tom. “Are there others like it?”

“There are three such knives on this planet. All three belong to me,” said Hequa.

“I’ll tell you what,” said Tom. “If you want to rent the garage, you can have it for one year in exchange for this knife.”

Suddenly suspicious, Hequa blurted, “Six hundred twelve times is seventy-two hundred bucks. Why would you take my knife instead of so many bucks? Are you joking on me?”

“Now now. It’s a fair offer,” said Betty patiently. “If I know my husband, he’ll be finding a way to make a fair bit more off your knife than your year’s rent is worth. If I were you, I’d demand a cut, but that’s just me.”

“Then I demand a cut!” said Hequa. “Where should I cut? The face? The arm? I am unfamiliar with this custom.”

“Oh it’s nothing like that,” said Tom. “She means a share of any profits I make from the knife. Tell you what, I’ll give you five percent, plus the year in the garage for the knife, but you have to tell me everything you know about it. Deal?”

“Bring me to my building, and I will accept your terms,” agreed Hequa. “The first thing to know is never let the knife dry out for too long. Here’s its case,” he instructed, retrieving what appeared to be a soggy tan polymer sock from its compartment on his boot. Sliding the knife into this casing, he continued, “Make sure to submerge this in water often. Every week, at minimum. Every day is better. And please, be very careful. A knife like this can be very dangerous.”

CHAPTER 9

“Oh I’ll be careful,” said Tom, accepting the alien knife as if it were a priceless artifact. “Now let’s get you a look at your new apartment.”

Chapter 10

A week after Hequa moved his meager belongings into the unfurnished garage apartment, the first snow fell, and the air became too cold for him to continue digging bugs from rotten logs down by the river for sustenance. Feeling very hungry and extremely cold, he walked through the city until he smelled delicious food emanating from a small restaurant. Entering the establishment, he was surprised to discover an Overseer's podium just inside the door.

"Overseer, I have come for food. I have fifty bucks. May I take a meal here?" he asked the man standing at the podium.

"Just you?" asked the bored-looking man, with none of the power behind his words Hequa expected from an Overseer. "Table for one. Right this way," said the man, motioning for Hequa to follow.

Sitting in the booth he'd been steered to, Hequa realized that the man who'd led him here wasn't an Overseer at all. He was just another servant. This was both a relief and a disappointment to Hequa, who looked at the words on the menu without really understanding what they meant.

“How can I help you? Can I start you with something to drink?” asked a friendly-seeming woman with a small writing tablet in her hand.

“I’m new to all of this,” said Hequa. “And I do not know how to read this,” he said, gesturing to the menu. “Can you bring water and a large meal? It must come to less than fifty bucks.”

“Coming right up,” said the woman.

The meal the server brought him consisted of many thin strings of boiled bread, with some kind of vegetable paste, served hot. Hequa enjoyed it, but found dining alone in such a place to be somewhat sad. Then, shortly after the server explained the check to him and accepted twenty bucks as full payment for the meal, Hequa spotted Constance and another woman at another table, and decided to say hello before facing the cold of the outdoors again.

“Constance, hello,” said Hequa.

“Oh hi Hequa,” said Constance. “Hey! This is perfect. Hequa, this is Sallycat. The one I said could help you with your wearable computer project.”

Hequa looked to the other young woman at Constance’s table. “Good to meet you, Sallycat,” he said. “Can you help me connect my computer to the internet?”

Sallycat laughed, sending a small bit of food through the air to an adjacent table as she did so. “Oops,” she said. “I mean sure.

Yeah, probably. What kind of computer is it?"

"It's a computer designed for space navigation, that I've been using for land navigation," explained Hequa. "Did Constance tell you I'm from another planet? The computer is also from another planet."

"Wait. What?" asked Sallycat.

"Another planet, far from Earth," said Hequa. "So connecting it to the internet may be challenging."

"Is he serious?" Sallycat asked her friend.

"Totally. But don't worry. He's harmless. And I saw the computer he's talking about, so that part's real," said Constance.

"In that case, I'll agree to take a look at your computer. But I can't promise I'll be able to get it online," said Sallycat.

"I have a building. Would you like to come to my building to work on the computer?" asked Hequa.

"Why don't you just bring it by the computer lab I'm at on campus?" asked Sallycat.

"A computer lab. Is that short for laboratory? Yes, I would be happy to bring my computer to your computer laboratory," said Hequa, grinning.

"What's your number?" asked Sallycat.

“Thirty-four,” said Hequa. “What’s yours?”

“Seven, like the building,” said Sallycat without missing a beat. “But I mean your phone number.”

“Oh. Now I understand. Constance gave me your phone number. But I do not have one. I have only five items, and a phone is not one of these,” said Hequa.

“Five items, hey? Alright, lets hear them. What five items do you own?” asked Sallycat.

“Flight suit, kimono, shirt, pants, building,” replied Hequa. “But the flight suit contains other things. Do you know where I could get a phone? Or could we more easily meet at an agreed upon place without the phones?”

“Well okay then,” said Sallycat. “We can meet. How’s next Tuesday at six, on campus?”

“Yes, I can meet you Tuesday. Can you write down the place for me?” asked Hequa.

Chapter 11

Having found the place where he was to meet Sallycat, Hequa stood waiting in the cold, clutching his bundled flight suit to his chest. His newest garment, a heavy coat he'd found discarded in a waste bin, barely kept the cold from being intolerable. Hequa could not understand how these Earth people dealt with such temperatures, and was just beginning to jump up and down vigorously to increase body heat when Sallycat walked up. "Just jumping up and down, huh?" she asked.

"Yes. It's so cold. Which way are we going?" asked Hequa.

"Here, follow me," replied Sallycat.

Sallycat led Hequa a long distance, though a massive building, and into a room filled with display terminals. A scattered handful of students sat working, but the room was otherwise empty. "Here we are," said Sallycat, gesturing for Hequa to sit at a large wooden table. "Let's see what you've got."

"Good. But where are your water tanks?" asked Hequa. "If we are to remove my computer from my suit, we must do so under

water.”

“Really? Show me,” said Sallycat.

Hequa showed Sallycat where on the flight suit the computer was, making it clear that the computer might break if forced out of the suit improperly. He also showed her the device’s display and controls, and how to start a custom program running. During the demonstration, it became clear to Sallycat that this computer was unlike any she’d ever seen before. And, before she knew it, she was agreeing to meet again the following day with water containers ready.

The next day, Sallycat watched in amazement as Hequa, his hands underwater in an old aquarium, nimbly coaxed a tiny octopus-like creature from his flight suit’s submerged arm. Holding this creature carefully with two fingers, Hequa showed it to Sallycat, who didn’t understand at all. “I don’t know what that is or why you’re showing it to me,” she said.

“It is my computer. Should I make your copy of it here, or do you have another place you’d like it?” said Hequa.

“Uhh, here’s fine,” said Sallycat. “But I still don’t get what you mean. Are you trying to tell me that that thing in your hands, that living thing, is somehow being used as a computer?”

Hequa did something in the aquarium with a molknife. “Yes. It was grown to be a computer. Your copy will grow into an identical computer in this water tank in a few days,” he said. “How long do you think it will take for you to connect it to the

internet?”

“I, uh. How should I know?” asked Sallycat. “Are you sure this isn’t some kind of joke? I feel like I’m being set up for something here.”

“No joke. The creature is called a trital. They make very strong computers,” said Hequa while coaxing the trital back into his flight suit’s arm by procedures that were unclear to Sallycat. “The trital connects to the colors crystal, which connects to the signals hub, which connects to the controls and display. I recommend growing your colors crystal with transparent carbon in a zero gravity environment, then allowing your trital to build its own signals hub once it has merged with this colors crystal.”

“Transparent carbon? Zero gravity? You’ve totally lost me, here,” said Sallycat. “Give me a board, and I can solder it. Give me an processor and I can build a circuit for it. But I’ve never seen anything even remotely like this. I wouldn’t even know where to begin working on it. Are you sure this isn’t some kind of joke?”

“No joke,” said Hequa again. “I understand that this must be strange. But would you please try to make it work. I feel I need my computer to be on the internet if I am ever to fit in on this planet. And you are the only one I have found who may be able to help me. This is why I have given you a cutting from my trital, because this is very important.”

While he was speaking, a thought occurred to Sallycat. “So

you're telling me that a computing creature like yours is now growing in this aquarium?" she asked.

"Yes. It will become an adult in a few days. And it will want to get right to work," said Hequa.

"So if you're wrong, no creature will grow here?" asked Sallycat.

"I am not wrong. And there is more I have to tell you," said Hequa. "Do you have an element table nearby, so I can point to what you will need for this project's success?"

Sallycat frowned, then understood. "Okay. I'll pull one up on my phone. Here. But why is it so important to you that your computer be connected to the web? It seems amazing enough as it is," she said.

Hequa pointed out the elements from the periodic table that Sallycat would need to procure to satisfy her trital. When he was done, Sallycat voiced the question she'd spent the past few minutes formulating. "So you don't have a phone, and you say this is your computer. No offense, but why don't you just get a phone, or a cheap computer to get online?"

"I have five dollars," said Hequa sadly. "And I don't know how, here in this backwards land."

"Well, I could give you a cheap laptop. There are plenty of them lying around here, if you know where to look. Call it a trade for trusting me with your water creature. What do you think?" asked Sallycat.

“You would do that? So I wouldn’t have to use the library internet always? Sallycat, you are a true friend,” said Hequa.

Chapter 12

Dividing his time between the reading at the library, spying on college lectures, sneaking food from unattended plates at busy restaurants, and watching videos online, Hequa passed the rest of the winter in relative comfort. Once a week, he dined with Tom and Betty, answering Tom's seemingly endless questions about the molknife as best he could. A few times, he tried calling Sallycat for a project update with Betty's phone, but was only able to reach her voicemail. By the time the river was clear of ice, Hequa felt well enough acclimated to the planet to begin seeking work.

With a large cardboard sign that read 'Will work for bucks! I do parties!', Hequa stood at a busy intersection in his flight suit, waiting to get hired for a job. He understood that this was not the most popular way to find work, but his research indicated that most other methods of seeking employment required a verifiable Earth-identity. While he stood there, uncomfortably close to the passing cars, he noticed something odd. Every twentieth-or-so vehicle that stopped at the intersection rolled down a window and stuck money out of it. When he realized what was happening – that these people were giving him bucks – Hequa was overjoyed.

Hequa stood there for hours, collecting bucks and getting honked at. As night approached, he decided he'd had enough, and backed away from the street to count his earnings, which totaled sixty-eight bucks. On his way home, he stopped for a meal of bread and mammal meat, fiddling with his suit's computer to blend in with the people fiddling with their phones. Then, noticing that he was close to the computer laboratory where he'd left the trital cutting, Hequa decided to check up on Sallycat's progress in person.

Without a key card to access the building, Hequa had to wait until the door was opened by someone else to gain entry. Then, making his way to the lab, he told several young people that he was a computing student looking for Sallycat, but no one seemed to have any idea what he was talking about. When he finally made it to the lab, it was locked, and the lights were off. Thinking of the precious little trital cutting that had started life there only to disappear into a nothing of voicemail, Hequa grew angry.

"Sallycat! Sallycat!" he yelled, irrationally. "Where's the trital? What happened to the trital?"

After just a moment, a stocky, middle-aged man with a look of concern on his face approached Hequa. "What's all this, now? Are you okay?" asked the man.

"I am okay, and I am angry," replied Hequa. "I gave Sallycat an important baby computer months ago, and she has disappeared. Now all of my calls go to voicemail only and the lab is locked."

"I'm sure it's just a misunderstanding," said the man. "This is a big department. Are you sure you've got the right lab."

"Yes. See," said Hequa while pointing to their current location on his flight suit's display panel.

"Hey, that's pretty cool," said the man. "You make that yourself?"

"I made the suit, and programmed the computer myself, yes," said Hequa. "Sallycat was going to help me connect it with the internet, but I have not heard from her in months. I want a progress report."

"Well, I don't know any Sallycat. But connecting to wifi should be a breeze compared to what you've already done," said the man.

"Could you help me do this?" asked Hequa.

"Maybe," said the man thoughtfully. "But you'll want to talk to your advisor first."

"I have no advisor," said Hequa. "She was killed by The Order, back where I am from."

"That sounds terrible. But you are a student here, aren't you?" asked the man.

"Sometimes I sneak in and pretend to be a student," admitted Hequa. "Admissions require identity documents that I don't have."

Upon hearing this, the man frowned, then looked up and down the halls conspiratorially. “Between you and me, son, fuck the system,” he said, handing Hequa a business card. “If you want help learning CS, I’ll help. Your place or mine. I’ll help you out. Just shoot me an email, and we can set something up.”

Chapter 13

One particularly warm spring day, Hequa was down by the river gorging on log bugs when he heard a familiar voice. “Hequa? Is that you?” called Sallycat from a dozen paces away. “What are you doing down here?”

Looking up from his meal, Hequa saw Sallycat and Constance approaching. Finishing his current mouthful of grubs and insects, he said, “Hello Constance and Sallycat. Sallycat, your phone number only goes to voicemail and your computer lab was closed. What progress have you made? And how is your trital?”

“We’re smoking a blunt. You want some?” asked Constance while pointing a small, smoldering brown object in Hequa’s direction.

“I will try it. You’ll have to show me how,” said Hequa. “I know how people smoke, I’ve just never done it.”

While Constance coached Hequa through hitting the blunt, Sallycat thought about how best to respond to Hequa’s questions. Settling on the truth, he said, “I’m sorry. I don’t know what

to tell you. Your waterproof computer was cool, but that stuff you said about the trital or whatever made no sense to me. I've got the tiny octopus thing. She's doing fine. I made her a little world in her aquarium. I call her Annie. Little Annie Octopus. But I don't know about the other stuff."

Feeling slightly woozy from the blunt, Hequa tried to take in the horror in what he'd just heard without losing his temper. "You made the trital a pet?" he asked. "Did you connect it to a colors crystal?"

"Dude, you made that up! Seriously," said Sallycat. "There's no such thing as a colors crystal."

"Sallycat, think about having a single purpose for being," Hequa said slowly. "Understand that serving this purpose feels very good, while not serving this purpose feels very bad. The purpose of a trital is to compute using a colors crystal. A trital without a colors crystal is a trital in great pain at all times."

"No way! That's awful," said Sallycat sarcastically.

"It would be better for you to kill the trital than to let it suffer like this, if you are not going to keep our agreement," said Hequa.

"Well, what am I supposed to do? I don't have a colors crystal or whatever. And I think Annie's just fine," said Sallycat.

"If I give you a colors crystal, will you give it to Annie?" asked Hequa.

“What? Okay, sure,” answered Sallycat. “You got one on you or something?”

“No, I will have to make it,” said Hequa. “It is a slow, careful process that I must work, to end the trital’s suffering. Do you have any sticks of fine carbon I could use for the process?”

“Fresh out,” said Sallycat. “Just text me when you’ve got the crystal or whatever.”

“Hey Hequa, what were you doing down here before we showed up?” asked Constance.

“Eating log bugs. I found a great soft log if you would like to join,” answered Hequa. “And I will text you when I’ve made the crystal,” he said to Sallycat.

“Are you trying to say that you ate bugs from that tree stump?” asked Constance.

“Yes. There are very good bugs here, by this river,” replied Hequa.

“I don’t know whether to be grossed out or impressed,” commented Sallycat.

“Hey, we should get going. I’ve got class in twenty,” said Constance.

Three days later at a coffee shop, Hequa met Sallycat to hand over a colors crystal. They sat, each with a drink, at a small

round table. “Here it is,” said Hequa while placing a large napkin on the table. On the napkin, a colors crystal sat, like an elongated crystalline teardrop.

“Oh my god you actually did it,” said Sallycat. “You are officially the weirdest person I know. So what exactly am I supposed to do with this?”

“Just put it in the tank. The trital will first connect to the crystal. If it has the proper elements nearby, it will then begin to make its signals hub. Do you remember what elements I told you?” asked Hequa.

“I made a note of it in my phone. I can look it up,” said Sallycat.

“Good,” said Hequa. “You will also have to add an input device, and arrange the display hairs that will grow from the signals hub into a repeating pattern, or the trital’s computing will not be clear.”

“Again – no idea what that means,” said Sallycat. “But I promise to put this crystal in the tank with Annie, if it’ll make you feel better.”

Chapter 14

The following week, Hequa was sleeping in his nest when he heard an insistent knock on his door. “Hequa! Hequa, I know you’re there. I saw you come in. You’ve got a visitor. And you got a text from your friend,” came Betty’s voice. Before Hequa could get up, he heard the sound of a key in the door, and Betty entered his studio apartment.

“I thought this was my building, for one year!” said Hequa gruffly while disentangling himself from the large pile of strips of cloth on the floor in which he slept.

Betty glared at the nest, but did not comment on it. Nor did she comment on the assorted oddities she saw neatly scattered around the small space. She almost asked about the large chunk of rotten wood sitting on the counter next to the sink, but thought better of it. “Sorry, I didn’t know you were sleeping,” she said. “Anyway, there’s coffee and cookies. And Tom’s got someone here he wants you to meet. To talk about that knife.”

Following Betty to the main house, Hequa found Tom and a man he didn’t know sitting at the kitchen table. “Hequa. This is Gabe. He’s interested in investing in your knife, and has some

questions,” said Tom.

“Good to meet you, Gabe,” said Hequa, sitting down. “I will answer while I eat cookies.”

Chuckling at the comment, Betty put a plate of cookies on the table next to the molknife, and a cup of steaming coffee in front of Hequa, before sitting down. Looking to Gabe, Hequa saw a man about as old as Tom, but with more body weight and much more facial hair.

“First, let me just say that this knife is marvelous,” said Gabe. “Really marvelous. How did you ever come up with it?”

“It is an old design,” answered Hequa. “A very good tool for cutting.”

“Right, but what exactly is it made of?” asked Gabe.

“The blade was grown from carbon and element Ta. The handle is plastic from water creatures. Within the handle is a switch and a light, to make the blade wiggle for cutting,” explained Hequa.

“While why does it have to be kept damp?” asked Gabe while making a note in a small notepad.

“Water powers the light, and keeps the handle from breaking,” replied Hequa.

“Hequa, this is important,” said Tom. “How did you make the

blade? What process did you use?"

"I made it with little carbons and the smallest pieces of Ta," said Hequa, grabbing a second cookie. "The Ta is added as a gas, folded into very hot liquid carbon in a special way."

"Amazing," said Gabe.

"You see what I mean?" said Tom.

"Well, what about the light?" asked Gabe. "Exactly what kind of light is it?"

"An invisible light that flickers in a special way," answered Hequa. "I think you call them lasers."

"And how exactly does water power this laser?" asked Gabe.

"The same way water powers most devices. The hydrogens and oxygens are separated and then recombined," replied Hequa.

"I don't follow," admitted Gabe.

"It is ... I don't know the words to explain it better," said Hequa, embarrassed.

"That's okay," said Betty. "I think that's enough for now, you two," she said to Tom and Gabe.

"Well okay then," said Gabe. "I guess that's good enough for now."

“Betty, can I see the text from my friend?” asked Hequa.

“Oh right. Here you go,” said Betty, handing Hequa her phone.

The text from Sallycat read: ‘OMG it worked. You are an alien! Let’s meet up and you can tell me all about it.’

“Betty, can I use your phone to call Sallycat?” asked Hequa.

“Go ahead,” said Betty. “But you’ll have to get your own phone one of these days.”

“Thank you,” said Hequa, pushing the screen to make the call.

“Sallycat, it is Hequa calling,” said Hequa when the call went through. “Good. Do you have the element In? Sorry, element forty-nine. Just a small bit is enough. Because the trital needs it for the signals hub. Yes, I can meet. Good. I will see you there.”

Returning the phone to Betty, Hequa noticed both Tom and Gabe looking at him expectantly. “That was my friend Sallycat,” he explained. “I must go now to meet her about a computer.”

Chapter 15

“Sallycat. Sallycat,” yelled Hequa when he reached the address he’d been given.

“Shut up and come inside,” said Sallycat from the building’s doorway.

“Can I get you anything? Tea? Beer?” asked Sallycat as they entered her apartment.

“Water,” replied Hequa. “And some blunt, if you have any.”

Sallycat laughed. “Here’s some water, but no can do on the blunt,” she said. “Do you want to see it?”

“I see it,” said Hequa, having just noticed the trital’s small aquarium on a window ledge. Moving to more closely inspect this, he waved his hand in front of the glass, and saw the creature’s color pattern respond in a healthy way. “Good. The hairs seem to be growing right. Your Annie has merged well with the crystal, even after the neglect,” he said.

“Here. Sit down,” said Sallycat, gesturing to the couch where

she herself took a seat. "I want you to tell me all about being an alien," she said. "Start with where you're from and how you got here."

"But what about your computer? Have you added the element In?" asked Hequa, sitting down.

"We'll get to that later," said Sallycat. "First, I want to hear your story. Sorry if I didn't believe you before. But it's just so crazy. Now I want to hear everything."

"Sallycat, you thought I was crazy but agreed to help me anyway, so I will tell you my story," said Hequa. "I came to your planet almost a year ago, from a distant world called Jhanya. There was what you could call a revolution on my world, and my people were killed. To escape, I stole a space vessel, and journeyed here, where no one would ever look for me."

"Okay, so where's your spaceship?" asked Sallycat.

"At the bottom of the sea known as Lake Superior," replied Hequa. "But it should be fully decomposed by now, so no one will ever find it."

"Well, how'd you know to come here? And if you could do it, why couldn't someone else from your world come here, too?" asked Sallycat.

"The journey took over three hundred of your years, in suspended animation," explained Hequa. "It is a very uncomfortable ride, Earth is of low importance to my people, and The

Order now in power on Jhanya. And The Order does not explore.”

“So more of you could still come, in theory? Wait, have your people been here before?” asked Sallycat.

“Yes and yes,” said Hequa. “In theory, someone could follow me here, but I do not think this will happen. And your world was mapped about eight hundred years ago, but our explorers found no magic here, nor anything else of interest that would make returning worthwhile.”

“Did you just say magic?” asked Sallycat.

“Maybe I used the wrong word,” admitted Hequa. “The use of subtle forces of mind and body to create changes in the world? I thought magic was the right word. It is in many of your books for children in the library.”

“Maybe it is,” agreed Sallycat. “Maybe it’s magic. But magic isn’t real. It’s just tricks. Illusions. For entertainment.”

“There was real magic on my world, kept by my people,” said Hequa bitterly. “This is why The Order killed my people, to kill our magic, so we couldn’t use it to oppose them.”

“I’m sorry. That sounds awful,” said Sallycat.

“It is awful,” agreed Hequa. “But for me, that is all in the past. Now there is only Earth, and my new life.”

“But, like, you’ve only been here a year?” asked Sallycat.

“Yes,” said Hequa.

“What I mean is, how are you doing so well? And aren’t you afraid the Men in Black will come and take you away to Area 51 or whatever?” asked Sallycat.

“Is this something I should fear?” asked Hequa. “What area are we in now?”

“You should be careful is all I’m saying,” said Sallycat.

“I am filled with care,” said Hequa. “But how will I know if Men in Black are trying to take me?”

“Dunno. I’ve only ever seen it in the movies,” said Sallycat. “Maybe it’s not a real thing. Not a real threat. But still, you need to be careful. If word ever got out about you, the government might try to dissect you or something.”

“I don’t understand ‘dissect,’” said Hequa.

“It means take apart. The government might try to take you apart,” said Sallycat.

Hequa was taken aback. “How can this be? I still do not understand ‘government’. They are like your rulers? Why would your rulers want to do such a thing?”

“If the government can’t understand something, it destroys it,”

said Sallycat. “Just the fact that you’re an alien makes you a threat to them.”

“I don’t understand,” said Hequa. “I think you are joking me.”

“Whatever. Anyway, we’re getting off track. I want to know more about you. Like, what do you think of Earth?” asked Sallycat.

“I have not seen all of Earth yet,” said Hequa. “I do like many things about the planet. But I don’t like the cold winter, or money. What really is money? No one seems to be able to tell me, but people use money at all times. No matter how hard I try, I can’t figure it out.”

“Don’t think too hard about money. And I mean what do you think about this planet? Like, really think about it?” asked Sallycat.

“I think it’s beautiful. It is sad that this beauty seems to be in a fight with many of the ways you people live,” said Hequa.

“How poetic. But okay, maybe give me an example of what you’re talking about,” said Sallycat.

“You make waste into clean water,” said Hequa.

“Fair point. Got another example?” asked Sallycat.

“With your devices, you are always other places from where you are. This is one of the strangest things to me,” said Hequa.

“But everything here is strange and new. I am learning to like the food. But I have not learned to like how separate you all seem to be from each other. When I learned the word tragic, this separation is what I thought of.”

“Now that’s what I’m talking about,” said Sallycat encouragingly. “What else?”

“When I first arrived, I became very sick, and spent some days in one of your hospitals. The room where I was kept seemed very much like a torture preparation room, on my planet,” said Hequa. “I was confused, and thought I had somehow been captured by The Order. Even now, I can not understand why your people would use such horrible rooms for healing.”

“What are hospital rooms like where you’re from?” asked Sallycat.

“They are very different. The walls are lined with special lights that help the healing. The measuring tools come out of the walls when tests need to be done. And every room has a healing pool, and a place where medicines are grown,” said Hequa. “And there are no terminal stories playing.”

“Terminal stories?” asked Sallycat.

“Yes. There was a display terminal on the wall where I was, and it played many stories that I found fascinating,” explained Hequa.

“Televisions. We call them televisions,” said Sallycat, pointing

to her own television across from the couch where they sat.
“They’re everywhere.”

“I understand this now,” said Hequa. “But what I don’t understand is why. Why are these things so popular?”

“Why don’t I just show you?” asked Sallycat, picking up a remote.
“Bet I can find Men in Black here somewhere.”

Chapter 16

“Get up. You’ve got to go. I’ve got to get to class,” said Sallycat, rousing Hequa from his slumber on the couch.

“What? Oh, I didn’t mean to sleep here,” said Hequa, getting up.

“No biggie,” said Sallycat. “You can show me more about the trital another time. And I still want to hear more about your world. But for now, you’ve got to go.”

Walking back to his own apartment, Hequa could feel the buzz of a world coming alive in springtime. Feeling happy to be a part of this buzzing life, and grateful to have met such a good friend as Sallycat, Hequa was feeling very good about his prospects. This feeling vanished when he arrived home to find the door wide open, and Betty inside his apartment, stuffing his nest into large plastic bags. “Betty, what are you doing?” he demanded.

“Moving you out!” said Betty. “Some people from the government came this morning and made Tom give them that knife. And even though Tom lied and said he got it from the thrift store, I don’t think he was fooling anyone. I think Gabe put ‘em

on to Tom, so they must know about you, and they'll be back for you. So you've got to go."

"Was it the Men in Black?" asked Hequa. "After last night, I thought that was just a fiction."

"Department of Energy, they said," said Betty, resuming the work of stuffing bags. "But they'll call ICE in a heartbeat, once they know you're an illegal alien."

"ICE?" asked Hequa, his thoughts racing.

"Immigration and Customs Enforcement," replied Betty. "Now I'm sorry, but you just can't stay here anymore. Tom's all broken up about the knife. He thought we were going to be rich. You know they took all his drawings and notes on that knife, too? And made us both sign papers swearing never to talk about the thing again, with anyone? Oh Hequa, I know you didn't mean any harm, but this whole thing has turned into one giant pain in the neck."

Silently, feeling ashamed, Hequa collected his belongings. Wrapping the laptop Sallycat had given him in the kimono sash, gathering his set of clothes and the five large water bottles in which tritals had barely started merging with colors crystals, he wrapped these belongings in his big winter coat, and used strips of cloth from what remained of his nest to secure the bundle. "Betty, I am sorry," he said. "I will leave here now as you request. Before I go, could I use your phone?"

Without a word, Betty handed the phone over. "Thank you,"

said Hequa, dialing the number for Robert Butler. “Robert Butler? This is Hequa,” he said into the phone. “We met outside a computer lab at the U. You told me ‘fuck the system’, and that you would help if I need it. Today, I need it. Because I must leave my home, and the Department of Energy may be calling ICE on me. No, I can sleep in the river, but I have five computers that need to be kept safe, which is why I called you. Yes. Yes, thank you. I will arrive soon.”

Handing the phone back to Betty, Hequa said, “I’m sorry. And please tell Tom I’m sorry.”

“Oh son, we’re both sorry, too,” said Betty. “I can handle the cleanup here. It’s really very clean, aside from these rags and that log you dragged in. You just be careful out there.”

Walking through an unfamiliar part the city, wearing his flight suit and carrying all of his other possessions in a bundle, Hequa tried to recall all he’d read about the Department of Energy. All he could really recall was that they were a part of the central government, which wasn’t very helpful. How could it be that the government could cause him to lose his building? Was that their power, to control the buildings? In a place that got so cold, Hequa could see how that would be a great power. But even though he didn’t understand, the whole thing seemed needlessly cruel, to him, and to Tom and Betty.

Arriving to Robert’s house, Hequa walked up to the door and shouted, “Robert! Robert Butler!”

Before long, the door opened, and Robert appeared. “Come on

in,” he said. “There’s coffee on if you want some.”

“Yes. I like coffee,” said Hequa, following Robert to a small kitchen.

“Are your computers in there?” asked Robert, pointing to Hequa’s bundle, once they were seated with coffee. “Well, let’s see ‘em.”

Undoing the bundle, Hequa placed the five water bottles on the table. Then after a moment’s pause, he also placed the laptop Sallycat had given him on the table. “I’m sorry,” he said. “There are six computers here that need to be kept safe. Not five, like I said.”

As Hequa spoke, the trital whose colors crystal merger was farthest along began emanating soft red and blue lights. “You see? We are just in time to see this one begin to make its signals hub,” he said.

“That’s far out. But you called these things computers, and they just look like little octopuses in murky water bottles to me,” said Robert.

“They are tritals. They are growing to be computers. Just like the computer in the arm of my suit, here. I showed that to you when we met,” replied Hequa. “But they will need help to grow into computers that can be used.”

“That’s some story,” said Robert, studying the glowing trital closely. “Where do they come from?”

"I grew them from cuttings of my own computer," answered Hequa. "I had to make a colors crystal for Sallycat's trital, and because colors crystals are made six at a time, I had five crystals left, so I started growing these. But then I lost my building this morning, which is why I need your help."

"Okay, let's say I believe you, that these are computers. How exactly do they work?" asked Robert.

"I don't have all the words, but I will try to explain," said Hequa. "The trital connects to the crystal, which connects to the signals hub. The signals hub connects to input devices, and outputs to display hairs, which are usually arranged into a screen. The input devices tell the signals hub to make a light pattern, which passes through the crystal to the trital. The trital then reads the light and makes a new light pattern, which passes back to the crystal, and into the signals hub, which displays this new pattern with its display hairs."

"Huh," said Robert, frowning. "So you're telling me these little things are light-based processors? Setting aside the fact that that's impossible, how would that even work, programming-wise?"

"Tritals like numbers grids, and feedback," replied Hequa. "In simple, they are fed grids of numbers, and told whether their response is correct until most or all of their responses are correct. Is this not how all computers are programmed?"

Robert laughed. "This is nuts, but you make it sound so plausible," he said. "Say I bite, and agree to help you with these?"

What exactly would you want me to do?"

"Before more days pass, they should be put into larger tanks. Aquariums. Once they are mature, they can be very compact. But while they are growing, they need space to move," explained Hequa. "I have given them most of what they need already, but they all need element In. Number forty-nine, if they are to combine input devices with their signals hubs in a good way."

"In? Forty-nine? You mean indium? How much do you need? I've got a bit of indium foil laying around here, somewhere," said Robert. "Used it for thermal interfacing, on a project I did ages ago."

Hequa grinned broadly. "You have this? Here? Each trital uses a very small piece. Can I take a piece to Sallycat? Her trital is very ready for it," he said.

"You know what? What the hell? You can grow your octopuses here, and I'll give you a piece of indium to take with you," agreed Robert. "I mean, what's the worst that could happen, right? If you're just nuts, no problem. And if what you say is true – crazy as it is – then I think I want to be a part of whatever you're into here."

Suddenly suspicious, Hequa asked, "Are you certain? No joke? This is not the coffee intoxication talking for you?"

"No joke. And I don't know what you mean by coffee intoxication. Let's just do this," said Robert. "I've got a bunch of little aquariums in the basement from back when I used to grow

fungi. Let's go check 'em out, and you can tell me if they'll work."

Hequa followed Robert down a steep set of stairs and into the basement, which was filled with piles and piles of objects. Robert turned on some lights, and Hequa marveled at the collection of things he had never seen before.

"First, the indium," said Robert, pulling a seemingly random book from the middle of one haphazard pile of stuff. From this book, he produced a square paper envelope, measuring under three inches on a side. Unfolding this envelope to inspect its contents, he said, "Got it! There are three pieces left, but they're big enough that we can cut them in half, if all you need is a little bit for each. Now let's see about those aquariums."

Leading Hequa between piles of junk further back into the basement, Robert pushed a large, unknown appliance aside, and they came to the open door of a small room with a long work bench and a wide variety of unfamiliar tools hanging on its walls. "We can work in here," said Robert. "Why don't you go get those bottles while I dig out the aquariums."

By the time Hequa returned with the bottles, Robert had set five little aquariums on the small room's workbench. "Do these need to be sterilized?" asked Robert.

"I do not know this use of that word," said Hequa. "The water tanks look good. But we will need more water, to add to the tanks after pouring the tritals from the bottles."

“Is that some kind of ammonia solution you’ve got them in?” asked Robert as Hequa poured out the contents of the first bottle.

“Yes. From urine, which is the easiest way,” said Hequa.

Chapter 17

“Sallycat! Sallycat, I brought indium for your trital!” called Hequa while standing in front of Sallycat’s apartment building. As no one answered, Hequa sat down to wait, enjoying the day’s hard rain. Waiting there, he noticed that many worms had come to the surface with the rain. He began gathering these together, and had a double handful ready when Sallycat finally walked up. “Sallycat! I have indium and worms for you,” he said excitedly.

“No worms,” said Sallycat, who appeared unhappy. “I need to get out of this rain. I’m soaked. You can come in, but you have to leave the worms outside.”

Hequa ate a large bite of the worms, but left the rest outside in accordance with Sallycat’s request. In the apartment, he waited for several minutes while Sallycat changed in another room. “Have I done something wrong, for you to refuse food from me?” he asked when she reappeared. “Are you upset about giving indium to Annie Octopus? I promise this is for the best.”

“Worms aren’t food, Hequa. And I just got done with class. We can still do whatever with Annie. But just give me a minute,”

said Sallycat.

Understanding his error, Hequa sat down on the couch and wondered why it had become taboo to eat worms in this world. After losing his building because of the government, becoming aware of this taboo should have been a minor thing, but it felt big. It reminded him of how much he still did not know, and how much he had yet to learn if he ever hoped to really fit in. Sitting there, thinking about his lost building, feeling bad for having caused Tom and Betty so much trouble, Hequa began to cry.

“I made coffee,” said Sallycat, interrupting his thoughts. “Hey, what’s wrong, Hequa?”

“Everything is wrong,” sobbed Hequa. “I lost my apartment today and ICE might be looking for me and now I upset you and you’re my only friend.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not upset. I’m here for you, Hequa,” said Sallycat, setting down the coffees and hugging Hequa for a long moment. “I don’t know what the deal is, but I’m sorry you lost your place.”

“This is just such a strange world,” said Hequa, grateful for the comfort. “Today, the Department of Energy came and took a knife I gave to Tom. And because of this, Tom and Betty will not let me stay in their building anymore. And ICE might try to find me. I have been here for a year and still I don’t know what to do.”

“Is there somewhere else you can stay,” asked Sallycat gently.

“It is warm enough that I can go back to sleeping in the river,” said Hequa. “But I am trying to be like the people of Earth, and no one else sleeps in the river.”

Sallycat laughed. “You really are an alien. I love it,” she said. “Okay, first things first. Let’s do the indium thing.”

Retrieving the metal foil sandwiched between two pieces of paper from a suit pocket, Hequa asked, “Do you have input devices ready?”

“Nope,” said Sallycat. “And I have no idea what kind of input device might work, either.”

“Any small enough thing that emits light or vibration in response to touch will work,” explained Hequa. “Even a single light will work, but it takes a very long time to program a computer with just one light.”

“What about electricity? We could maybe just start with a bunch of wires, and add controls to them later?” asked Sallycat.

“Yes, that might work,” said Hequa. “Just make sure to put the wires against the signals hub within a week of adding indium to Annie’s tank.”

“You make sure. You’re helping me with it!” said Sallycat with mock anger. “Put the indium in now. I want to see it.”

Dropping the metal foil edgewise into the tank, Hequa moved aside so Sallycat could have a clear view of Annie Octopus beginning to manipulate the new material. “That’s so cool,” exclaimed Sallycat. “It’s like she knows we put it in there for her.”

“Yes. But not ‘she’. You can say ‘she’, but tritals have many more than two genders. On Jhanya, we call them something like your word ‘it,’” explained Hequa.

“It’s a her,” said Sallycat. “Annie is a her or this is over.”

“Agreed,” said Hequa, feeling somewhat better.

“Want to watch Men in Black part two?” asked Sallycat.

“There are more parts? Yes, let’s watch it, and drink coffee until the viewing terminal melts!” replied Hequa.

“You’re hilarious and your jokes aren’t even funny,” said Sallycat, giggling.

Chapter 18

Having refused to eat any log bugs for several days, and having found that it took him about three hours of collecting bucks from passing cars to pay for a restaurant meal, Hequa had wondered how anyone in this world could afford to stay fed. Wondering this aloud to Sallycat, he'd been directed to the grocery store around which he now wandered, looking for assistance. "Hello store person," he said to a man wearing a shirt with the store's insignia on it. "Can you help me?"

"Sure," said the man, looking overly happy.

"I am a normal person who does not eat log bugs," said Hequa. "But do you sell a food that is like log bugs, but for normal people?"

The man thought for a moment before replying, "Maybe try shrimp, over there with all the other seafood. They're basically water bugs."

"Thank you," said Hequa, heading in the indicated direction.

In the parking lot of the store, Hequa gorged himself on frozen shrimp and birdseed. When he was finished, there remained no shrimp, half of the seeds were gone, and he felt full for the first time in days. Heading towards the library, enjoying the bright spring afternoon, Hequa saw something that he had to go and investigate. A very young man in a top hat, standing atop a small wooden box, was declaring to a small crowd that he was a magician.

Hequa watched the magician's act, which included tricks with cards and ropes and metal rings. To Hequa's eye, the trickster was good, but not great. Still, the crowd clapped semi-enthusiastically with every trick, and several people placed bucks in the magician's hat when this was passed around. As he watched, it dawned on Hequa that this was the sort of person he'd been mistaken for by Constance when they'd met.

"Hello Great Bamzini," said Hequa when the crowd had dispersed. "You have good tricks. Can I ask you some questions?"

"Fine," said the Great Bamzini.

"Is there any real magic at all in your show? And where did you get that hat?" asked Hequa.

"Great. You're one of those," said the Great Bamzini.

"I mean no offense," said Hequa. "I want to know if I can become a great magician with your kind of hat?"

The Great Bamzini chuckled. "Before you get the hat, you have

to learn your tricks,” he said. “Do you know your tricks?”

Hequa smiled. “I have many good tricks,” he said.

“Alright. Let’s see it. Show me something,” said the Great Bamzini, expectant.

After looking around to make sure nobody was watching, Hequa extended his hand, palm up, towards the Great Bamzini. Just above his palm, Hequa caused a series of bursts of blue fire to appear, each one larger than the last. “How is this trick? Is it worth the hat?”

“Shit, with tricks like that, you don’t need no hat,” said the Great Bamzini. “Wow. I can’t tell at all how you’re doing that.”

“A magic spell, of course,” said Hequa, turning off his suit’s hydrogen torch with a careful flick of his wrist.

“Fine. Don’t tell me. Hell, I’d keep it a secret if it were me,” said the Great Bamzini. “Let me guess, it’s built into the suit?”

“That is right,” said Hequa. “My trick was that you did not know I carried a flame in my suit. What did you mean, about me needing no hat?”

“People come for the show, not the hat,” said the Great Bamzini. “What’s your name, by the way?”

“I am Hequa, from Jhanya,” said Hequa. “I do parties.”

"I'll bet," said the Great Bamzini. "You got a card or something? Maybe I could open for you sometime?"

"What does this mean, to open for me?" asked Hequa.

"You know, open. Go on first, and warm up the crowd before you come in with your expensive fire gimmicks and whatever," explained the Great Bamzini. "What's your act all about, anyway?"

Thinking back to the party where Constance had given him fifty bucks, Hequa said, "I cut things in half. I am an alien from outer space who cuts things in half."

"And you're looking for an opener, right? That's why you're talking to me? Look, I know my act is a little unpolished, but I can do it!" said the Great Bamzini.

"If you come here at this time tomorrow with a hat for me, I agree you can open for me," said Hequa. "But now, I must vomit up many ice shrimps."

The Great Bamzini waited politely while Hequa forcefully expelled the contents of his stomach across the busy downtown sidewalk. "Man, you okay?" he asked Hequa when the retching had stopped.

"I am sick from eating new food, but this will pass," said Hequa. "I thought we agreed to meet tomorrow. Was there something else?"

“Well, you still haven’t given me your card,” said the Great Bamzini. “And I’m sorta wondering if you’d buy me some beer.”

“I have no card, and need more bucks before I can go buying again,” said Hequa. “Now, I must go sleep in the river. See you tomorrow. With the hat.”

Chapter 19

To his credit, the Great Bamzini had a hat waiting for Hequa when he arrived the next day. “This is very good,” said Hequa under the darkly overcast sky. “But why is this hat red, while yours is black.”

“Red goes better with your yellow suit,” said the Great Bamzini. “Plus, it’s the only other hat I had.”

Trying the hat on, Hequa found that it fit, though it felt a bit awkward. “Good. Thank you. I have thought about our show. Are you ready to hear these thoughts?” he asked.

“Sure thing,” said the Great Bamzini.

“The first thing I think is that we should make many bucks,” said Hequa.

“I’m listening,” said the Great Bamzini. “You said you do parties. What do those usually pay.”

“I have done only one party, and it paid fifty bucks,” said Hequa.

The Great Bamzini rolled his eyes. “Are you kidding me right now? I thought you were big time,” he said.

“I don’t know what this means, but I can do many things that others on this planet do not seem able to do,” said Hequa. “You know how to collect bucks for your tricks. I want to learn how to do this.”

“Okay, show me another trick. I saw the flame gimmick, now show me another one so I know I’m not just wasting my time,” said the Great Bamzini.

Having anticipated this, Hequa had placed one of his pea-sized light orbs under his tongue before arriving to the meeting. Now, looking at the Great Bamzini, he smiled broadly, open-mouthed, allowing the light orb to come out from under his tongue and shine brightly on the Great Bamzini’s face.

“Holy shit!” said the young magician.

Returning the light orb to its place under his tongue, Hequa asked, “Is that what you wanted?”

“Holy shit,” said the Great Bamzini again. “I mean, I can definitely work with that. But if you don’t have any bookings, we’ll have to make a video to send around, otherwise no one will believe us.”

“Bookings? What are these?” asked Hequa.

“For shows, duh,” said the Great Bamzini. “Maybe I’ll book the

shows, and we'll split everything fifty-fifty?"

"I can keep the hat?" asked Hequa.

"Keep the hat. But I'll need your contact info, picture, and probably a bio," said the Great Bamzini.

"Why should you need my biology for making bookings," asked Hequa suspiciously.

"No, just a few sentences about who you are," said the Great Bamzini. "I'll have to put up a new website for the act. If you're the star, people will want to know who you are."

"Like I told you, I am Hequa, from Jhanya," said Hequa. "I left my planet to escape The Order, and came to Earth because no one will look for me here. I had an apartment, but I lost it because of the Department of Energy, so now I again live in the river. But I do not eat log bugs, because it is taboo to eat log bugs here, and I honor the local custom."

"That's perfect! Something like that, anyway," said the Great Bamzini. "You might not know the business, but you've really got your character down. Fucking solid."

"So can we meet here again tomorrow?" asked Hequa.

"No. Just give me your number. And your email," said the Great Bamzini.

"My number will not be useful. I don't have a phone," said

Hequa. “But Sallycat helped me get an email. The address is hequafromjhanya@tutanota.com. Robert is keeping my computer safe until I get another apartment, but I can look at my email at the library when Robert isn’t home.”

“Fine,” said the Great Bamzini. “I’ll send you an email when I’ve got something set up. Now stand up straight and look over there. I need a couple of pictures.”

Chapter 20

Having successfully sneaked into yet another lecture about environmental issues earlier in the day, Hequa was equal parts confused and outraged. Although the information he'd learned was in accordance with everything else he'd been learning at the library and on campus, the things he'd learned were so outrageous that he found it difficult to believe them. How could people let the insects and the fish die? How could they burn such vast quantities of fuel that the climate became unstable? How could they spray their cereal grains with poison? Or let plastics get everywhere, including into the creatures they ate?

Reflecting on these questions while he walked down the street, Hequa realized that they pointed to something he found deeply disturbing about these Earth people. Individually, they seemed mostly kind and interesting. But as a whole, they behaved horribly, and seemed incapable of doing better. It was as if all their systems of governments and companies were irreparably broken, and they knew it, but had no power to fix anything. Like they were all under the thumb of The Order, only there was no Order to blame here. There was only people doing things wrong.

Thinking about all the things that had to have happened to eliminate nine tenths of this planet's fish and a third of its insects, Hequa wanted to scream; to make someone answer for such monumental folly. But the people he passed on the sidewalk were not responsible for the travesty. How could they be? They had too little power. The same went for the people passing in the cars. They were, Hequa knew, just like sidewalk people, but in vehicles. So who was responsible? Maybe it was the people he had heard were hiding in the tall buildings, he reasoned. Maybe they were responsible.

Entering one of the tallest buildings he could find, Hequa approached a man sitting behind a large desk. "ID please," said the man, holding out his hand. "Who are you here for?"

"I have no ID, and I am here for the people who cause climate change," said Hequa.

The man behind the desk stifled a laugh. "Just come in to mess with me, did you?" he asked.

"No mess. I want answers. Why are most of the fish dead? Why are the insects dying off? Why are so many people burning fossil fuels?" demanded Hequa.

"Hold on there, buddy. Do I have to call security? Or will you get out of here peacefully?" asked the man.

"I will go," said Hequa. "But will you tell me, are they hiding here? The ones responsible for damaging the environment?"

“Probably,” said the man. “But you can’t see ‘em without ID and an appointment.”

Outside, continuing on his way, Hequa still wanted to take action, but was unclear on what action to take. Perhaps something involving the tall buildings that would require no ID. Considering his recent experience, as well as how worked up Sallycat got every time she talked about the three tall buildings that had been demolished by explosives after two of the buildings were hit by airplanes, Hequa knew how important such buildings were to the people of this planet. They were the key to something, but he didn’t yet know what.

Wondering if there was a way to destroy tall buildings without hurting anyone, Hequa made his way to the library to find someone to ask. “Excuse me,” he said upon finding a librarian. “Where are your books on destroying tall buildings without hurting anyone?”

“That’s not a section,” said the librarian. “If you tell me what exactly you’re after, maybe I can be of more help.”

“I am upset about the environment,” said Hequa. “So I want to do like 9/11, but for the dying fish and insects instead of for the military industrial complex.”

“Hold on,” said the librarian, waving a nearby security guard over. “Why don’t you tell him what you just told me?”

As he obliged, Hequa watched the security guard’s neck flab quiver from rapid jaw clenching. “Let’s just all stay calm, and

I'll escort you to the police," said the guard.

Doubting that the police could help, Hequa nonetheless followed the man to two uniformed officers near the library's entrance. "Got a live one here for you," said the guard. "Sir, will you tell these officers what you just told me?"

Sensing something wrong, Hequa hesitated. "You act like I said something important," he said. "But I just want to learn how people make big buildings fall down. I think if buildings fell down because of harm done to the environment, then people might change their ways."

"Well, good luck with that," said one of the officers. "Come on Cody, are you really wasting our time with this bozo?"

"Come on guys. He's a credible threat," argued the guard.

"Not today he's not. Today, he's just a guy in a kimono," said the officer who had until then said nothing. "Sir, you can go back to looking at books."

Feeling suddenly self-conscious about his attire, Hequa forwent further research to visit the place by the river where his pants and shirt hung from a tree. Finding that these garments had dried from their morning washing, he was about to change into them when he decided to don his freshly-cleaned flight suit instead. "When feelings are big, it is not time for action," he admonished himself in his native tongue. "When danger is clear, it is time for the truth-trance."

Securing his face mask, Hequa proceeded to wade into the river, then let himself settle, underwater, on its uneven ground. There, he assumed the proper posture, and allowed the truth-trance to overtake his consciousness for the first time in many months. Enthralled by this trance, Hequa felt everything he knew being resized by everything else he knew. As the contents of his mind readjusted themselves, he experienced his hopes and his fears as fluids, flowing through his subtle body like the river that flowed around him. Hours passed.

Coming back into himself, Hequa made his way to the shore and arose from the river. The sun was nearly down. He felt clear-headed, but hungry. And he'd sworn off log bugs. Hequa knew he'd have to leave soon to find an available food seller. So he put on his top hat, and headed for a nearby pizza place he knew.

In the line for pizza, Hequa found that his ensemble was attracting attention. Although no one said anything to him, a handful of young people were staring. "I do shows with the great Bamzini," he said to the small crowd. "And I want to talk about environmental issues."

As soon as Hequa said this, everyone looked away. He got his slices of pizza and found a place at the counter. Eating these slices in the relative silence of a noisy restaurant, Hequa thought about trying borrow a phone to call Sallycat, but decided against it. When his meal was consumed, he noticed a very young man approaching.

"Dude, you seriously do parties?" asked the man.

“Yes, I do parties!” replied Hequa.

“Like, what exactly do you do?” asked the man.

“I cut things in half,” said Hequa.

“What things? Like a person? I saw that once,” said the man.

“Things like beer bottles and locks,” said Hequa. “Have you ever seen a lock cut in half?”

“No,” said the man. “But I want to. Do you work for tips or ... ?”

“Fifty bucks. I can work for fifty bucks. If you want the Great Bamzini too, it is a hundred,” said Hequa.

Chapter 21

Looking at his forged identification card, Hequa said the name it bore aloud. “Hector Richardson,” he said, savoring the sound of the name. “I am Hector Richardson. I am from Earth and I know what toilet paper is for. I got this ID from the government and not from a college student for five hundred bucks. My name is Hector Richardson.”

Securing the ID in a pocket with his bucks, Hequa walked until he accidentally found Sallycat on her way home from class. “Oh hey, Hequa,” she said. “What’s up?”

“I have an ID,” said Hequa, brandishing the card.

“Good for you, uh, Hector. Is that your real name?” asked Sallycat.

“It is my new ID’s name,” said Hequa. “Do you like it?”

“I like Hequa better. But yeah, that’s a pretty good fake.” said Sallycat.

“It better be good. I paid five hundred bucks for it,” said Hequa.

“You got robbed,” said Sallycat. “Three hundred’s the going rate.”

Hequa shrugged. “I paid what he asked, and got what I wanted,” he said. “Now I can ride the bus, and go to movies, and visit the tall buildings and maybe even ride in a plane.”

“Cool. Whatever,” said Sallycat. “Give me a call soon. I found a new documentary you’ve got to watch, called Human Resources. And we need to figure out Annie’s input devices.”

“Good, Sallycat. I will call,” said Hequa.

Getting on the bus, Hequa tried to show the driver his new ID, and was told he just needed to pay the fare. Arriving to the movie theater, his ID was likewise dismissed as irrelevant. The movie itself was an action film he didn’t understand. And every time he asked a question about the film, his neighbor told him to be quiet.

Feeling let down, Hequa walked slowly across a long bridge towards some tall buildings. He was hungry, but had only six bucks, which he spent on birdseed at a hardware store. Eating his birdseed from the bag, Hequa got an idea, and entered one of the tall buildings. When challenged by the security guard, he showed his ID, and said, “I am Hector Richardson. I do shows with the Great Bamzini. I am here for a show.”

“What floor?” asked the security guard absently.

“The top floor,” replied Hequa with a confidence he did not feel.

“Elevator to your right. I’ll call up and let them know you’re coming,” said the security guard.

While enjoying the elevator ride to the top floor, Hequa placed a light orb under his tongue in case he had to do a trick. Exiting the elevator, he found a long hallway, and chose a door at random. Suddenly faced with a large, busy office, Hequa almost turned around to try another door. But a receptionist caught his eye and waved him over.

“You look lost. Can I help you?” asked the receptionist.

“I do shows with the great Bamzini. Would you like us to do a show for your next party?” asked Hequa.

“Sir, I think you’re in the wrong place. This is an insurance company,” said the receptionist.

“You can book us at www.greatbamzini.com,” said Hequa. “We do parties and other events. The cost is a hundred bucks.”

“You’re not allowed to solicit here,” said the receptionist. “Do I have to call security?”

“No security,” said Hequa. “But is this where the people who are killing the planet hide? Are the frackers and insect poisoners here?”

“I’m calling security,” said the receptionist.

After being escorted out of the building by security, Hequa tried several other tall buildings, but did not find anyone who admitted to killing the planet. So he went to the library, only to find it closed for the day. With only one buck left, Hequa walked aimlessly around the city until his birdseed had all been consumed. He was about to head back to his spot by the river, but he heard music, and decided to investigate.

The bar that the music was coming from had a long line in front of it. Hequa got in the line. When it was his turn at the door, he handed his ID to the doorman.

“This is fake,” said the doorman, pulling the ID away from Hequa.

“It is mine,” said Hequa, his hand darting out to grab the ID before it disappeared.

“That’s it. I’m calling the cops,” said the doorman.

Hequa left quickly, and walked three miles to Robert’s house, enjoying the summer evening. “Robert,” he called when he arrived. “Robert!”

A few minutes later Robert opened the door. “Oh hey there,” said Robert. “You know my doorbell works fine. Come on in.”

“Your house smells like blunt,” commented Hequa as he was led into the kitchen. “Can I use my laptop computer to watch Human Resources, the documentary?”

“You want to watch it here? Well, I guess that’s okay,” said Robert. “The truth is, I’ve just been watching your tritals. I tried connecting an old joystick to one, with the wires we put in place, just to see what would happen. And you know what? I think it actually worked. Now, when I move the stick, the display hairs’ colors change, as if the trital knows what’s happening.”

“Very good,” said Hequa. “Should we go and see it? I want to see.”

After demonstrating the joystick’s success, Robert said, “There. You see? But there’s something related I need to ask you about. Now, don’t get mad, but I tried to take a biopsy of one of the tritals, for study, and I couldn’t do it. It was like the scalpel wasn’t sharp enough, or something.”

Parsing the statement, Hequa frowned. “Tritals are very strong. To cut one, you need a special knife.”

“Really? What kind of special knife?” asked Robert.

Hequa took out a molknife and cut a large wrench in half to demonstrate his tool’s effectiveness. “You must be very careful,” he said, deactivating the knife and handing it to Robert. “And do not press this button.”

Robert looked at the knife, turning it over and over to thoroughly inspect it. He tested its deactivated edge on his workbench and found it sharp, but not unusually so. Eventually, he handed the tool back to Hequa, who put it away.

“Maybe it’s time for you to tell me who you really are,” said Robert in a serious but friendly tone. “And I want to know who you stole this stuff from, so I know who to look out for.”

Hequa told Robert the whole story, from the persecution his people faced on Jhanya to his first day on Earth. Robert asked questions, and Hequa answered. While they talked, they migrated from the basement back up to the kitchen table, into what Hequa suspected was the only uncluttered part of the house. By the time each had consumed a cup of tea, Robert was out of questions, and the conversation became more casual.

“You know, I’m way into UFOs and crop circles and stuff,” said Robert. “But now, seeing your tech, with you here right in front of me, there’s a big part of me that just can’t believe it.”

“Believe it or not, I am here,” said Hequa.

“Yeah but, but what did you mean about magic in your world?” asked Robert.

“This is the word I use, but I think it is wrong,” said Hequa. “Here, the word means tricks for a show. But I use the word to describe very powerful tricks that my people learned to do with the mind.”

“So what tricks do you have up your sleeve?” asked Robert.

Hequa adjusted the light orb in his mouth to make it appear as if bright light poured out of him from within.

Chapter 22

One day as the weather grew chilly, Hequa found the U campus locked down. He tried and failed to enter several buildings, and was told that he needed a student pass when he asked a passerby what the problem was. Watching autumn rain drizzle onto the sidewalk, Hequa realized that he'd have to find a new routine. He also had to find a place to stay before it became too cold to sleep in the river. Which meant he had to find a new job, since he'd fallen out with the Great Bamzini the night before.

Sitting down on a bus bench, Hequa considered his options. He had seven hundred and twelve bucks left from doing magic shows at restaurants and kids' parties. He'd done a great many of these shows with the Great Bamzini, and had grown bored, even as the Great Bamzini swore each time that the next show would get them to the 'big time'. Now, idly nibbling birdseed in the rain, Hequa knew that the Great Bamzini was a poor judge of circumstances, and he wondered why he had ever partnered with such a disagreeable young man.

"How do all these people do it?" asked Hequa, aloud to no one. "I know they are all playing the game of bucks, but I hate the

game of bucks.”

“What’s that, then?” asked an umbrella-carrying woman who was passing on the sidewalk.

“I lost my job, and have seven hundred bucks for a new apartment, which is not enough,” answered Hequa.

“Oh. I’m sure you’ll figure something out,” said the woman, quickening her pace to avoid further conversation.

When the bus came, Hequa got on it, not caring where it went. He rode the bus a long way, getting off at a random stop, then walked until he found a coffee shop that looked nearly empty. Entering this shop, he got a coffee, then sat down to enjoy the psychedelic hallucinations that coffee inevitably produced. There, sitting at a table, growing increasingly intoxicated, an idea came to Hequa.

Looking at his flight suit’s display, Hequa called up an inventory of all the items he’d brought to this planet, modifying this to reflect the loss of ten fishing weights and one molknife. Examining this list, thinking about his experiences so far on Earth, Hequa knew that there was great treasure hidden in his flight suit’s pockets. He knew that, if he used it wisely, this treasure could be used to get him everything he needed. But knowing this in general was different than knowing exactly what to do.

“Excuse me,” said Hequa to a man who was using a laptop at a nearby table. “I am trying to plan for using a treasure to make

money without losing the treasure. Do you know how people do that here in America?”

Looking up from the screen, the man looked around to make sure he was the one being addressed before turning to Hequa. “I guess that depends on the treasure,” he said.

“Many small things, unlike any other things on Earth,” said Hequa.

“Is this a riddle or something?” asked the man. “I’m Andy, by the way.”

“Hequa,” said Hequa. “It is no riddle. Only a question that I have. The coffee intoxication brought the question into my mind.”

“Yeah, coffee will do that,” said Andy. “But I don’t know anything about treasures. Maybe try an auction house? No, never mind. You want to keep the treasure. Guess I’m stumped.”

“I too am stumped,” said Hequa. “I need an apartment, but I have seven hundred bucks, and my job doing shows is over.”

“Shit. That sucks,” said Andy sympathetically. “I know someone with a room for four fifty. My friend Bruce. I can text him your number if you want.”

“I have no phone. Can you text him my email instead?” asked Hequa.

“Sure thing,” said Andy, entering the email into his phone as

Hequa spelled it out. "I should warn you, the room's pretty small, and Bruce has a bunch of dogs."

"Dogs are good, and I can occupy a small room," said Hequa. "Thank you for helping me."

"No problem. Nice meeting you," said Andy, turning his attention back to his computer screen.

Wishing he had brought his own laptop to this coffee shop, Hequa returned his attention to his suit's display screen, which he used to plot a course back to Robert's house from this unfamiliar neighborhood. As he began the long walk across town, the rain stopped, and tepid sunlight broke through the clouds. Seeing colors too vividly and feeling as if the weather was in sync with his mood, Hequa appreciated the coffee intoxication as it slowly wore off. By the time he arrived to Robert's house, it was nearly dark, and his head was nearly clear.

Instead of shouting for Robert, Hequa tried the door, and found it unlocked. "Robert," he called from the entryway. "Robert, I am here to check my email."

Proceeding to the kitchen, Hequa located his laptop, and found no new emails waiting for him. Powering the device off, he heard faint noises coming from the basement, and went to see if Robert was there. Reaching the room where the tritals were, Hequa heard Robert in conversation with another man whose voice was familiar. "If I decide to invest, you won't have to worry about any of that," this man's voice said as Hequa opened

the door to the workshop.

“Robert! Be careful of that man!” said Hequa.

“Jesus Hequa, don’t you know how to knock? This is Gabe. He’s a venture capitalist who invests in tech. I was hoping you two could meet,” said Robert.

“Good to see you again Hequa,” said Gabe, smiling broadly. “When I saw the level of engineering going on here with these processors, I thought you might be involved.”

Afraid to address Gabe directly due to the anger he felt, Hequa fixed his eyes on a trital’s undulating light pattern. “Robert, the last person that I knew who met Gabe like this was Tom,” he said. “And the Department of Energy took a knife I gave to Tom the day after he met with Gabe to show him this knife. I think Gabe is trying to steal these tritals and pay you nothing, like he did with the knife.”

“Hequa, Gabe is a respected businessman,” said Robert in a tone of voice that Hequa had never heard. “I’m sure that whatever this other situation was, it was just some big misunderstanding.”

“That’s right. Just a misunderstanding,” said Gabe. “I made your friend Tom an offer and he refused is all that happened. Now Hequa, would you be able to answer some questions about these things and how they compute?”

Hequa instinctively wanted to fight Gabe, right then and there. But there was something in Robert’s tone that suggested

another course of action would be more appropriate. “Okay,” he said. “But answering questions about these is challenging. I need four thousand dollars.”

Robert and Gabe both laughed. “That’s not really how these things work,” said Gabe. “But if I fund the development of these biocomputers, I promise you’ll get a whole lot more than that. These things are worth six figures, at least.”

“Yes. I will answer your questions, but you have to show me the figures,” said Hequa.

The three of them talked for an hour, with Robert and Hequa working together to answer Gabe’s questions. When Gabe left, Robert walked him out, then called Hequa up to the kitchen. “Hequa, I’m sorry,” said Robert. “It’s just, well, we’re sitting on a goldmine here, and I know you’re not great with business stuff, so I made some inquiries. I didn’t mean you any harm, and I hope you’ll still work with me.”

Chapter 23

“I think the government will come tomorrow to take the tritals,” said Hequa. “But I like our experiments, and do not want the government to take them.”

“You seem sure about that,” said Robert, loading a bong.

“It happened before, like I told you, with one of my special knives,” said Hequa. “Tom and Betty were very upset, they threatened me with ICE, and I lost my apartment.”

“Well shit. Guess we’ve got to move ‘em,” said Robert before hitting the bong.

“Can I try that blunt?” asked Hequa.

Robert passed the bong. “You know, I’ve got keys to a bunch of spots on campus,” he said. “There’s one room that’s like a tech graveyard. I’ll bet we could keep the tritals there without anyone else noticing.”

“Everywhere on campus now needs a pass,” said Hequa, coughing. “And I can’t get a pass.”

“Oh man, that’s right,” said Robert. “Fucking fascists. I mean, I guess I could rent a place just for the tritals. I can’t really afford it, and who knows what we could get done before tomorrow, but your tritals are about the coolest thing I’ve ever been involved in. I guess I could do that.”

“I have seven hundred bucks, and I need a place,” said Hequa. “Could you help get a place for me and the tritals for seven hundred bucks?”

“Maybe, but it’s the wrong time of the month,” said Robert. “I could get an overpriced storage unit now, but you couldn’t live there.”

“So what should we do?” asked Hequa. “I have hiding places by the river. We could hide them there?”

“Too risky,” said Robert. “Oh wait a minute. I have a friend with a room open. It’s not too late. Be quiet while I call her.”

Listening to Robert’s side of the drawn out conversation that followed, Hequa became sure that the effort was futile. But then, hanging up, Robert smiled. “Looks like we’re a go,” he said. “But we’ve got to get the tritals packed up and in the car now. We’re supposed to be there in an hour.”

“Hi I’m Angie,” said the elderly woman who came to the door. “And you must be the star student, Hequa.”

“I am a star student,” said Hequa thoughtfully. “Thank you for helping me.”

“Oh it’s no bother,” said Angie. “That basement studio has been vacant for months. Let’s go take a look.”

Following Angie’s lead, Hequa and Robert found themselves in an apartment that consisted almost entirely of a single room. The floor was aging vinyl, the bathroom was a curtained alcove with a toilet on one side and a shower spigot on the other, and the kitchen consisted of a small sink, a mini-fridge, and a hot plate. A single rusty folding chair sat in the center of the otherwise unfurnished room.

“Well, here it is. I’m asking eight hundred for it,” said Angie.

Hequa nodded. Robert laughed. “Come on Angie, it’s me,” he said. “This place is worth half that on a good day.”

Angie scrutinized Hequa. “You a trouble maker, son? You play loud music or cause trouble?” she asked. “I already know you smoke the reefer, based on how you two smell. But that’s fine as long as you pay the rent on time. If I ask five hundred, are you good for it?”

“I am good for it,” said Hequa. “Do I give you five hundred bucks now?”

Angie laughed. “Normally, I’d charge a deposit, but I’ve got a feeling Robert here would argue with me,” she said.

Unsure of what exactly was happening, Hequa handed Angie five hundred dollars. When she accepted this, Hequa realized the place was his. “I have an apartment,” he said, his voice filled

with pride. “Do I have a key?”

“Here you go,” said Angie, handing Hequa a door key and a slip of paper. “And here’s my number and the wifi password. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a show to watch.”

“I owe you one, Annie,” said Robert.

After moving the trital tanks and Hequa’s laptop from the car to the floor of the studio, Robert sat in the chair while Hequa flushed the toilet and tried the faucets. Staring at the aquariums, Robert said, “You know, I don’t think it really sank in until today how amazing this whole project is. Thank you, Hequa, for including me in it.”

“You helped me when no one else would,” said Hequa. “Now your experiments with the tritals are just as important as mine are. But please be careful when the government comes tomorrow.”

“Yeah, about that,” said Robert. “There are still a few things I should probably get out of the house. I should get going. But I can come by tomorrow to work with the tritals, if that’s okay.”

“Sounds good,” said Hequa. “I will be away until sunset, so come then.”

Chapter 24

“This is your place?” asked Sallycat upon entering Hequa’s apartment. “What the fuck is that?”

“It is my nest,” replied Hequa, looking at the large, colorful pile of strips of cloth in which he slept. “The beds of Earth people are not for me.”

“No comment on the nest. But your trital are all looking good. Is that one hooked up to a regular computer?” asked Sallycat.

“Yes. Robert connected the controls and screen to a trital. The trital is now tweeting,” explained Hequa. “Robert says that we are doing something great by merging the technologies. But I think we are just playing.”

“That is so fucking cool,” said Sallycat, inspecting the tweeting trital closely. “That’s the coolest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Do you like the apartment?” asked Hequa.

“Is your bathroom door a curtain?” asked Sallycat. “But seriously, I mean, as places go, I guess I’ve seen worse.”

“I know it is not a great place,” said Hequa. “But it was five hundred bucks and I needed it.”

“Hey, no offense, alright? The apartment is okay by me. And I love what you’ve done with the place,” said Sallycat, feigning sincerity.

“Be serious, Sallycat. I need help finding a way to get more money to keep the place,” said Hequa. “I’m not doing shows with the Great Bamzini anymore. And standing with a sign to get money from cars does not pay enough. What am I going to do?”

“Come on. You’ll figure something out,” said Sallycat.

“Good. Robert is arriving,” said Hequa.

Sallycat looked around. “I don’t hear anyone,” she said.

“There was his car door. Now he’s on the path. Now coming down the stairs,” said Hequa, opening the door. “Welcome Robert. Sallycat is already here.”

“Love what you’re doing with the tritals,” said Sallycat.

“Hequa tells me your own experiments are also promising,” said Robert.

“Good. Now that both of my friends are here, I want to share with you ideas I have for making money,” said Hequa. “Would you like some coffee? I drank much coffee to find these ideas.”

Sallycat and Robert exchanged glances. Robert sat down on Hequa's folding chair. "I'll take a cup," he said.

"Here," said Hequa, handing Robert some burned coffee in a paper cup. "I am still learning to make it properly."

"Hequa, what's this all about?" asked Sallycat.

"As you both know, I did shows with the Great Bamzini. Then I discovered that the Great Bamzini is not a very good person," said Hequa.

"Yes, we know," said Robert. "Your coffee is full of grounds, by the way."

"I have also found that bad people from the government want to steal the things I brought from my home world. So selling even one of these things may not be possible, no matter how much money these things might be worth," said Hequa.

"You got that right," said Robert. "Fucking feds trashed my place looking for these tritals. And I still don't get why the Department of Energy cares about computing octopuses."

"Well, these tritals will only be safe if I pay rent, and I can't do this without money. Will you hear my ideas?" asked Hequa.

"Sure thing," said Sallycat.

"Let's hear 'em," said Robert.

“Thank you. There are three,” said Hequa. “First, I have some small gold balls to sell. They are ammunition for a projectile weapon I have, but have never used. Second, I can easily make diamonds of what you call industrial grade. I think these could be sold. Third, I have been learning of the bitcoin revolution on the internet. I think the tritals could make bitcoins, if we trained them to. What do you think?”

“I can sell the gold for you. How much is there?” asked Robert.

“This much,” said Hequa, handing Robert another paper cup with fifty BB-sized gold pellets in it. “More than my kimono cost.”

“Might be worth a grand or two,” said Robert. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“And the diamonds?” asked Hequa, handing Robert another paper cup half full of what looked like glassy sand.

“They’re great, but I have no idea how to sell them,” admitted Robert. “Guess I can poke around online.”

“I don’t know what to do with them either,” said Sallycat.

“And what of using tritals to make bitcoins?” asked Hequa.

“That one’s too nuts, Hequa,” said Sallycat. “And even if we could get it to work, it probably wouldn’t pay very much. I can help you set up a miner if that’s what you really want. But it probably wouldn’t be worth it, money wise.”

“Yes, I want you to show me how to set up a trital miner,” said Hequa. “For now, the sale of gold should provide me with enough bucks to pay the rent. Thank you. You are dismissed.”

Sallycat and Robert looked from Hequa to each other, then burst into laughter. “Dismissed, huh?” asked Sallycat. “What’re you, royalty?”

“Saying ‘dismissed’ was a social error, wasn’t it?” asked Hequa.

“It sure was,” said Robert. “That’s not the kind of thing you say to your friends.”

“I understand. Sorry for that,” said Hequa. “I meant only to say that I am happy about our friendship, and that I need no more of your time.”

“What you need is a lesson on coffee making,” said Robert.

“And another chair or two,” said Sallycat.

“And maybe some real dishes,” said Robert.

“Oh, you are both right,” said Hequa, flinging himself dramatically onto his nest. “You are both very good friends, and I am just a person from Jhanya who knows almost nothing.”

Chapter 25

By the time the first heavy snow fell, the gold sale had allowed Hequa to pay three months rent in advance with plenty of money left over. In search of something to do, he wandered around the city until he found the restaurant where the Great Bamzini was doing his weekly show. Entering this restaurant, he shouted, “The great Bamzini is a mean cheater with stupid tricks! The great Bamzini is not great at all!”

Before anyone could respond, Hequa left the place, laughing to himself while trudging through the snow. Several blocks later, he heard music coming from a bar, and decided to check it out. When the doorman shrugged and accepted his ID as genuine, Hequa was thrilled. And when he made it into the crowd in front of the stage, he could not believe his good fortune.

No one paid attention to Hequa while he popped a light orb into his mouth and started to dance. But when he looked up and opened his mouth wide at the end of a song, everyone on the dance floor took notice of the column of light he produced. Afterwards, as Hequa looked around, he saw that several people were staring. One of these people approached Hequa with

familiarity.

“Hey, Hequa, that shit was awesome, with the light,” said Dan.

“Good to see you, Dan. Is Constance here?” asked Hequa.

“Nah. We broke up. I’m here with my new girlfriend Hailey and her friend Maya,” said Dan, gesturing to his companions.

“Nice to meet you,” said Hequa.

“Hequa? Cool trick with the light,” said Hailey.

“I’m Maya. And you’re a total trip,” said Maya. “You here with anyone?”

“I am here alone,” said Hequa, shouting to be heard over the music. “Do you want to go somewhere quieter?”

Finding a booth to sit at where the music was less loud, Hequa and Maya ordered more drinks from a passing waitress. Then Maya asked, “How do you know Dan?”

“I met him on a restaurant patio, then performed at a party he attended with his former girlfriend, Constance,” replied Hequa.

“So you don’t really know him? Well me neither. I don’t know what Hailey sees in him,” said Maya.

“Perhaps she likes his body,” said Hequa.

Maya laughed. "You're kind of a weirdo. I like that about you," she said.

"I am an alien from another planet," admitted Hequa. "I sleep in a nest instead of a bed and my bathroom door is a shower curtain."

Maya laughed harder. "You're funny," she said. "Are you in school?"

"I stopped going to school when they stopped letting me into the buildings on campus," said Hequa. "Now I study at the library and on the internet."

"Ha! Well, I got a degree in international relations and now I'm a bank teller," said Maya.

"What do you tell people, for the bank?" asked Hequa.

"Don't you know what a teller is? Where exactly are you from, anyway?" asked Maya.

"A world far away, called Jhanya," replied Hequa.

"Okay, but what country?" asked Maya.

"My world is all one country," said Hequa. "I thought it was this way here too, when I came to Earth. Now I am trapped in America with only a fake ID."

While Hequa was speaking, Dan and Hailey approached the

table. “Hey Maya, we’re out of here,” said Hailey. “You need a ride or ... ?”

“I’m good,” replied Maya. “You two have fun.”

“Always,” said Hailey.

“Later Hequa,” said Dan.

“Good seeing you, Dan,” said Hequa.

“God, just get out of here already,” said Maya.

Once Dan and Hailey were gone, Maya turned to Hequa and asked, “Seriously, is it Syria? Armenia? Turkey? Am I getting close?”

“It took me hundreds of years to get to Earth on a stolen spaceship,” said Hequa.

“Fine. Show me the ship,” said Maya.

“It decomposed in Lake Superior,” said Hequa.

“Well then, why do you look so human, if you’re from outer space?” asked Maya.

“Because evolution is the same everywhere,” replied Hequa. “That is my thinking, but I do not know for sure. There are some small differences between me and the people of Earth. My kind has much longer lifespans. The fish here taste wrong

to me. There are other small things. But we seem basically the same, your people and mine, and I think that is because evolution is everywhere the same.”

“I like your eyes. They’re so pale, they’re almost silver,” said Maya.

“I like your eyes, too. They are the color of a good bug log,” said Hequa.

“A what?” demanded Maya, bursting into fresh laughter.

“A log filled with many tasty worms and insects to eat,” said Hequa.

“Gross,” said Maya. “Just, gross.”

“I know the people of Earth think so. This is why I stopped eating log bugs. To fit in,” said Hequa. “But I will tell you a secret. I still sometimes eat log bugs, when no one is looking.”

“Whatever,” said Maya. “So what do you do for work?”

“I used to do magic shows with a partner. But more recently, I sold gold. And now I am trying to be a bitcoin miner.”

“Trying to be?” asked Maya.

“Yes. My friend Sallycat said that there was no money in it. And I am starting to think she was right. The truth is that I don’t know what to do, so I just keep trying things,” explained Hequa.

“Not many people have it all figured out,” said Maya. “Look at me, I thought I’d be some kind of great diplomat by now, living in some exotic place, but all I do is work at a bank and make student loan payments. So, okay Hequa, if you could do anything at all, what would it be?”

“I would make a special farm, that mixes things from my world with things from this world,” said Hequa. “What about you?”

“I’d follow you home to see if you’re lying about having a nest for a bed,” said Maya.

Chapter 26

“Sallycat said banks support the war machine. Do you support the war machine?” asked Hequa.

“Worst first question of the morning ever,” said Maya, attempting to disentangle herself from a particularly tangly clump of nest. “I can’t believe you sleep in this thing every night. In a room where octopuses are hooked up to computers.”

“Would you like some coffee? Or some birdseed?” asked Hequa. “I could also open a can of silk worms. Or peaches. Are you hungry?”

“God, I’m so hung over,” complained Maya. “Did you just offer me birdseed?”

“I like it,” said Hequa. “Maybe just some water for you?”

“That sounds good. And some canned peaches sound good, now that I think about it,” said Maya. “Do I seriously have to pee in a curtained alcove?”

“Pee anywhere, just not in the nest,” said Hequa, rising to fix

breakfast. "You can also shower if you want. I will shower soon. We could do this together."

"You want to shower together in the toilet alcove?" asked Maya, incredulous, as she gratefully accepted a paper cup of water and an open can of peaches.

"I do not know how it is done, with lovers here on Earth," said Hequa defensively. "In Jhanya, people have sex anywhere, not just at home in secret or on the internet. In Jhanya, there are public showers, and lovers bathe together. Things are much more confusing here."

"If it's so great there, why did you leave," asked Maya.

"There was what you would call a revolution. The Order took control of the planet and killed all of my people. I left so they wouldn't kill me too," said Hequa.

"Fuck," said Maya. "No wonder you won't tell me where you're really from. That's some intense shit right there."

Sighing, Hequa said, "I know you don't believe me about being from another planet. You have seen a light orb and these tritals and still you do not believe me. You sleep with me and still do not believe. I accept this. But please do not ask me questions and then say that my answers are false."

"I'm sorry, okay," said Maya. "It's just that everything about you is unbelievable. That's part of what I like about you."

"I know my life seems impossible to you," said Hequa. "It seems this way to me, sometimes. But it is the life I have, impossible or not."

"Don't listen to me pee," said Maya after finishing the peaches and heading for the bathroom.

"I hear nothing. I hear nothing," said Hequa until Maya told him to shut up.

"You know what? Let's go get some real breakfast," said Maya upon emerging from the bathroom. "Put some clothes on, I know a great spot not far from here."

Dressed for winter, following Maya, Hequa was led to a crowded diner. They each got an omelette, and dug in as soon as the food arrived. "Now that's what I'm talking about," said Maya, finishing the final bites of her breakfast.

"Good chicken eggs," agreed Hequa. "Very warm and filling."

"You know what I'm trying to do?" asked Maya suddenly. "I'm trying to decide if this was a one night stand."

"If you come over again tonight it could be a two night stand," replied Hequa.

"No way. Next time is my place, or the deal's off," said Maya.

"Good. I will be happy to see your place," said Hequa. "What are your plans for the day?"

“Nothing. Yoga. Feed the cat. Maybe some shopping,” said Maya. “You?”

“The library is closed. I don’t know. I might try to make larger diamonds from carbon using molknives with my draath crystal in a chamber of melted sand,” said Hequa.

“See, when you say stuff like that, I think you’re just giving me shit,” said Maya.

“No shits. I did not say I would be successful. Only that I might try,” said Hequa.

“Okay, so what’s a ‘draath crystal?’” asked Maya.

“It is like a crystal of power, with special rods placed into it. When twisted one way, it becomes very hot. When twisted another way, it produces electricity,” explained Hequa. “I can show you the next time you visit my apartment.”

“How hot does it get?” asked Maya.

“Hot enough for hydrogen fusion,” replied Hequa. “But I do not need that much heat. I only need enough to melt carbon. And my carbon will be wiggling, so even less heat still.”

“Oh, your carbon will be wiggling, huh?” teased Maya.

“I could cut that empty juice glass cleanly in half with wiggling carbon as we sit here,” boasted Hequa.

“Bet you you can’t. Loser buys breakfast,” said Maya.

With flourish learned from his brief stint as a showman, Hequa cut the juice glass neatly in two with his molknife.

“I feel like I’m tripping,” said Maya. “That, what you just did, was impossible.”

“I am also tripping. Remember, we both ordered coffee,” said Hequa. “Is the glass cut to your satisfaction?”

“Yes. Fine. Whatever. You win the bet,” said Maya flatly.

“Now you are starting to sound like Sallycat,” said Hequa.

“Who is that? You mentioned her before, but who is she?” asked Maya.

“She’s my friend. Her and my other friend Robert are the only people who really know about me. Well, except for you, now,” said Hequa.

“Wait. How long have you been here? Don’t you know anyone else?” asked Maya.

“I’ve been here for less than two years,” said Hequa. “I knew Tom and Betty, but after the government caused them trouble, they worried about ICE and kicked me out. I knew the Great Bamzini, but now we are enemies and not friends. I have met many people, like Dan, but most of them I see only once, or only sometimes. Sallycat and Robert are my only real friends,

and you are my first lover on Earth.”

“You have an enemy named the Great Bamzini?” asked Maya.

“Yes,” said Hequa. “We used to do magic shows together. But he lied and cheated and now we are enemies. I put a very small tracker in his top hat, so I know where he is always. Sometimes I go and find him and yell things that cause trouble for him. Yesterday, I yelled that his tricks were stupid during his show.”

“That’s ... pretty cool,” said Maya slowly. “But maybe try to think of better things to yell.”

Chapter 27

Hequa's drawings reflected that he was not a landscape architect. Still, he was proud of these large crayon drawings as he unfolded them to show Sallycat at a coffee shop. "See," he said. "Here are pictures of all the parts of the farm I want."

"I mean, those pictures are cool and all, but you're not serious with this. Are you?" asked Sallycat.

"Maya says it is a good idea," said Hequa.

"It's a fine idea. It's just expensive. And you're broke," said Sallycat.

"Maya says that's why I should use other people's money," answered Hequa.

"You just met Maya last week. Give me a break," said Sallycat.

"So you think it's a bad idea?" asked Hequa.

"No. It's fine, I just don't know how you'll do all that," said

Sallycat.

“Oh. Okay,” said Hequa. “Have you seen the tweeting trital lately? It has six thousand followers.”

“No way? With those tweets? What’s with people?” said Sallycat.

“People like what the trital tweets. I do not understand it either,” said Hequa.

“All it does is talk shit,” said Sallycat. “How can a shit talking octopus have six thousand followers?”

“Tritals are very smart. Robert has the other four tritals back at his house now, but I kept the tweeting one, who I am now calling Tweetly,” said Hequa.

“Are you sure that’s wise of Robert, after the government came by his place?” asked Sallycat.

“Robert said it’s safe and I trust that,” said Hequa. “As you know, my apartment is too small for five tritals in water tanks.”

“Well, Annie’s doing great,” said Sallycat. “It took me forever, but I finally got her display hairs arranged into something like a screen using that glue you gave me. I still haven’t figured out how to get her directly connected to the web except through an intermediary computer. But I have been running lots of tests.”

“Now that I know more, I think there are better things to do with tritals on this world than connect them to the internet,”

said Hequa.

“Better things like put them in charge of your weird alien farm?” asked Sallycat.

“Is it wrong that I want a place to live and share treasures from my world with this planet?” asked Hequa.

“No. I just don’t want to see you disappointed. Big talk leads to big disappointment, and you’re my friend,” said Sallycat.

“Do you want to come with me to yell at the Great Bamzini after this?” asked Hequa.

Sallycat laughed. “You’re still on that? Should we pick up some rotten fruit on the way?” she asked.

“Rotten fruit? I like the fresh kind,” said Hequa.

“To throw. Duh,” said Sallycat.

When they got to the restaurant, the Great Bamzini had not yet started performing. He was sitting at a table eating spaghetti. Hequa and Sallycat walked quickly past the host to the table with the top hat on it. “Great Bamzini, it is I, your enemy Hequa,” announced Hequa. “Your timing is off and your jokes fall flat! Sallycat, the tomatoes!”

“Hequa, he’s just a kid,” objected Sallycat, who was holding two rotten tomatoes. “I’m not throwing rotten fruit at a kid eating dinner.”

“God, what’s your problem?” asked the Great Bamzini. “Why can’t you just leave me alone?”

“You lied about the money and your magic is easy to understand as trickery,” bellowed Hequa, grabbing a tomato from Sallycat and tossing this onto the Great Bamzini’s lap. “Here. A rotten tomato for you!”

“Sir? Sir, do I have to call the police,” said a nearby server.

“Sallycat! Quickly, give him the other tomato!” said Hequa. “The great Bamzini is a fraud who does not even know magic!”

Sallycat shrugged and tossed the other tomato onto the Great Bamzini’s lap. “For the Great Bamzini, a second rotten tomato,” she declared, grabbing Hequa’s arm to pull him away from the scene. They ran down the block and around the corner, laughing the whole way.

“I see what you mean. That shit was fun,” said Sallycat. “Did you see the look on his face when the second tomato just plopped on his lap. I’m pretty sure I heard it plop.”

“It did the plop,” agreed Hequa. “In fifteen minutes, my enemy has to do a show, so he will not have time to change, and his pants will smell like rotted tomato.”

“Hequa, you’re hilarious. But that poor kid. What is he, like, twelve?” asked Sallycat.

“He is a legal adult,” said Hequa. “And he’s very sneaky in

business. He is still using video of my performances on his website to book shows.”

“If a twelve-year-old amateur magician can outfox you, how do you think it will go if you start taking other people’s money to set up your alien farm?” asked Sallycat.

“Better, I hope,” said Hequa.

“Hey wait. Trital04 just tweeted: ‘The Great Bamzini is bad at tricks’. Hequa, was that you?” asked Sallycat.

“Yes, I suggested the tweet to Tweetly earlier today,” admitted Hequa.

“Now it tweeted: ‘Alan Dorkowitz worked for CIA in UAE after defending a pedophile’. I’m guessing that one was all Tweetly,” said Sallycat.

“Sallycat, why did you pull out your phone to look at tweets while we stood here in the cold?” asked Hequa.

“Me and Beth are in a fight. I wanted to see if she texted. Then I guess I got distracted,” admitted Sallycat.

“This internet has great power over the minds of people here,” said Hequa. “My enemy uses it to book shows with my tricks. You use it to fight with Beth. Tweetly attracts thousands of followers. I wonder, could it also be used to find support for my alien farm?”

“Maybe. It depends,” said Sallycat. “Want to go get some egg rolls?”

Chapter 28

Waking up alone in Maya's apartment, Hequa showered, then took pictures of various household objects with a digital camera that was lying around. After making coffee and boiling a few eggs, he sat down to eat, and scratched out an idea on a pad of paper that was laying on the kitchen table. After an hour, Hequa had the basics of the idea outlined in the notebook.

He would've called Sallycat and Robert right then, but without a phone, the best he could do was email. Firing up Maya's computer, he emailed Sallycat and Robert about his idea, then sent yet another email to the Great Bamzini demanding to be taken off the entertainer's website. Finally, he cleaned up after himself and left the apartment.

On the long bus ride home, Hequa considered how best to capitalize on Tweetly's influence, but came up with nothing solid. Then, approaching his apartment, Hequa saw a man in a suit and tie standing in front of his door. "Do you work for the Great Bamzini?" demanded Hequa. "You look like his kind of person!"

“Sir, is this your apartment?” asked the man.

“Yes, and I must go in now because of the cold out here. So leave,” said Hequa.

“Sir, I’m with Transcorp Security. Did you tweet about Alan Dorkowitz yesterday afternoon?” asked the man.

“No, but one of my computers did. Why?” asked Hequa.

“Mr. Dorkowitz takes the matter very seriously. Here’s a cease and desist demanding that you take the offensive tweet down immediately. If you don’t, you’ll be sued for libel,” said the man, handing Hequa a letter.

“What does it mean, to be sued for libel?” asked Hequa suspiciously.

“It means you’ll go to court and you’ll lose,” said the man. “Mr. Dorkowitz is a very good attorney.”

“Fine. Go. Get out of here,” said Hequa, shoving past the man.

Entering his room, Hequa looked from the envelope that the man had handed him to Tweetly and back again. Sighing, he deleted the Dorkowitz tweet, then read through some of Tweetly’s other tweets. Most of these appeared as if they were designed to be inflammatory. “Tweetly,” said Hequa to the trital in the tank. “Do not make me be sued for libel.”

Hequa watched for the next tweet intently. When it appeared

on the laptop screen, it read: 'Epstone was suicided. How many conspirators were there?'

"Seriously?" said Hequa to the trital, who now had seven thousand followers. Putting the unopened envelope in the fish tank with the trital, Hequa sat down on his chair, and turned his attention to the notebook containing his new idea. The idea was novel, and seemed more plausible than trying to make a whole farm with other people's money. All he had to do was open an embassy, and become Jhanya's ambassador to the people of Earth.

While searching the web for information on how to open an embassy on the computer connected to Tweetly, Hequa heard a knock at the door. Answering this, he found Angie, wearing heavy boots and a tattered old bathrobe. "Please, come in," he said.

"Is that an octopus hooked up to a computer?" asked Angie after entering the studio. "I guess it's none of my business. But there was a man here threatening a lawsuit about something you put on the internet. I hope you know I can't have that sort of thing happening here."

"I'm sorry," said Hequa. "It was a surprise to me to meet this man. I have deleted the offensive tweet, and it will not happen again."

"Well, okay," said Angie, eyeing Hequa's nest uneasily. "Listen, I know things work differently here than wherever you're from. I know you're probably busy with school, and I do appreciate

that you pay the rent in advance. But please try to keep the place a bit tidier.”

“I will make it tidier,” said Hequa. “Thank you.”

Chapter 29

Sallycat was not enthusiastic about Hequa's embassy idea. Neither was Maya. But once Hequa outlined his vision for the project, Robert couldn't wait to get started on it. With a budget funded by the sale of Hequa's homemade industrial grade diamonds, they rented a storefront, had a sign painted, and started growing more trital. Within two months, Hequa was standing behind the counter at Jhanya Embassy, and the place was open.

The grand opening was a subdued affair, with only Hequa, Robert, Sallycat, and Maya in attendance. The four of them stood facing a wall of one hundred trital tanks, installed on shelves. Wires and various devices protruded from these tanks, and the trital themselves shone with vibrant colors that changed in undulating pulses over time.

"That's so crazy. It's like special effects in a movie. But way better," commented Maya.

"That is something," agreed Sallycat. "But what's going on over there," she said, pointing at a large, dome-shaped assemblage of sponges, bound together with twine, sitting in a kiddie pool.

“Fungus farm, for a kind of fungus Hequa says is used for textiles,” said Robert. “It’ll apparently take a month before we’ll see any fruiting.”

“And that?” asked Sallycat, pointing to a card table on which various cut-in-half objects had been placed.

“Sallycat, you know what that is,” said Hequa.

“No, that,” said Sallycat, making it clear that she meant to point underneath the table.

“Oh. That is a draath crystal furnace. For making things out of crystals and metals,” explained Hequa.

“And that?” asked Maya, gesturing towards another card table with only a notebook on top of it.

“Examples of Jhana’s words and writing,” said Hequa. “For visitors to the embassy who want to learn my language.”

“So, you’re expecting to have visitors?” asked Maya. “How will people find you? How do you even advertise a place like this?”

“There is a website, with live video of the cutting table on it,” said Hequa. “And I have called the United Nations, and the embassies of many countries to tell them we are here.”

“So that’s just it, then? You open an alien embassy?” asked Maya.

“You sound like you don’t like it,” said Hequa. “It is just like I

said it would be. Why don't you like it?"

"Come on. I know you worked hard at it. But it looks like the world's strangest and most pointless store," said Maya. "It's like the kind of store you accidentally go into, but then it's so weird that you leave right away and have to spend all day thinking up explanations for the things you saw there."

"But that is the point. These things are alien," said Hequa defensively.

"I think it's maybe just a little too real," said Sallycat.

"The website's already got five hundred views," said Robert. "And traffic spiked up the last time Hequa cut something in half."

"I hope you didn't spend too much money on all this," said Maya.

"Less than five thousand dollars," said Hequa proudly. "And we can operate for two thousand a month."

Just then, the Great Bamzini entered. "Jesus. What is this?" he demanded upon seeing Hequa.

"Ha ha!" laughed Hequa. "I have used your online form to book a show, but there is no show. It was a trick! For my grand opening!"

The Great Bamzini studied the room filled with alien objects. "Hey, is that an octopus hooked up to a computer?" he asked.

“No. It is a trital. And is tweeting,” said Hequa.

“Okay weirdo, stop messing with me,” said the Great Bamzini.

“Take the video of me off your website,” said Hequa. “And pay me three hundred bucks.”

“Whatever,” said the Great Bamzini, taking his leave.

“Is there any way we could adjust Tweetly,” asked Robert. “Some of its tweets are really offensive. Is that how it got twelve thousand followers?”

“After I got a letter about Tweetly’s bad tweets, I tried and failed to find a solution. Now I just delete the very worst tweets whenever I see them,” said Hequa.

“Guess that works. But I mean, listen to this: ‘China puts its fanatics in concentration camps. Not saying we should too, but food for thought.’ How does that thing even come up with this stuff?” said Robert.

“Maybe delete that tweet,” said Hequa. “As for how Tweetly comes up with its tweets, it uses an algorithm that maximizes retweets and follower attraction.”

“That algorithm might be worth something,” said Sallycat.

“I kind of like that the octopus is an asshole,” said Maya.

“Tweetly is not an octopus or an asshole,” said Hequa. “It is a

trital, and can only be how it is programmed to be.”

“Fine,” said Maya. “I like that you programmed Tweetly to be such an asshole.”

“Good to know you like something about my embassy,” said Hequa.

“Hequa, I’ll be honest. Your embassy kind of sucks,” said Maya. “And didn’t you say you fled for your life from your home planet. People who do that don’t usually open embassies.”

“Since it’s been hundreds of years, most of the people I fled from are very old,” said Hequa. “And as far as I know, I am the only person from Jhanya on this planet. Why shouldn’t I be the one to open an embassy here?”

“Because no one cares, Hequa. That’s why,” said Maya.

“Robert cares. And Sallycat. I thought you were here because you care too. Maybe you should leave if you don’t care so much,” said Hequa.

“Yeah, well, maybe you should get a life,” said Maya angrily. “I’ve totally got better places to be.”

Chapter 30

On the morning of Jhanya Embassy's tenth day in operation, Hequa was cutting a large lock into very fine slices with a molknife in front of a camera for his website's followers when a pair of suits entered. "Welcome. I will be right with you," he said, finishing his cuts.

"Hequa Janya? I'm Ms. Fellows and this is Mr. Camden. We're here on behalf of the Defense Intelligence Agency. We'd like to ask you a few questions," said Ms. Fellows.

"I will answer as best I can. Would you like to see how people on the planet Jhanya write? I have a notebook of writings on display here," said Hequa proudly.

"Thanks. But we're more interested in those," said Mr. Camden, pointing at the wall of tritals in aquariums hooked up to computers and other assorted devices.

"Yes. The tritals," said Hequa. "They are very beautiful creatures. First engineered on Jhanya about two thousand years ago."

"Engineered?" asked Ms. Fellows, moving to inspect a trital

closely. "Is that freshwater?"

"They can live in salt as well," said Hequa. "The species that provided much of their original blueprint came from a salt ocean on Jhanya."

"What're those things they're grabbing on to? The interface devices?" asked Mr. Camden.

"The trital communicates through a colors crystal joined to a signals hub," explained Hequa. "The signals hub can interface with many kinds of signal carriers. Metallic wires carrying electrical signals, fiber optics carrying light, even simple tubes carrying signals in the form of pressure changes. Tritals are very versatile."

"Huh. What do they eat?" asked Mr. Camden.

"Hydrogen and oxygen," said Hequa. "Would you like to try this joystick, to see how this trital responds?"

Accepting the joystick and watching the trital's unbound display hairs begin to change their pattern, Mr. Camden became immediately transfixed. "See, I told you they were real," he said to Ms. Fellows distractedly. "They're just like our source said they'd be."

"How fast are they, as processors?" asked Ms. Fellows.

"My friend Robert told me that they do not process fast, but they process much at once. Each part can do just a few hundred

operations per second, but there are billions of such parts that can all operate at once,” said Hequa.

“Mr. Jhanya, are you in this country legally?” asked Ms. Fellows.

“This is where I landed after flying here in a spaceship,” said Hequa. “I have an ID that says my name is Hector Richardson, but it is fake.”

“How long have you been here?” asked Ms. Fellows.

“Less than two years,” said Hequa. “But I just opened the embassy ten days ago.”

“Do you have a job? What do you do for money?” asked Ms. Fellows.

“I did magic shows and sold some gold. But now I make diamonds for industrial purposes,” replied Hequa.

“He makes diamonds,” said Mr. Camden slowly after putting down the joystick.

“Sir, what is your country of origin?” asked Ms. Fellows.

“The planet Jhanya is all one country. Or it was that way hundreds of years ago, before I left,” said Hequa.

“To your knowledge, does anyone else possess this computing technology? These tritals?” asked Ms. Fellows.

“Yes, my friends Sallycat and Robert both have tritals,” replied Hequa. “Sallycat is a student of computer science and Robert is a professor.”

“Are you now, or have you ever been a member of a terrorist organization or private army?” asked Mr. Camden.

“No. Not on Earth,” said Hequa. “On Jhanya, before I left, there was a revolution. The Order killed my people, and called us terrorists, but all we wanted was to live in peace. This is why I left Jhanya.”

“Cut the crap, Mr. Jhanya, we know you’re from Iran,” said Mr. Camden. “We need the location of the facility where you stole this technology from, and a list of everybody who works there.”

“As I said, I flew here on a ship from the planet Jhanya,” said Hequa patiently.

“Oh yeah? Then where’s your ship?” asked Ms. Fellows.

“My ship landed in Lake Superior and rotted away to nothing, so you can not see it,” said Hequa.

“Well isn’t that convenient?” said Mr. Camden.

“Biodegradable ships are very convenient, yes,” replied Hequa. “On Jhanya, anything made to be used only once or a few times is made biodegradable.”

“Let’s not get off track here,” said Ms. Fellows. “Mr. Jhanya,

I'm going to level with you. We're here to assess the threat that those octopus things pose to national security."

"They are no threat. They are tritals. Little computers. Nothing more," said Hequa.

"How long can one survive out of water?" asked Ms. Fellows.

"They must be kept damp or they begin to malfunction," answered Hequa.

"And what about the – what did you call it? – colors crystals? What are they made of?" asked Mr. Camden.

"Mostly crystallized carbon. Diamond," replied Hequa.

"You mean to tell me you've got a hundred diamonds in a hundred tanks here?" asked Mr. Camden.

"Yes," said Hequa. "I make the diamonds with carbon rods from dry cell batteries and a draath crystal. But I still don't know what to do with all the leftover manganese dioxide. I have a large bucketful remaining if you want it."

"How durable is a trital? Can they survive high pressure? High temperatures?" asked Ms. Fellows.

"Oh yes. And they can be placed in a state of suspended animation for centuries," answered Hequa.

Mr. Camden and Ms. Fellows exchanged glances. "Mr. Jhanya,

if you were us, and you had to come up with a way to fight these things, how would you do it?" asked Mr. Camden.

"I don't understand," said Hequa.

"Do you love America? You must at least like it here," said Mr. Camden. "So with that in mind, if the Iranians have started putting this tech into missiles, for guidance systems, how would you defeat that threat?"

"You think the Iranians are putting trital in missiles? How would they get them? As I've said, only three people on this planet possess tritals. Robert, Sallycat, and me," said Hequa.

"Please just try and answer my question," said Mr. Camden.

Hequa gave it some thought. "No trital would willingly guide a missile. But if someone were to somehow convince tritals to guide missiles, you could send reset patterns to the tritals in the missiles, which would make the tritals forget their programming," he said slowly.

"What's a reset pattern?" asked Ms. Fellows.

"The signal that tells a trital to reset when it is to be reprogrammed," said Hequa. "The easiest way to send this signal is with light, but it can also be sent with sound. Or if you are very patient, with mechanical tapping on the trital itself."

Mr. Camden and Ms. Fellows exchanged another glance. "So there is a failsafe," muttered Mr. Camden. "Any chance you'd

be willing to share this pattern with us?”

“I could,” said Hequa. “I could give you a trital and its reset pattern, as well as a colors crystal for the trital to build a signals hub on. But you are from the government, yes? From you, I want protection from the government. Especially the Department of Energy and ICE. Also, I want a real ID.”

“That might be possible, but it’ll take time, and you’re going to have to answer a lot more questions,” said Mr. Camden.

“Good,” said Hequa. “I opened this embassy to answer questions about Jhanya. I want to talk about my home world so it does not fade in my memory.”

Chapter 31

Over a series of increasingly mean emails, Hequa and Maya broke up. During this time, Hequa moved his nest and other personal property from his studio apartment to the embassy. The Great Bamzini called ICE on Hequa, which resulted in ICE agents being turned away from Jhanya Embassy by Defense Intelligence Agency personnel. Robert and Sallycat kept their distance, but each politely submitted to a DIA interview about the tritals. Eventually, Hequa was alone in the embassy, with a new passport, playing with the joystick trital as if it were a video game.

Vibrant yellow tendrils of fungus had started growing on their twine-and-sponge scaffolding in the corner opposite the trital tanks. A garbage can filled with cut-in-half objects sat near the door. Two card tables and three secondhand office chairs arranged the room's remaining space haphazardly. Giving up the Joystick, Hequa went over to the garbage can and stared into the mass of cut-in-half cups and locks and stones. Considering what to do about this accumulation of waste from his online performances, Hequa wondered what would happen if he used his draath crystal to just melt all of these cut-in-half things into one big lump.

Would having such a lump be better than having a can filled with small, heavy things? As an experiment, Hequa fished enough cut lock pieces out of the garbage can to fill his largest crucible. After melting this scrap, he slowly poured molten metal on the concrete floor to make a blob. Watching the blob cool, Hequa was surprised when the door opened and two people he'd never seen before came in.

"Hello? Are you open?" asked one of the men, a thirty-something fellow in an orange parka. "We saw you cutting things in half on your website and had to come check it out."

"Really?" said Hequa. "Yes, come in. Welcome to Jhanya Embassy."

"I brought something for you to cut in half," said the older man in a long brown overcoat. "It's a piece of I beam," he said, lifting the heavy piece of rusted metal he carried slightly to show Hequa what he was talking about.

"Good. Yes. I can cut that," said Hequa. "Just place the I beam on that table over there."

"See, I told you he would do it," said the older man to the younger, placing the section of I beam on the table.

"I think this will take three cuts because my knife blade is only so long," said Hequa as he readied a molknife. "I could also cut it in half the long way with only one cut. Which do you want?"

"The short way is fine. I just want to see this in person," said the

older man.

Hequa cut the beam with three neat slices in as many seconds. “As you can see, the molknife cuts very efficiently, with very little heating,” he said when the job was done.

“Fucking far out,” said the younger man. “What kind of a knife is that?”

“Here on Earth, I call it a molknife, short for molecular knife,” said Hequa. “They are very common on the planet Jhanya, where I come from. Would you like to see a notebook containing the written language of Jhanya? And would you like me to melt the I beam parts into a blob for you to take home? My draath crystal furnace is still hot from the last blob I made. It is right there. Be careful, it is still hot.”

“How about no to the notebook and yes to the blob,” said the older man.

Just then, Sallycat entered the embassy. Seeing that Hequa was busy, she wandered slowly around the room looking at all the things she’d seen before.

“Hi Sallycat,” said Hequa as he placed the I beam parts into a crucible. “These people came to see me cut an I beam in half. Now I am melting the halves into a blob.”

“Hi Hequa,” said Sallycat. “I hope you’re not trying to use jet fuel to melt those steel beams. Because if you are, it totally won’t work.”

“I am using the draath crystal furnace,” said Hequa. “I already made one blob today. See,” he said, pointing to the cooling mass of metal on the floor next to the furnace.

“Hey, is that really safe to be doing in here?” asked the younger man. “What about fumes?”

Hequa grinned broadly. “Do you see that?” he asked, pointing at the scaffolded fungus. “The fungus that grows there is used on Jhanya for two things: textiles and cleaning the air.”

“Goldilocks fungus is what I call it,” said Sallycat.

“Catchy,” said the younger man. “So are you part of the act, too? My name’s Dylan, by the way,” he said to Sallycat.

“There is no act. Only treasures from my home world,” said Hequa. “And on Jhanya, the fungus is called ‘ffassa’. Sallycat, you know this. Why do you keep calling the fungus ‘goldilocks’?”

“Because here on Earth, goldilocks is a better name,” said Sallycat.

“I have to agree with the lady,” said the older man. “But I’ll tell you what, son. This place sure is impressive.”

“What’s the deal with that computer wired up to that fish tank?” asked the younger man.

“That is a trital, who is connected to the internet for the purpose of tweeting,” replied Hequa. “Feel free to take a closer look.”

After studying the tank and the computer atop it for a moment, the younger man grimaced. "Why does the most recent tweet say: 'Gone are the days when a Real American could get a fair shake in the workplace. Illegals and robots are Taking our Jobs!'" he asked.

Hequa chuckled. "That's not even one of the bad ones," he said. "Some of Tweetly's tweets are much more offensive. And it is always saying bad things about Jorge Sorrows and Hilery Clamton."

"Weird. Are these, like, squids?" asked the younger man.

"They are tritals. Much closer to octopuses than squids," replied Hequa, pouring dollops of molten steel onto the floor. "Your blob of I beam is almost ready. Would you like to see the writing of Jhanya now?"

"No thanks," said the older man. "But I really can't believe you melted that much steel that fast."

"The technology of Jhanya is great," said Hequa. "It can cut things in half and then turn them into blobs."

As the former I beam cooled, Hequa neatly cut three triangles and an ellipse into the blob with his molknife. "It is still very warm, but it is ready," he said.

"Alright, what do I owe you for that?" asked the older man.

"I don't know," said Hequa. "I did not know this was a thing for

money. How about twenty bucks?"

"Works for me," said the man, reaching into his pocket and handing Hequa a twenty.

"I made twenty bucks!" exclaimed Hequa to Sallycat.

"Good for you," said Sallycat. "But listen, there's something we need to talk about."

Chapter 32

“Now, what do you have to talk about?” Hequa asked Sallycat once the men had left.

“Okay, so you know how I’ve been spending all my time eating ice cream and playing with Annie Octopus since my girlfriend dumped me?” asked Sallycat.

“I remember you saying something like that. Why?” asked Hequa.

“Well, what you don’t know is that after the DIA interviewed me, they offered me a job working with trital computing. I’m not supposed to talk about it with anyone, but I had to tell someone, so I’m telling you,” said Sallycat. “And I’m guessing Robert got the same offer.”

“Do you want to do their job?” asked Hequa cautiously.

“It’s a good offer,” said Sallycat. “But I’d have to move to Nevada. That’s where the company handling the DIA contract is. I’d have to move, and I’m not sure we’d even be able to talk except by email.”

“But aren’t they the spooks of the military industrial complex? Do you really want to work for the spooks?” asked Hequa.

“Yes, they’re spooks. And that’s not the only problem,” said Sallycat. “Eventually, they’ll figure out that there are no tritals in Iran. What do you think will happen to me if I’m working for them when they figure that out?”

“They should understand already. I told them several times,” said Hequa.

“Hequa, be serious,” said Sallycat. “This is a big deal to me. Do I take the job or not?”

“It sounds like you want to,” said Hequa. “If you want it, take it. And, if it is possible, make a report to your superiors right away about there being no tritals in Iran.”

“But what’ll you do without me around here?” asked Sallycat.

“Cut things in half and make the halves into blobs,” said Hequa. “And I may soon travel myself, now that I have a passport.”

“I think that’s a great idea,” said Sallycat. “So you’re not mad that I’m probably taking the job?”

“No, I’m not mad. I think it is good. Also, it is funny that you of all people will be working for spooks,” said Hequa.

“Right. But how do you feel about me sharing information about the tritals with the government?” asked Sallycat.

“Tritals are not a scarce resource on Jhanya. Each one is very special, but they are as common as phones are here. I trust you to care for any trital in the ways that I have taught you. That is all,” said Hequa.

“Aren’t you afraid of what the government might do with them?” asked Sallycat.

“They are just computers, Sallycat. The government already has many computers. And with you working for them, what is there to fear?” asked Hequa.

“They want me to bring Annie Octopus with me so they can experiment on her,” said Sallycat. “I don’t know if I like that,” said Sallycat.

“How long until you leave?” asked Hequa.

“Six weeks,” replied Sallycat.

“Good,” said Hequa. “Before you go, I will make you a small molknife, so you can make trital cuttings on your job.”

“Really?” asked Sallycat. “You can do that?”

“It will not be of the same quality as the knives I brought from Jhanya,” said Hequa. “It will have a larger handle and a smaller blade. The power source will be a rechargeable battery, and the knife may get too hot to hold after it is used for just a short time. But yes, I think I can do that. Robert has already ordered the parts online from China.”

“Oh Hequa, I don’t know what to say. That’s great,” said Sallycat.

“Say that you will help me with a problem before you go,” said Hequa.

“Of course. Anything,” said Sallycat.

“Soon I will travel, to see more of this world,” said Hequa. “But I can not travel in my flight suit, because it could violate some security customs. Without my flight suit, I will not have access to my navigation trital. I can keep a molknife in what is called a checked bag, but I will need acceptable clothes to travel in, and another way to navigate. Will you help me find a good phone and some travel clothes?”

“Oh my god, it’s about time you got a phone,” said Sallycat. “And some new clothes, come to think of it. Of course I’ll help with that.”

“And will you also help me with the ffassa, right now?” asked Hequa. “The longest pieces need to be pulled off of the sponges and stretched out. They can be stretched to the walls and ceilings, and nailed in place.”

“Sure, I’ll help you with the goldilocks fungus,” said Sallycat agreeably. “It’s pretty amazing, how fast it grows.”

“I wanted to use it to make travel clothes,” said Hequa. “But I want more to see how much ffassa fabric can be made in this small space if the fungus is left uncut for many weeks. Stretching the ffassa while it is growing is how the best fabric

is made on Jhanya.”

Chapter 33

With Robert watching over Jhanya Embassy, Hequa traveled. In New York, he cut a horn off of the Wall Street bull and left it on the subway. In London, he got into a fight with a mime. In Berlin, he was kicked out of a museum for eating vogelfutter and marzipan loudly enough to interrupt a video exhibit. And in Tel Aviv, he was stung by a jellyfish.

In Addis Ababa, Hequa chased a large group of children through the streets after one of them threw a small stone that knocked his red top hat off. In Nairobi, he sold a pound of industrial diamonds to a bartender. On the outskirts of Capetown, he saved a woman from being bitten by a snake by cutting the creature in half with his molknife. And, in Mumbai, he found a group of venture capitalists eager to invest in ffaasa.

In Guangzhou, Hequa was granted a tour of a laser diode factory. In Beijing, he was involved in a minor traffic accident involving three bicycles and a taxi. In Hong Kong, he had a one night stand with a commodities broker. In Sydney, he was interrogated by the police after acting strangely in front of large public building.

In Tokyo, Hequa finally found an Earth fish that tasted good. In Santiago, he got too drunk in his hotel room and threw up in the garbage can. In Rio, he had guns pointed at him when he climbed a wall to get a better view of the garden beyond the wall. In Lima, he heard the best music he'd yet heard on Earth, and bought a special flute in hopes of learning to play it. And in Los Angeles, he saw a man leaning against the side of a building, pooping on a passing rat.

Overall, the trip lasted just over three months. When Hequa arrived home to Jhanya Embassy, it was early evening, and Robert was waiting for him.

"Hequa!" exclaimed Robert, grinning broadly. "How was your walkabout?"

Hequa took in the embassy's main room, which was now covered on one side by the trital tanks and covered on the other by bright yellow ffassa, stretched from its sponge scaffolding to the nearby walls and ceiling. "Hello Robert," he said. "Why does the embassy smell like blunt?"

"Oh, that? I pulled a bong rip ten minutes ago. Why, you want some?" asked Robert.

"Yes," said Hequa. "How was business here while I was gone?" asked Hequa.

"Mostly quiet," said Robert, handing Hequa a small bong. "I got another can to put the cut-in-half things in, since the first one filled up and got too heavy to move. Web traffic is pretty

much flat. Except for Tweetly, who has almost thirty thousand followers now.”

“Has anyone from the government come? Or the Great Bamzini, has he come?” asked Hequa, his voice distorted from holding in smoke.

“Nope. Neither one,” said Robert. “In fact, there have really only been a few people in every week. Mostly, it’s just been me and the tritals hanging out.”

“I wonder if the Great Bamzini received my packages,” said Hequa. “Everywhere I went, I put something surprising in a box and sent it to him. I sent biting insects, rotted fruit, a rat carcass with poop on it, and many other things.”

Robert laughed. “Well, depending on where you were, some of that stuff probably hasn’t arrived yet,” he said.

“And my room? It is undisturbed?” asked Hequa.

“No one’s touched your nest or your safe, Hequa,” said Robert. “But I’m really curious to know what you make of the world, now that you’ve seen more of it.”

“I think this planet is very beautiful, but there are too many languages,” said Hequa. “And so many people. So many poor, and so many rich. Did you know I had guns pointed at me for visiting a garden? And I was detained in Australia for taking pictures of traffic controls outside a large building with my phone? It was like, everywhere I went, there were always more

rules, each one more strange than the last.”

“I guess that makes sense. The world is full of rules,” said Robert. “But what about the people? I bet you met some interesting ones.”

“Yes, I met many interesting people,” said Hequa. “And I learned that all some people do is travel. In many places, the people who do this thought I was like them. In other places, I got to meet workers who make lasers and farmers who watch over animals. And I saw many tall buildings, in every city I visited.”

“What was your favorite place, if you had to pick one?” asked Robert.

“My favorite people were in Kenya, but my favorite plants were in Peru,” replied Hequa. “But I did not like London. The mimes there were very mean.”

“Well, it’s good to have you back,” said Robert. “Hey, have you heard from Sallycat?”

“Yes. She sent me an email three weeks ago. She said her job was good, but that she couldn’t talk about it,” said Hequa.

“That figures,” said Robert. “Well, it’s good to know she’s doing okay out there, anyway.”

“Oh Robert, I have brought you a gift,” said Hequa, reaching into the duffel bag he’d set on the floor when he arrived. “It is a watch. I got it in Hong Kong.”

Opening the small box Hequa offered, Robert removed the timepiece and examined it. "This is too nice, Hequa. I don't know if I can even accept it, it's so nice," he said.

"I made a friend in Hong Kong who helped me pick it out," said Hequa. "I got one for me and one for you and one for Sallycat."

"But this must've cost a fortune," said Robert. "I mean, we're doing very well on those diamonds you make. But you can't just go throwing money around like that."

"I can, and I did," said Hequa. "It is a very special watch. It is waterproof, and self-winding."

"Aww hell, it's probably the nicest watch I've ever seen," said Robert. "Thank you, Hequa."

"I am happy to bring you this gift," said Hequa. "But now, I must fluff up my nest and go to sleep. It has been a very long day."

Chapter 34

After a fitful sleep, Hequa changed into his comfortable flight suit for the first time in months. He ate leftover snacks from his travel bag, and wandered slowly around the embassy. Coming to the trash cans filled with cut-in-half things, Hequa paused, meditating on the contents of the cans. Then, activating the draath crystal, he set about making the cut-in-half things into blobs.

By late morning, more than a dozen grapefruit-sized blobs of metal and glass were cooling on the floor along a wall. Hequa was in the process of making another of these blobs when the door opened, and an enemy walked in. "I have molten glass here. Do you want me to throw it on you?" demanded Hequa, glaring at Gabe.

"I come in peace," said Gabe, showing Hequa the palms of his hands.

"You are a liar and a trouble causer," said Hequa. "You are worse than the Great Bamzini. Please leave the embassy at once."

"Please just hear me out," said Gabe. "I'm here to make you a

very rich man.”

“I have enough money,” said Hequa. “You are a liar and a thief who uses the government to cause trouble. Why should I listen to anything from you?”

“Hequa, I think we got off on the wrong foot,” said Gabe. “I’ll be honest, when we first met, I thought your tech was stolen. I thought you were a criminal selling state secrets. But now? Now I know better. I know you’re the genius behind all of this. And, knowing that, I think we can make a deal.”

“No deal,” said Hequa. “You can either leave, or you can leave with molten glass thrown on you.”

“But Hequa, I just heard that a group from India is developing fungus-based textiles. If you do a deal with me, we can beat them to the punch and make seven figures,” said Gabe.

Hequa moved towards Gabe with a smoking crucible. “Maybe I should cut you up and make you into blobs,” he said. “I am still mad about you causing trouble for Tom and Betty. They were kind to me, and you interrupted their lives over a knife.”

“Woah, easy there,” said Gabe. “Like I said, I misjudged you. But now I know you’re in bed with the feds, and all I’m interested in is this crazy fungus here.”

“I made a deal with people in Mumbai, for the ffassa fungus,” said Hequa.

“Wait. What?” asked Gabe. “How the hell did you pull that off?”

“It was very easy,” said Hequa. “All I had to do was show them the embassy website, show them a sample of the fungus, and explain how easy it is to grow ffassa in nearly any shape you want. The investors I talked to are very excited. Maybe you can do a deal with them?”

“You little shit,” said Gabe, finally dropping his nice guy facade. “I may not know where you’re from, but I’ll tell you right now, you’re swimming with sharks, and you’re going to get eaten.”

Hequa poured a dollop of molten glass onto Gabe’s shoe. “Aww, fuck!” said Gabe. “What’re you, crazy?”

“I have much more hot glass in this crucible,” said Hequa. “I want you to apologize to Tom, and to Robert.”

“Like hell,” said Gabe, backing away. “I should call the cops on you for ruining my shoes.”

“Call them. And while you are calling, I will call the DIA, to tell them that you are making trouble for me,” said Hequa.

Once Gabe had left, Hequa returned to making blobs, signing each with a molknife once sufficiently cooled. Growing restless by late afternoon, he locked the embassy up and took a long walk. He walked to the river and went for a swim, enjoying the familiar orange-tinted water. Then he went downtown, to walk around buildings that no longer seemed as tall as they once did.

Heading back towards the embassy, Hequa found a coffee shop and ordered a cup of the psychedelic brew. He wanted to call Sallycat, but knew she was unreachable. So he settled for calling the Great Bamzini and leaving curse words in several languages on his voicemail. Unsatisfied with this prank, Hequa called Maya and told her voicemail about his good financial prospects and his one night stand in Hong Kong. Finally, Hequa called Robert, to ask for Gabe's phone number and address. After leaving this last message, Hequa's phone rang. It was Maya calling.

"Hequa? Hequa, did you just call me to leave me a nasty voicemail?" asked Maya.

"Yes, Maya. Would you like to hear more about the important business deal I did in Mumbai? Or the woman I had very good sex with in Hong Kong?" asked Hequa.

"God, what are you, like, the biggest asshole on the planet?" asked Maya.

"No Maya. Remember? You told me I was the biggest loser on the planet. Loser, not asshole. You said that my embassy was stupid, and that my penis was unsatisfying," said Hequa.

"Only because you said I had a nipple mustache!" said Maya.

"I was wrong to say that. I was still learning the words," said Hequa. "It is not a mustache, because mustaches grow on the face."

“What is wrong with you, Hequa? When I first heard your voice, I was thrilled that you finally got a phone. I thought maybe you wanted to make up. But then I listened to your voicemail and now I’m so mad I don’t know what to do,” said Maya.

“Meet me for drinks? You choose where, and I will pay,” said Hequa.

“Fine. The first place we met. They’ve got bands tonight, I think,” said Maya.

“Good. I will be there in an hour,” said Hequa.

Chapter 35

Hequa was not sure what the person on stage was doing with that guitar. What came from the instrument sounded more like a dying animal than like music. Strangely, the small crowd gathered before the small stage seemed to be enjoying it. They swayed back and forth, some with eyes closed, and did not appear at all disturbed by the music, despite that it consisted wholly of screeches and abrupt, jarring transitions.

Just as this band began putting away their gear, much to Hequa's relief, Maya appeared at the bar next to him. "Hey Hequa," she said. "Buy me a drink?"

"Maya. Good to see you," said Hequa warmly. "Yes, have whatever you want."

"Are you wearing a fucking Rolex?" asked Maya, incredulous, once Hequa had paid for her drink.

"It is automatic and waterproof. I think it looks nice with the flight suit. Don't you?" asked Hequa.

“I think you’re ridiculous,” said Maya. “But, yeah. It’s flashy, if that’s what you’re into.”

“What are you into? It has been some time since we’ve talked,” said Hequa.

“Same old same old here,” said Maya. “I still work at the bank, but I got promoted to loan officer.”

“Have you found a new boyfriend?” asked Hequa.

“I’ve seen a couple of people, but no one serious,” said Maya. “How’d you get rich so quick?”

“I am not rich,” said Hequa. “But I made some money selling diamonds, and I made more money off of ffassa, the textile fungus I brought to Earth from Jhanya. That was the deal I did in Mumbai.”

“How did you even go there? I thought all you had was a fake ID?” asked Maya.

“I got a real ID from the government, for helping them with something involving tritals that I’m not supposed to talk about,” explained Hequa. “I went there on a plane. I have been to many places since the last time we spoke.”

“Well aren’t you just full of surprises,” said Maya. “I’ve driven by your embassy store a few times, and pictured you there, doing whatever strange things you do. Guess you were really off having adventures the whole time.”

“Yes, great adventures,” said Hequa. “This world is very big, and there are people all over it.”

“I want to go on an adventure! Did you ever think about that?” asked Maya.

“Your last email told me to ‘go to hell and stay gone forever’. So I didn’t think about that,” said Hequa. “Do you want to go on an adventure right now?”

“Yes. Let’s go on an adventure. I mean it,” said Maya.

“Okay. Then let us go on an adventure,” said Hequa. “Have you seen the Rocky Mountains? Because I have not.”

“I want to go to Barcelona. Tomorrow,” said Maya.

“Yes,” said Hequa enthusiastically. “We can go there tomorrow. For how long?”

“How about just the weekend. Do you seriously want to do this?” asked Maya, gulping her drink down and signaling the bartender for another.

“Yes. We will go to Spain for the weekend like a regular Earth couple,” said Hequa.

“Yup. Barcelona for the weekend. Totally normal,” said Maya. “Do you know what I can’t stop thinking about? I can’t stop thinking about if you’re really an alien from another planet. Like, what if you are?”

Hequa laughed. "Of course I'm from another planet, Maya," he said.

"No, but like, what if you were, for real," said Maya. "Like, what would that mean?"

"It would mean you've had sex with an alien," said Hequa. "And more than once."

"No, but like, what if there were whole other worlds out there, way out there in space?" asked Maya, slurring slightly.

"My people know of three other inhabited worlds, beyond Earth and Jhanya," said Hequa. "But Jhanya itself consists of three small planets all in the same system."

"Hequa, I want to believe that. I really do," said Maya. "But I just can't believe you're from another planet. Another country, for sure. But not another planet."

"With all you've seen, you are still not convinced?" asked Hequa. "What about my tritals, and ffassa, and knives that can cut through anything?"

"You know what it is?" asked Maya after a long pause. "It's the money. You told me there was no money on Jhanya. But there's like, an advanced civilization there, right? I call bullshit. You can't have civilization without money."

"You are a banker," said Hequa gently. "Maybe that is why you believe this. On Jhanya, people never traded incessantly like

the people of Earth do now. And once Jhanya became a world with just one nation, trade all but disappeared, except among prisoners. The economy of Jhanya ran perfectly fine on gifts for many years. When I first got to Earth, and saw every person trading for every little thing, I feared I had arrived to a planet filled with prisoners. And after seeing many countries here, I still fear this. More than ever, in fact.”

“Your English is much better than it was the last time we talked,” commented Maya.

“Thank you,” said Hequa. “I have started to learn other Earth languages, and I think this has helped my English.”

“But I’m still not buying it,” said Maya. “Money is what makes a civilization civilized. And that Rolex you’re wearing tells me you know what I’m talking about.”

Hequa chuckled. “Yes, the watch can be traded for a year’s worth of a low wage earner’s pay in this country. But the fact that I can buy a watch like this while there are people going hungry in the world shows that your system of money is a system of oppression.”

“Oppression, huh? So you’re still talking to Sallycat?” asked Maya.

“Only sometimes. By email,” said Hequa. “She is working for the government now, and does not have time to talk.”

“No shit? Well good for her,” said Maya. “But I’m still not buying

your story.”

“You even refer to ‘buying’ when signaling your disapproval,” said Hequa. “I think living here has reorganized your thinking around money, so you can’t even have a thought without considering it in terms of money or trade.”

“Maybe you should try owing sixty thousand dollars for a degree you’ll never use. See if you start thinking differently,” said Maya.

“I started thinking differently the moment I realized everything in this world happened by trade,” said Hequa. “It is a madness that I do not like, and can not escape.”

“You know what my job is now? I approve lines of credit for people,” said Maya. “The thing is, only people who don’t really need credit can get credit at a reasonable rate.”

“That sounds like the kind of job that would never exist on Jhanya,” said Hequa.

“Okay, so how do people pay for a house on Jhanya?” asked Maya.

“They find a place that no one else is living in and move in,” said Hequa. “Sometimes they build a new place, but usually they just move into one that is already there.”

“Okay, but who pays for it?” asked Maya.

“Well, friends and family help with finding the place, and the

moving, and the construction if some is needed,” replied Hequa. “Jhanya is not like here, where every inch of places is owned, often by someone far away. In Jhanya, if there is a place built for people to live in, then this place is owned by whoever lives there. This way is much more simple than what is here on Earth.”

“Fine,” said Maya. “But how do you get people to do stuff that no one wants to do, like garbage collection?”

“There is not garbage there like there is here,” replied Hequa. “If a thing that is made to last breaks, it is fixed. If a thing that is made for just a few uses wears out, it is buried or sunk in water, where it quickly decomposes. The way you handle garbage here is completely insane in comparison.”

“Right, but what about farming? Food production?” asked Maya.

“Farming is one of the most labor intensive jobs on Jhanya,” admitted Hequa. “When I was young, there were many large farming families who did this work, with help from young people from all over. The young would go to a farm and work for a few seasons to learn, as part of their basic education. But then some of the large farming families decided that they wanted to be in charge of the world, and they formed The Order, and there was a revolution. This is why my people were killed.”

“What about government? Couldn’t they do anything?” asked Maya.

“Government works differently on Jhanya,” explained Hequa.

“There are Overseers who keep peace in every part of the world, but there had been no central government for a thousand years when the revolution began. The big farm families wanted a central government that they could be in charge of, so they created The Order, and split the Overseers into conflicted factions, and destroyed my people and many others.”

“Okay, so what you’ve just told me is that your world without money led to a bloody revolution,” said Maya.

“One revolution in a thousand years,” said Hequa. “Yes. Because people with power wanted more power.”

Chapter 36

To Hequa, the weekend in Spain was an unqualified success. To Maya, it was a series of stressful minor mishaps that Hequa seemed oblivious to. On the long flight home, Hequa dozed while Maya drank wine. And once they landed, Maya had just six hours before she had to be back at work, so they went their separate ways.

Returning to the embassy, Hequa watered the fassa and read Tweetly's latest offensive tweets. He tried finding the Great Bamzini on his flight suit's computer, and instead found that the tracker he'd placed on the young magician's hat was no longer transmitting. After leaving a message for Robert, he cut some things in half, then set about making more blobs from cut-in-half things. While finishing up a blob that was about two thirds metal and one third glass, the front door opened, and two uniformed police officers entered the embassy.

"Hello and welcome to Jhanya Embassy," said Hequa. "Would you like to see a notebook filled with the writings of Jhanya?"

"Hequa Jhanya?" asked the taller officer.

“That’s what it says on my ID,” replied Hequa.

“Sir, I’m Officer Hanson. That’s Officer Nunez. We’re following up on a complaint against you,” said Officer Hanson. “Do you know a Gabriel Knox?”

“I don’t think so,” said Hequa. “I know a venture capitalist named Gabe. He is my enemy. Is this the same person?”

“Your enemy, huh?” said Officer Nunez. “Sir, did you assault Mr. Knox here in your store four days ago?”

Hequa laughed. “No, there was no assault,” he said.

“Sir, this is no laughing matter,” said Officer Hanson. “Mr. Knox claims that you poured molten glass on his foot.”

“You see what I do here? I make blobs. Sometimes of metal, sometimes of glass,” explained Hequa. “Gabe came to try and do a deal with me that I didn’t want to do. Then he got in the way of my blob-making, and some glass got on his shoe. It was an accident that he caused.”

“What exactly do you do here?” asked Officer Hanson slowly, his eyes moving from the brilliant strips of ffassa to the trital tanks to Hequa’s cutting table.

“I share things from my home world with the people of Earth,” replied Hequa.

“Are you hooking octopuses up to computers?” asked Officer

Hanson.

“I think we’re getting off track here,” said Officer Nunez. “So Mr. Jhanya, you admit to arguing with Mr. Knox but deny the assault.”

“Yes,” said Hequa. “Gabe is a liar and a troublemaker. He made trouble for me twice before this because I am an immigrant. Can you make him stay away from me?”

“Well, you can bar him from your property, which means that he can be charged with trespass if he comes back. You can also file a restraining order, to keep him at a distance from your person, but I’m not sure you’d be able to get one on the strength of what you’ve told me,” explained Officer Nunez. “Hanson, I think we’re done here.”

“But,” said Officer Hanson. “But there’s a bong right there, on the table with all those cut up things on it.”

“So there is,” said Officer Nunez. “Mr. Jhanya, we’re going to have to take that, and cite you for possession of drug paraphernalia.”

“What does this mean?” asked Hequa.

“It means you’ll have to pay a fine for having a pot pipe,” said Officer Hanson.

“What if I say it was Gabe’s pot pipe?” asked Hequa.

“Is it?” asked Officer Hanson.

“No. It is mine,” said Hequa.

Once the police left, Hequa called Robert and told him of the visit.

“Hequa, I’m glad you called,” said Robert. “We’ve got bigger problems than the fine for the bong. The landlord for your space just sent an eviction notice, claiming you’re living there in violation of your lease and creating unsafe conditions for the public. They want you out by the end of the month.”

“But I paid. It is all paid until the end of the year,” argued Hequa.

“They say they’ll refund it all, minus damages. But they want you out,” said Robert.

“This is Gabe. I know it is,” said Hequa. “To get this notice on the same day police come here because of him. This is Gabe’s doing.”

“You’re probably right, but I don’t see how that changes anything,” said Robert. “You’ve got to find a new place, and quick.”

“Okay,” said Hequa. “Do I have enough money to buy my own building?”

“Maybe part of one, if that’s what you want,” replied Robert.

“If I own a place, can I be evicted again?” asked Hequa.

“No, but you’ll be responsible for keeping it up to code. And I doubt you’ll be able to get another decent storefront on such short notice. But I guess you never know,” said Robert.

After three weeks of frantic property searches, Hequa purchased the fifth floor of an old industrial building. Making trip after trip in Robert’s Volvo, moving from the old embassy to the new took five days. Once moving was complete and the utilities were activated in the new Jhanya Embassy, Hequa set about arranging and rearranging his things in the cavernous warehouse space. While he was doing this, an idea occurred to him.

After hiring Transcorp Security, Hequa began receiving regular reports on the activities and whereabouts of both the Great Bamzini and Gabe Knox. Hequa studied these reports for several weeks, ruminating on how best to cause trouble for his enemies. Finally, Hequa devised a plan, and began setting this into motion.

Chapter 37

“Oh hey, Hequa. I haven’t heard much from you since we got back. What’s up?” asked Maya.

“An enemy moved against me, so I had to move Jhanya Embassy to another building. I have been very busy,” said Hequa.

“Oh. I thought you were sick of me, after Barcelona,” said Maya.

“No. I still want to see you. I have just been busy,” said Hequa. “How have you been, these last weeks?”

“Same as usual,” said Maya. “I’m sorry, but was there something specific you wanted to talk about?”

“I want to invite you to see my new place, and to go out eating,” said Hequa.

“When?” asked Maya.

“Tonight,” said Hequa. “We can eat anywhere you want.”

“Sorry. Can’t tonight. What about Friday or Saturday?” asked Maya.

“Friday. Yes. It is a date,” said Hequa.

“Okay. Bye then,” said Maya, hanging up.

When Friday came, Maya took the freight elevator up five floors to Jhanya Embassy. “This looks like a step up,” she said to Hequa, in lieu of a greeting.

“It is bigger, and I own it,” said Hequa. “As you can see, there is much more space to stretch the ffassa fungus, but I still have to build a room for my nest.”

“I love the new way your octopus computer things are stacked,” said Maya, marveling at the trital tanks on their new shelves. “And I like that you have actual tables and benches instead of the folding ones you had at the last place.”

“Thank you. Yes. This place will be much better, and no one can evict me from it,” said Hequa.

“Hey wait. Are you wearing a tux?” asked Maya. “Like, to dinner?”

“Yes,” said Hequa. “It is part of my plan to get revenge on my enemy Gabe.”

“Alright. Let’s hear it. How is wearing a tux part of a revenge plan?” asked Maya.

“Will you help me with my plan?” asked Hequa.

“Sure. Why not?” asked Maya.

“Okay. I had Gabe followed. Every Friday night, he eats at the same restaurant. Perch. My plan is to go and disrupt his meal,” said Hequa.

“So you want me to go with you to cause trouble at a restaurant? Fine. I’m in,” said Maya.

From their seat at one of Perch’s back tables, Hequa saw Gabe and his wife enter the restaurant. After pointing them out to Maya, Hequa discreetly darted out the back door, then returned a few minutes later. “Now it is your part,” said Hequa. “Maya, can you walk by Gabe’s table and dump this vial into Gabe’s soup without him noticing?”

“I’m not doing that,” said Maya. “What the hell is that stuff, anyway?”

“It is the eggs of a useful lizard called the yilanka. Eating the eggs is the normal way to hatch them. But for someone on Earth to eat the eggs without knowing it? This could be very confusing, especially when tiny living lizards begin coming out in the toilet,” explained Hequa.

“Wow, you don’t fuck around with your revenge,” said Maya.

“The yilanka eggs are just one part of my plan,” said Hequa, getting up. “Here. I must place them now, while Gabe is in the

bathroom.”

Returning to the table, Hequa tried to suppress a grin. “It is done,” he said. “Now we can enjoy our meal while Gabe enjoys his.”

“This asparagus is absolutely perfect, by the way,” said Maya. “Want to try?”

“That is very good,” agreed Hequa. “Want to try my quiche?”

“Sure,” said Maya. “But Hequa, where do you see this going? Us, I mean.”

“I don’t know,” said Hequa. “I don’t know how it works here. Are you saying you want to take another trip? We can do this, but I think we should wait awhile.”

“No, I mean us as a couple,” said Maya. “You’ve never even asked me about my family, and we’ve been seeing each other for how long? I mean, what are we really doing here? Do you even really want to date me, or just use me for a prop in your crazy schemes?”

“Are you saying you want me to meet your family?” asked Hequa.

“I’m saying normal people would at least take an interest,” said Maya.

“Normal people don’t drink three glasses of wine before dinner,” said Hequa. “But I’m not judging you for all of the ways that

you are different.”

Maya appeared ready to become angry. She took a breath to calm herself, then consumed a deliberately large sip of wine. “Fine,” she said. “Neither of us are perfect. So what? I just need to know that I’m not wasting my time with you is all. Can you really blame me?”

“Our time has never felt wasted to me,” said Hequa. “It has always felt like animal attraction that our personalities sometimes get in the way of. Is it not this for you?”

“It is, but you can’t just say stuff like that,” said Maya.

“There is much I can’t just say. But I say it anyway,” said Hequa. “Do you still like your apartment? Do you want to move into the embassy with me?”

“Ha! You wish,” said Maya. “Do you even, like, know where I work?”

“You work at the bank as a loan officer,” said Hequa.

“But do you know which bank I work at?” asked Maya.

“No,” said Hequa. “Why? Is that important?”

Chapter 38

On Monday afternoon, Hequa went to Knox Capital Group. Finding a plush waiting area, he approached the receptionist. "I'm here to see Gabriel Knox," he said.

"Of course," said the receptionist. "What time is your appointment?"

"I don't have an appointment," said Hequa. "But if you tell him Hequa from Jhanya is here to see him, he will want to meet me."

"Okay. Take a seat," said the receptionist. "Coffee's over there."

Hequa waited, sipping mediocre coffee, for under ten minutes. When Gabe appeared, Hequa got up. "Gabe!" he said. "You have a very nice waiting room."

"Hequa. Good to see you buddy," said Gabe, shaking Hequa's hand. "Finally come to your senses about doing that textiles deal?"

"We can talk about that," said Hequa. "But I have another subject

of talk that you might be interested in.”

“Well, come on then. My office is back this way,” said Gabe.

“Before we start, I have a few questions for you,” said Hequa, once seated in Gabe’s office.

“Shoot,” said Gabe. “I’ll tell you anything you want to know.”

“I know you called police on me. But did you also call my landlord to get my embassy evicted?” asked Hequa.

“Guilty as charged,” said Gabe. “Truth is, I was trying to pressure you into doing this textiles thing.”

“And how have your insides been feeling today? A little squirmy, maybe?” asked Hequa.

Gabe’s face paled. “Now, how could you know that?” he asked.

“I can see it in your face,” said Hequa. “Have you ever heard of the yilanka lizard? These are very small lizards that the people of Jhanya use to sort and turn compost.”

“Okay, but what’s that got to do with anything?” asked Gabe.

“I can make these lizards appear anywhere, as if by magic. Today, I have made them appear inside of you,” said Hequa.

“You what?” said Gabe.

“Soon, you will begin pooping out dozens of small, living lizards,” explained Hequa. “They are not dangerous. And each one is very valuable for its ability to improve the health of compost.”

“Be serious, Hequa,” said Gabe cautiously. “I’ve got a contract all drawn up to develop a textile plant around your biotech. Now I know things between us haven’t been great. But if you say no to this deal you’re throwing away millions.”

Hequa sipped his coffee thoughtfully. “Let me see the deal,” he said. After flipping through the contract carefully, he finished his coffee and placed the pile of papers back on Gabe’s desk. “This can work, but it will need to be changed in a few places,” he said.

“Okay. Now we’re talking. What do you need?” asked Gabe.

“Five million up front, instead of three,” said Hequa. “And you can’t own the ffa. Not any percent of it. But you can own the right to use it forever, and pay me a flat quarterly fee of three million dollars for this right, instead of a variable percentage of your sales.”

“I’ll give you four up front and one point five quarterly,” said Gabe.

“I will agree,” said Hequa. “But only if you meet me next week, and give me no fewer than fifty yilanka lizards. They will have to be pulled from your poop, rinsed with warm water, and given bugs to eat. If you have the yilanka lizards here, at this time

next week, and if you modify your contract as we just agreed, I should be able to sign the deal.”

Gabe appeared about to say something. Instead, he jumped up from his chair and very quickly left the room. Hequa waited patiently, flipping through Gabe’s contract, taking pictures of every page with his phone. Finally, Gabe returned, his face ashen, to stand in the office’s doorway.

“I don’t know how you did that, but you and me are done here,” said Gabe.

“Good,” said Hequa. “Next week, we can do the deal we talked about today. Remember, I need fifty lizards, or there is no deal.”

“Get out of my sight, you lunatic,” said Gabe.

“Remember, rinse them with warm water. Cold water makes them want to sleep too much. And for food, crickets from the pet store should be fine,” said Hequa, rising to leave.

“You’re going to jail for this,” said Gabe. “Do you have any idea who I am? You’re finished.”

“You already called police on me and got me evicted,” said Hequa. “So I paid people to learn everything about you. Now I know how much you need a deal with me. Without such a deal, it is you who are finished within months. So collect my yilanka lizards, and do not cause any more trouble for me. Or I will start causing even bigger trouble for you.”

“Fine, you little fucker. Just get the hell out of my office,” said Gabe.

The following week, Hequa arrived at Knox Capital Group carrying a small aquarium filled with ffassa growing on a sponge. “I’m here to see Gabe,” he said to the receptionist.

“Go right in. Mr. Knox is waiting for you,” said the receptionist.

“Hequa. Good, I see you’ve brought our sample, like we agreed,” said Gabe.

“Yes. But where are the yilanka lizards?” asked Hequa. “I thought our agreement was clear?”

Gabe shuddered. “That was some trick. I’ll give you that,” he said. “But I’m not messing with shit lizards for anyone. Especially you. Now are we going to sign this deal or what?”

Hequa set the aquarium down and looked over the paperwork carefully. “When do I get the first payment?” he asked.

“Seventy two hours after signing,” said Gabe. “It should be in your account by Friday.”

“Good,” said Hequa. “And I don’t have to see you again after this?”

“No, and good riddance,” said Gabe. “I still don’t know how you did that trick with the lizards. That’s some scary negotiating. Fucking cutthroat. I’ll stay away from you if you stay away from

me.”

“Good. I will sign,” said Hequa.

Chapter 39

“**H**equa, I just checked the accounts, and someone transferred four million dollars into one,” said Robert upon entering the new embassy. “What the hell did you do?”

“Hello Robert!” said Hequa. “I did a deal with Gabe Knox, for ffaasa rights. We are still enemies, but his money is good for me. Four million is just the first payment.”

“Well holy shit,” said Robert, lighting a joint. “That is good for you. And I guess good for us, since you’re giving me ten percent to manage your finances.”

“It is good for us,” said Hequa. “And as you can see, I have been busy making Jhanya Embassy much better.”

“Is that your room?” asked Robert, pointing at a large plywood dome in the center of the space. “And what are those pots lined up along the windows?”

“The dome is my room. As you can see it still needs to be painted,” said Hequa, accepting the smoldering joint. “As for

the pots, soon they will sprout zanzi plants. These plants make very good medicine.”

“Hey, what’s going on over here?” asked Robert. “Did you connect these tritals to each other?”

“Yes. I made a network,” said Hequa. “I’m using it to edit the Great Bamzini into videos that make him appear foolish. Here’s one where I edited him into a crowd at the beach that kills a dolphin with their stupidity.”

“Wow, that actually looks pretty convincing,” said Robert.

“Here is another one where he is in a racist parade,” said Hequa. “The program to do it is simple. It is called a generative adversarial network. And with the tritals working on it, the results come very fast.”

“Pretty cool. But promise me you’re not doing any sex video stuff,” said Robert. “That’ll get you in big trouble, quick.”

“There’s no way a sex video of the Great Bamzini could be made to look convincing,” said Hequa. “But I will heed your warning.”

Robert chuckled. “I see your point,” he said. “But, moving on, there are a couple of business items we should probably discuss. Like, first, a regular checking account might not be the best place to put four million dollars.”

“Oh? Where should I put it?” asked Hequa. “Should I call Transcorp to arrange for the money to be guarded?”

“No, the money is safe. But you’re not really earning any interest. With a big chunk of change like that, most people buy stocks, or real estate, or at least put it into a money market account.”

“What if I want to use the money to stop bad people from hurting the environment?” asked Hequa.

“Well, there are ways to do that,” said Robert. “There are some green investment funds, and plenty of nonprofits to donate to. What exactly did you have in mind?”

“I want to find the people who are killing the fish, and the insects,” said Hequa. “The people who are making the bad chemicals and the weapons of war. I want to use my money to find these people and show everybody who they are and where they live.”

“Hequa, that sounds kind of dangerous,” said Robert. “Are you sure you won’t just consider a money market account.”

“I will live another three hundred years. Maybe longer,” said Hequa. “I need to consider how to act now to make sure the world is still good for me hundreds of years from now. Knowing this is my motivation, what would you have me do?”

“Tough call,” said Robert. “I can’t tell you what to do. But if it were me, I’d park a third in an interest bearing account, park another third in real estate, and use the last third to try and influence people to change like you want them to. That way, even if part of your plan falls through, you’ll still have something to fall back on.”

“Good. Do it,” said Hequa. “Only, instead of a money market account, put one third into Ethereum. Try to buy the rest of this building or buildings around it with the next third. If you can not, look for places like this that can see the river. Just tell me if you need my help. And I will design a plan to stop the world damagers from destroying the planet completely.”

“You want me to spend one point three million on cryptocurrency?” asked Robert.

“Yes,” said Hequa. “I have been reading about it, and think it is a better investment than your more traditional vehicles.”

“Vehicles? Guess you have been reading up,” said Robert. “Well, okay then. If that’s what you want. Hey, heard from Sallycat lately?”

“Yes. She is coming to visit in two weeks,” said Hequa. “I’m excited to show her the new embassy.”

“How’s she doing out there in top secret Nevada?” asked Robert.

“She says her work is very boring. But she has a new girlfriend, which makes the boring work easier,” said Hequa.

“Well good for her,” said Robert. “Two weeks, huh? Is that why you want to throw a party here in two weeks?”

“It is,” said Hequa. “A party to celebrate many things. I hope you can come. I will wear my tuxedo, but you can dress however you want.”

“Of course I’ll be there,” said Robert. “I’ll even put on a sport coat.”

Chapter 40

On the night of the party, Hequa sat, hunched over in his nest, wearing his tux and staring at his watch. “Hequa?” called Sallycat at the doorway to his dome.

“Hello Sallycat!” said Hequa in a hushed tone. “Come in. It’s good to see you. Welcome to my party.”

“Who are all these people?” asked Sallycat, leaning over slightly to stand beneath the dome. “Cool place, by the way.”

“Shh, it is almost the moment,” said Hequa. “Yes, I think he is here.”

Outside the dome, Sallycat and Hequa heard a familiar voice. “Ladies and gentleman, it is I, the Great Bamzini. Prepare to be amazed. For my first trick, I will need a volunteer,” said the Great Bamzini. You sir, can you come right over here and hold this piece of rope?”

“This is my moment,” said Hequa, springing up and exiting the dome. After activating a large display screen which had been set up to face the crowd, he walked over to stand just behind

the Great Bamzini.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” bellowed Hequa. “I am Hequa, your host. You will notice on the screen here is video of a crowd mishandling a dolphin. If you look closely, you will see that the Great Bamzini is pictured in this crowd. Now, this video may or may not be authentic, but I understand that this young dolphin later died. Great Bamzini, what have you to say for yourself?”

“This was you? This whole thing was you?” demanded the Great Bamzini. “You did all this to prank me?”

“Oh yes,” said Hequa. “This is my party. These are my guests. This is my video.”

“Fucking asshole! Where did you even get that video?” asked the Great Bamzini.

“I found it on the internet and edited it in a special way,” said Hequa. “Now there you are, mishandling a young dolphin.”

“I’m leaving. I don’t care about the fee,” said the Great Bamzini before slipping out and into the elevator.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” said Hequa over the din of renewed conversation. “If you came here as paid guests, you can now leave. Please pick up your fee on the way out.”

Nearly all of the guests moved towards the door, where Robert was handing out twenty dollar bills. As the crowd filtered

out, Sallycat found a beer and stood looking at the trital tanks. Hequa and Robert wandered over.

“Hequa, did you seriously just hire a crowd of people to embarrass that poor kid?” asked Sallycat.

“Yes,” said Hequa. “What did you think of the video? These tritals made it.”

“Hequa, what kind of person makes a dolphin abuse deepfake?” asked Sallycat.

“What kind of person puts a trital into a missile?” asked Hequa.

“Fair point,” said Sallycat. “Got any food around here?”

“I bought many tiny sandwiches for the party. Most are still there,” said Hequa, pointing to the food table.

Over sandwiches, Sallycat caught Robert and Hequa up on her life. Working for the DIA meant doing an endless series of tests and program adjustments. It was very tedious, but her coworkers were all great. Especially one, Nadia, with whom she was romantically involved.

“Very good. I am happy for you,” said Hequa. “But have they figured out that Iran is not involved yet?”

“Honestly? I think they knew it all along,” said Sallycat. “They pretty much know everything.”

“So they used lies about Iran as a tool to get more information about the tritals from me? Very clever,” said Hequa.

“Yeah it’s clever. And they’re probably listening right now, so watch what you say,” said Sallycat.

“The DIA is very clever and Sallycat is a very good worker,” said Hequa, loudly. “Nadia is also a good worker and Sallycat is a good match for her.”

Sallycat laughed. “Hequa, shut up,” she said. “Did you really do a deal with that guy Gabe?”

“Yes. I have done many deals since the last time we saw each other,” said Hequa. “And I am back together with Maya. I think. She is difficult to understand, and I thought she would be here now.”

“Many deals, huh?” said Sallycat. “What kind of deals?”

“With Gabe for ffassa. And another group of investors for ffassa, also,” said Hequa. “Then I did a deal with a factory in China for laser diodes. Those should be arriving soon. And Robert is helping me do more deals for cryptocurrency and real estate.”

“Well, look at you, making moves like a big shot,” said Sallycat. “Hey, there’s Maya.”

“What happened? Did I miss the party?” asked Maya as she approached.

“You missed the paid guests, and my prank on the Great Bamzini,” said Hequa. “But this is the real party. There is beer and wine and coffee and blunt, and many small sandwiches. Would you like to see a video I made?”

“Oh hey Sallycat. Robert. Looks like you guys are getting the band back together,” said Maya, pouring a glass of red wine.

“Just a vacation, for me,” said Sallycat.

“Maya, you work in a bank,” said Hequa. “Robert says it it a bad plan to buy one point three million dollars worth of cryptocurrency. What do you think?”

“I think that’s some serious money, Hequa. You should do more research before committing to something like that,” replied Maya.

“Oh! I just remembered,” said Hequa, fetching a small box from a nearby shelf. “Maya, I have a gift for you.”

“A Rolex?” said Maya upon opening the box. “You got me a Rolex?”

“Yes,” said Hequa. “Now we all have one.”

“Well, thanks. But holy shit,” said Maya.

“Yes, holy shit,” said Hequa. “It’s automatic and waterproof. I got it so you know you always have a place with me.”

“Thank you,” said Maya. “Hey, I can’t believe how big your ffassa is getting.”

“I am stretching it into a net that will cover one wall and the whole ceiling,” explained Hequa. “It will be very fun to climb around in, once it has grown enough.”

“And your trital tanks look good like that. Still weird as hell, but they almost look like a sci fi art installation,” said Maya. “But what I don’t see is your table of cut-in-half things. Give that up, did you?”

“Yes,” said Hequa. “I grew tired of cutting things and then making blobs with the leftovers. The blobs were not even good for weights, because they were too brittle.”

“If this is a party, where’s the music?” asked Maya.

“I’ll find something,” said Sallycat, moving to Tweetly’s computer. “How’s this?” she said, causing the device to begin emitting tinny rock music.

“I’m not sure it’s better than nothing,” said Robert. “Hequa, I can go buy some better speakers and be back in an hour.”

“You would do that? Yes,” said Hequa. “There should be better music at this party.”

Chapter 41

“**H**equa? Hequa, we did it. We got the rest of this building for six hundred thousand. We close on Friday,” called Robert after exiting the elevator. “Hequa, are you here?”

“Up here,” said Hequa, who was suspended a dozen feet off the ground in a web of fassa. “So the whole building is ours? That is great news. I will come down.”

“Ours at the price we wanted,” said Robert happily. “Can’t beat that.”

“This is very good,” said Hequa once he was standing before Robert. “The molknife parts will be arriving from China next week. Now we can have a whole floor for a molknife factory. Which floor should it be on? I think it should be on three. What do you think?”

“Yeah, about that,” said Robert. “Are you really sure you want to spend your time working in a knife factory?”

“Have you seen how road workers cut concrete?” asked Hequa.

“It is very slow, and very loud, and makes terrible toxic dust. A molecular cutter would be much better. So I will make cutters for cutting roads.”

“Okay. If you say so,” said Robert. “By the way, have your zanzi plants sprouted?”

“Some have. They are growing more slowly here. I don’t know why,” said Hequa. “But I have also started sprouting the rest of my seeds, and some are doing quite well.”

“Amazing,” said Robert. “Amazing that any at all would sprout, after so long in space.”

“They were well shielded in my suit,” said Hequa. “I’m a little worried about them, even though they seem fine. But now that the whole building is mine, can we go on the roof?”

“Let’s do it,” said Robert, leading the way. “Technically, it’s not yours until Friday, but I’ve got the keys already.”

The entrance to the roof was a small door, locked with a padlock, at the top of a steep and narrow wooden stairway. Following Robert’s lead, Hequa passed through this door, and stepped out onto the roof. Feeling rubber roofing material give slightly beneath his feet, Hequa proceeded cautiously, making his way to the roof’s nearest edge. “It’s a long way down,” he said, peering over this edge. “Do you think I should move some of the growing plants up here so they get better sun?”

“Maybe a few,” said Robert. “But you’ll have to be careful about

weight so you don't damage the roofing. The last thing you want in a building like this is a leak. And you'll have to be careful about who comes up here, too, come to think of it. None of this looks very safe."

"Should we put solar panels here? I think we could put enough here to power the building," said Hequa.

"Might be worth looking into," said Robert. "But, between the city and the state, there are rules we'd have to follow that might make that more trouble than it's worth."

"But it's my building, and I like how solar panels look. The whole way you Earth people make electricity in one place for use in another far away place makes no sense to me. It is very wasteful. I want my building to have its own electricity, and I can't use my draath crystal to make this electricity because I'll be using it in the furnace to make molknife blades," said Hequa.

"It's not me you have to argue with. It's the government," said Robert, pointing to a distant building where solar panels were installed. "You see that? Just one building with solar in the middle of all these other buildings without it? There's a reason for that, and it's not that people don't want solar. They do. They want solar, and rooftop gardens, and all kinds of things. But these old buildings weren't built for that. Their electrical systems, their load bearing capacity, their points of access for firefighters. They just weren't designed for it."

"So it is like the sewers," said Hequa. "They were built wrong, but everybody keeps using them, even though waste should be

composted instead of sent to centralized toxic cesspools.”

“Curious comparison, but yeah, that’s about the size of it,” said Robert. “Still, I’m sure no one would mind if you put potted plants up here.”

“Good. I will put plants, and places to sit,” said Hequa. “Can we go to the basement now?”

“Well, it’s not much to look at, but here it is,” said Robert once they’d reached the basement. “There’s the old furnace. Looks like an oil burner. Hasn’t been used in years. There’s your newer gas furnace, and hot water heater, and electrical.”

“Does no one ever clean basements?” asked Hequa, examining the grime on a finger he’d touched to a wall.

“It’s your building now. Feel free to clean up down here,” said Robert.

“Maybe I will,” said Hequa. “But I don’t like the air here. I will have to wear a breathing mask.”

“Probably a good idea,” said Robert. “But Hequa, there’s something else we should probably talk about. Are you planning on occupying this whole building? Because the first three floors already have a bunch of office space rented and I’m sure the tenants would like to stay put and rent from you if they could.”

“Okay, if you can handle them,” said Hequa. “And I will put the

molknife factory on floor four instead of three.”

Chapter 42

Once the parts arrived from China, Hequa wasted no time in setting up a one-man factory on his building's fourth floor. Making blades from carbon and tantalum, casting handles from chitosan and an enzyme secreted by yilanka lizards, Hequa worked for weeks, until he had just under five hundred battery-powered molknives ready for sale. Each one appeared as a dagger with a foot long iridescent blade and a large off-white handle. After testing each blade to make sure it cut concrete cleanly, Hequa started making sales calls using phone numbers of road construction companies he found on the internet.

Eventually, Hequa found someone with the Pavement Union who was willing to come and look at the molknives. This man introduced himself as Kyle Jensen when Hequa met him at the building's entrance, but did not speak further until they reached the factory floor. Then, upon seeing Hequa's ramshackle operation, he asked, "I came all the way here for this? Where are the cutters?"

"They are here," replied Hequa, picking up one of the molknives.

“That looks like a fantasy knife. I thought you had concrete cutters,” said Kyle.

“Watch this,” said Hequa, carving off a slice of concrete from a slab he’d cast for the purpose. “See? The cutter passes through easily, and cuts the concrete cleanly.”

“Is this some kind of joke?” asked Kyle, moving to touch the slab of concrete.

“No joke,” said Hequa. “You should try it to see how it feels.”

“Holy shit!” said Kyle after cutting his own slice off the slab. “That’s crazy. Are you sure it’s not some kind of trick?”

“No trick. Just good science,” said Hequa. “The battery will have to be replaced sometimes, but you do not need to water this kind of molknife, except to keep it clean.”

“Okay, what do you want for it?” asked Kyle.

“Two thousand six hundred dollars,” said Hequa. “There are not other knives like this on Earth. And by my calculations, each cutter will pay for itself very quickly because it will make jobs go very fast. With one of these, a single person can do in an hour what now takes three people two days to do.”

Kyle frowned. “Well, that is something, I’ll give you that,” he said. “I’ll think it over and give you a call.”

When three days passed without a call, Hequa phoned Kyle to

see what was going on. “This is Jensen. What’s up?” asked Kyle.

“Hi. This is Hequa, from Jhanya. I am calling to ask if you want one of my cutters,” said Hequa.

“Hequa, I’m going to level with you. Your product seems great. But no one’s going to buy your cutters, because they’ll put people out of work,” said Kyle.

“How can this be?” asked Hequa. “The whole point is to make less work for people. How can you not want this?”

“My people have bills to pay and mouths to feed,” said Kyle. “They want more work, not less. Have a good day now.”

Hanging up, Hequa looked around his cutter factory, wondering how he could have so seriously misjudged the market. Having worked so hard on this project, he did not want to see it fail, and wondered what other use might be found for the molknives he’d made. Methodically dismantling his factory over the next few days, he cleared the space of all but the molknives themselves, which he arranged into a large star pattern in the middle of the empty floor. Hequa was attempting to get a good picture of this when the elevator door opened and several people came into the room.

“Hequa Jhanya? I’m Agent Dodd with the Department of Energy,” said the black-suited man who took the lead. “We have reason to believe you’re violating a patent held by the DOE.”

Hequa looked from Agent Dodd to the sheriff's deputy next to him to the three other people in black suits behind the pair. "I am violating nothing," he said. "I am just trying to get a good picture of these knives, to sell them on the internet."

"Sir, have you sold any of those knives?" asked Agent Dodd.

"No," said Hequa. "I tried to sell them to road workers, but they didn't want them."

"Is this all of them?" asked Agent Dodd.

"Yes," said Hequa. "But what's this about? I made these myself. They are my own design. How can this be patented?"

"Alright. Let's get an inventory and start boxing these up," said Agent Dodd to the other agents. "Mr. Jhanya, we've got some paperwork for you to sign."

"I don't know what's happening. Are you stealing my molknives?" asked Hequa.

"Those devices contain classified technology patented by the DOE," said Agent Dodd. "I'll need a list of everyone you've told about these, and a list of everyone who has seen them. And I need you to sign a document confirming that you'll never talk about this technology with anyone in the future. Do you understand?"

"I understand you are stealing from me and want me to be quiet about it," said Hequa. "These knives are worth over a million

dollars and you're stealing them. You come into my building and steal what I have made and tell me to keep it secret. How can you do this to another person? It is terrible."

"Mr. Jhanya, I'm just doing my job," said Agent Dodd. "Please don't make this any harder than it has to be."

"If your job is to steal from people, then you are a thief," said Hequa bitterly. "If your job is to cause trouble for people, then you are a troublemaker. What does doing your job have to do with the kind of person you are? Nothing. What you do is what you do, whether it is for a job or not."

"Just sign the documents and let my people do their thing," said Agent Dodd. "If you've got a problem, take it up with the federal government."

"I know people who work for the government. I will take it up with them," said Hequa.

Chapter 43

After trying and failing to get the DIA to respond to the DOE's theft of his property, Hequa felt adrift. He wandered the streets in his flight suit, drank too much at bars, and gorged himself on log bugs down by the river. He saw the Great Bamzini performing at a small theater and did not heckle the young magician. He used one of his two remaining molknives to carve three triangles and an ellipse into the street in front of Gabe Knox's house, and found the action unsatisfying. Then, not knowing what else to do, he drank a great quantity of coffee and wandered around the city, carrying his notebook containing the writings of Jhanya, unsuccessfully trying to show these writings to passersby.

Hequa wandered for days in this delirium of mental anguish and coffee intoxication, waving his notebook in front of passing strangers and ignoring calls from Robert and Maya. Coming to rest finally at a tiny park with a large statue in it, Hequa sprawled out on the grass and flipped through his notebook, crying the whole time. "Come! Come and see the writings of Jhanya!" he shouted to a passing couple. "Behold! The writings of an alien world!" he yelled at a man walking three dogs.

As the coffee he'd consumed wore off, Hequa curled up on the grass under the statue and slept. When he woke, sometime after dark, a man was trying to take his Rolex from his wrist. "Thief!" he bellowed, causing the man to jump back two paces. "You are as bad as the government!" he shouted at the man, who turned and ran away.

Getting up and collecting his notebook, Hequa used his flight suit's computer to find a nearby coffee shop. Recalling that he'd been in this shop once before while looking for a new place to live, Hequa borrowed a pen, found a table, and opened his notebook to one of its few remaining pages. On this page, he wrote the word 'framework' and its counterpart in Jhanyan. He then did the same for the words 'nature', 'biology', 'society', 'technology', and 'evolution'. When he was finished, he looked around for someone to show his handiwork to, but found the shop's other customers all engrossed in conversation or interacting with their electronic devices intently.

Ordering another coffee, Hequa returned to his seat, and began writing other words and their translations down in the notebook. But, for reasons he did not understand, his mind kept wandering back to the word 'framework'. Framework was the sponges on which ffassa grew. It could also be the skeleton of a person, the beams of a building, the electrical grid. It was an excellent word, better than its Jhanyan counterpart, and Hequa found himself saying it, quietly to himself, over and over again.

"Excuse me," said an unshaven man sitting nearby. "What's the deal with the word 'framework'? You keep saying it."

“It is a very good word,” said Hequa. “You want to see how it looks translated into the language of my home world?”

“You know what? Sure,” said the man, accepting the notebook. Then, after flipping through several notebook pages, he said, “This is really cool. Is it for a game or something?”

“No game,” said Hequa sadly. “I came to Earth over three years ago. I wanted to share the language of my home world, Jhanya, with the people here. So I created this notebook. But, aside from my friends, you’re the first person who has actually looked at it.”

“Huh,” said the man. “Well I think it’s pretty cool. But your format might be holding you back. People don’t want to see notebooks. They want to see stuff electronically. On the web.”

“My embassy’s web traffic is down to almost nothing since I stopped cutting things in half in front of a camera,” lamented Hequa.

“Mine’s down since Facebook started seeing ‘fake news’ everywhere,” said the man. “Name’s Luke, by the way. Are you some kind of performer?”

“I’m Hequa,” said Hequa. “I used to perform magic with the Great Bamzini. But he was a dishonest partner.”

“At least you got to keep the top hat,” said Luke. “So what exactly is it that you do?”

“I have an embassy where I show people the wonders of Jhanya, but no one ever comes now that the embassy is not on street level,” said Hequa. “I made many molknives, but the government stole them. Now, I don’t know what to do, which is why I am here, writing more in this notebook.”

“Okay,” said Luke. “But you’re wearing a Rolex, so things aren’t all bad.”

“Oh, I have money from textiles deals,” said Hequa. “But I have much more that I wish to share with the people of Earth, and I’m beginning to think that the people of Earth aren’t interested. They want my diamonds and my ffassa. They’ll try using my tritals to guide missiles. But they don’t want yilanka lizards, or anything else that could actually change the conditions of this planet for the better.”

“Is that why you were muttering about frameworks?” asked Luke.

“Yes,” said Hequa, surprised that this stranger had made the connection. “It is like the skeleton of this world is wrong, but no one wants to fix it. They only want to rearrange what covers this skeleton.”

“I can see that,” said Luke. “At least in theory. But if you came here from somewhere else, did you really think that the people here would change to fit what you wanted?”

“I don’t know,” said Hequa. “Maybe not. But I did not expect the people here to be so deeply foolish, either.”

“Never underestimate the human capacity for foolishness,” said Luke. “I mean, most people in this country think an airplane knocked down a skyscraper by crashing into another nearby skyscraper. So ...”

“Oh yes. My friend Sallycat has told me about Building Seven many times,” said Hequa. “Just as she told me about the mysterious death of a wealthy sex criminal in government custody. And many other suspicious things. But while these things act like windows into the framework I’m talking about, I feel the framework itself is a deeper thing. It is like a thing in people’s minds that becomes reflected in the world, underneath the world that most people see every day.”

“You’re not wrong,” said Luke. “But it’s not like there’s anything you can do about it.”

“Is there not?” asked Hequa. “I fled a terrible revolution to come here. I started with nothing, not even the language, and found a way to buy a building and make millions of dollars. Why should I not be able to do something about it?”

“Why should you not be able to change things?” asked Luke. “This might be a good question — the question of what’s stopping you. So, what’s really stopping you?”

“When I tried to help the road workers by giving them a tool that would make less work for them, they said they did not want the tool. They said they wanted more work, not less. My thoughts keep returning to this,” said Hequa. “Maybe the thing stopping me is the thing in their minds that makes them want to

keep doing jobs in ways that are both difficult and unnecessary.”

“Now you’re getting somewhere,” said Luke. “No barrier is harder to cross than the one inside someone else’s mind.”

“Thank you for talking with me about these things,” said Hequa. “My mind has been heavy with them for too long.”

Chapter 44

Heading in the direction of the embassy, Hequa returned Maya's latest call. "Maya, I know what the problem is. It's other people's thinking," he said in lieu of a more traditional greeting.

"Good to hear your voice too, Hequa," said Maya. "But that idea sounds like a recipe for disaster. Have you been drinking too much coffee again?"

"Yes. I've been drinking much coffee. But the idea is serious," said Hequa. "The problem is serious. It's why the road workers didn't want molknives. It's why the government is putting tritals in missiles. It's why Gabe Knox was willing to do the ffassa deal with me even after I made him an incubator of yilanka lizards. The problem is in the thinking. In the thinking about money and power."

"Hequa, I'm in the car now. Do you want me to come and get you?" asked Maya.

"Yes. Do you want to eat? I'm suddenly very hungry," said Hequa.

Over tapas, Hequa excitedly told Maya about his past few days. She listened politely through two glasses of wine. By the time Hequa got to the part about meeting a stranger at the coffee shop and showing him the writing of Jhanya, Maya had had enough. And when Hequa mentioned talking with this stranger about Building Seven, Maya put her foot down. “Hequa,” she said. “Just shut the fuck up for a minute, okay.”

“Okay,” said Hequa. “But why? What is wrong?”

“Do you know what I did yesterday?” asked Maya. “Of course you don’t. Because you didn’t ask.”

“What did you do yesterday?” asked Hequa. “I really want to know.”

“Hequa, I got fired,” said Maya. “I had three martinis at lunch, and when I got back, my manager smelled the booze on me and fired me, just like that. Hequa? What am I going to do?”

“There are many banks,” said Hequa. “Can you not find another one to work in?”

“Maybe. But I’m not even sure that’s the right move,” said Maya. “I’m questioning everything right now. I’m even starting to wonder if I have a drinking problem.”

“Do you drink when you don’t want to?” asked Hequa.

“Sometimes,” admitted Maya. “I mean, I usually know when to quit. But that third martini yesterday was over the line, and I

knew it, and I ordered it anyway.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know how to help you with that,” said Hequa. “On Jhanya, there are places where people who drink too much can go to heal. Are there such places here?”

“Sure, but they all cost an arm and a leg. Are you saying you think I need treatment?” asked Maya.

“Maybe,” said Hequa. “But if you don’t want to work in a bank, where will you work?”

“I’d like to work somewhere where I can use my degree,” said Maya.

“You could work at the embassy,” said Hequa. “I would pay the same as your last job paid.”

“That’s sweet, but what would I even do there?” asked Maya.

“In South Korea, compost is much more important than it is here,” said Hequa. “You could start by bringing yilanka eggs there to sell.”

“Eww,” said Maya. “Got anything less disgusting?”

“Well, Robert is doing a good job handling my money and properties. But I could use someone for getting more people to know about Jhanya Embassy and the wonders it offers.”

“Public relations for an alien embassy,” said Maya. “Will you let

me take three martini lunches?”

“Only if your job doesn’t suffer for it,” said Hequa. “Will you do it?”

“I honestly don’t think I could handle working for you,” said Maya. “No offense, but I need a real job, with benefits.”

“Okay,” said Hequa. “I hope you find the right job.”

“Thanks,” said Maya. “It’s just, you know, just a hard time right now. With the job. With you. I’m not sure how to even do it.”

“Maybe try doing it how you usually do, only better,” said Hequa.

Maya burst into laughter. “Gee, wish I’d thought of that,” she said. “God, you really have no idea what people go through, do you?”

“I am learning,” said Hequa. “I’m learning that society makes trouble for people, because its framework is wrong, which leads to wrong thinking.”

“Oh, not this again,” said Maya. “Sorry, but most people have to live in the world that is, not your fantasyland of million dollar fassa deals and conspiracy theories. Maybe if you’d ever had a real job, you’d understand.”

“I worked parties and restaurants with the Great Bamzini,” said Hequa. “And, the more I learn, the more I think that the real world here on this planet is a very troubled place. You call my

thinking fantasy? What if the real fantasy is money and jobs and working on the roads more than necessary?"

"You're losing me there," said Maya. "I just mean that I've got a ton of student loan debt. And if I've got to go to treatment, I'll have to do it right now, while I've still got my insurance."

"Do you need me to feed your cat while you're away?" asked Hequa.

"Only if you promise to feed it cat food," said Maya. "No bringing rodents into my apartment for it to hunt."

"I did this only once, and your cat was very happy," said Hequa.

"Look, maybe we should just break up," said Maya. "You obviously have no idea how to be supportive. And I obviously have some work to do on myself."

"Good idea," said Hequa. "And maybe I can find a new girlfriend, whose thinking is not part of the framework problem."

"Just for that, you're walking home," said Maya, rising to leave. "Don't call me."

Chapter 45

Not feeling much like walking home, Hequa called Robert for a ride. They drove without speaking, listening to Robert's current audiobook. Arriving at Hequa's building, Robert parked, and they got out.

"Let's go to the roof and smoke blunt," said Hequa. "There are important things I would like to talk about."

The summer night made the patio furniture on the roof seem slightly damp. Robert sat down and put his feet up. Before sitting down, Hequa walked around and lightly touched each of the plants growing in the large pots around the seating area.

"Of all that I own, these plants are the most special," said Hequa. "They are foods and medicines from Jhanya, unlike anything that exists here."

"I like that one with the square-shaped stem," said Robert, lighting a joint. "But what was it that you wanted to talk to me about?"

"Maya broke up with me," said Hequa. "Just now, in the

restaurant.”

“Sorry to hear it,” said Robert. “But you could’ve told me that in the car.”

“Yes. I know,” said Hequa. “That’s not what I wanted to talk about. But it just happened, so I said it.”

“Well, we close on your next building next week,” said Robert. “It’s the one I showed you, right down the street.”

“Very good,” said Hequa. “But what I want to talk to you about is framework.”

“I’m not following,” said Robert.

“I mean it as a metaphor,” said Hequa. “Framework like the sponges ffaassa grows on, or like the beams that make the skeleton of this building. Only, I mean the framework of thinking, like the frame that ideas grow on. The frame that gives these ideas shape.”

“Sounds to me like someone’s been binging on coffee again,” said Robert. “Are we just not going to talk about how the government took one point three million dollars worth of molecular cutters from you?”

“They did this. What is there to talk about?” asked Hequa.

“Well, I did some digging, with help from your friends at Transcorp,” said Robert. “Do you know what a secret patent

is?”

“I can guess,” said Hequa.

“Well, apparently, the government holds secret patents on all sorts of things,” explained Robert. “Mostly, these are for things like portable energy sources and weapons systems. And most of the patents are held by the military. But we both know that the Department of Energy got a hold of one of your original molknives. And now, according to them, they’ve patented it. So you’re not allowed to sell molknives, or tell anyone how they’re made. But no one will tell us what exactly you are allowed to do, because everything’s shrouded in secrecy.”

“Sounds like more of the framework problem,” said Hequa thoughtfully. “Too many secrets are part of the problem. So is the financial infrastructure. And the practice of treating the world like a war.”

“I’m not sure I follow,” said Robert.

“I keep coming back to the road workers who want to do more work instead of less,” said Hequa. “Of all the things I have encountered on this planet, that idea is the most alien to me. I just can’t stop thinking about it. It may be driving me mad. How long has such thinking been allowed to rule? How much of what we see was made to create more work, not less, for people? Maya says I do not understand her because I’ve never had a real job, but what I am starting to understand about real jobs troubles me greatly.”

“Heavy thoughts,” said Robert. “I mean, I’ve protested wars, and nuclear power, and the School of the Americas, once upon a time. I supported Occupy and Black Lives Matter and #metoo. I give to the Sierra Club and NPR. But what you’re talking about seems more, I don’t know, more basic than that stuff.”

“You’ve told me about some of those things,” said Hequa. “But they concern only small parts of what troubles me. What troubles me most of all is that I do not even know the language for what troubles me. If the framework problem has no language, how can it even be talked about, much less addressed?”

“Hard to say,” said Robert. “Any idea what you want to do about it?”

“Just talking, for now,” said Hequa. “I keep hoping for some better idea, but just learning to talk about it seems like a big challenge.”

“Well, that sounds sensible,” said Robert. “For a second there, I was worried you had something crazy planned.”

“It is all crazy,” said Hequa. “I knew the first time I had to trade for clothing that this world was crazy. But the shape of this madness is only now beginning to become clear. There was nothing like it on Jhanya.”

“Right. But the conditions on Jhanya produced the revolution you had to flee from,” said Robert. “Maybe that’s worth looking at, too.”

“There, the people who controlled the food wanted to control everything else,” said Hequa. “They started with too much power, and used this power to seize all the power. My people and many others fought them and lost. What should be looked at in this?”

“Try this,” said Robert. “Imagine someone from Earth going to Jhanya before the revolution. What would this imaginary person see that would bother them in the same way as your framework problem bothers you here?”

“An interesting thought,” admitted Hequa. “If such a person arrived to Jhanya with trade and war and working jobs in their mind, they might have been able to see very plainly that revolution was coming. To a person like this, it may have even seemed natural that a force like The Order would take over the world, even after a thousand years of peace.”

“And what would have happened if this imaginary person had tried to warn others on Jhanya of the revolution to come?” asked Robert.

“No one would have believed,” said Hequa. “Even while it was happening, many refused to believe that it could happen. When my people were killed, they were gathered together, arguing over the contents of a letter to The Order they were writing. That’s how they tried to fight. With words. I was off fooling around, flying my glider, or I would have been killed as they were. If I hadn’t seen from the sky when The Order came and killed everyone, I would not have ever believed that such a thing was possible.”

“Okay, now hold that thought,” said Robert. “But come back to yourself in the here and now. What do you see here that seems obvious, that the people of Earth simply can not believe?”

“That this planet is a paradise,” said Hequa after a moment’s thought. “That life in such a paradise should not consist of ruining the paradise and then fighting over the ruins.”

“Well, amen to that,” said Robert. “I doubt you’d find many people who would disagree with what you just said. The hard part is finding people who would still agree if you got more specific.”

“I’ve got it,” said Hequa. “Robert, I know what I must do next.”

Chapter 46

Absorbed in his latest work, Hequa did not leave the embassy for several weeks. He ordered food and supplies online, and slowly used his draath crystal to make a second drath crystal. Once this new crystal was complete, he cast a chitin case for it, and began fashioning the rest of the parts he'd need for his project. One day, while testing the thrust of a propeller on an electric motor, Sallycat entered the embassy.

"Robert, is that you?" shouted Hequa over the whine of the motor.

"Hequa, it's me," shouted Sallycat. "Turn that thing off. We need to talk."

"Sallycat!" said Hequa, silencing his machinery. "It is very good to see you."

"Same here," said Sallycat, embracing her friend. "But Hequa, something's happened. I need your help."

"What is it?" asked Hequa.

“Hequa, I got fired,” said Sallycat. “Everything was going great, with our work using the tritals. We were passing every test with flying colors. But something happened when we put the tritals into actual missiles. It was like they just stopped working. The first time it happened, we all figured it was just a fluke. But when it happened again and again, they started saying it was sabotage, and fired me even though there was no proof that I did anything wrong.”

“I see,” said Hequa. “Did you tell them that tritals are pacifists?”

“They’re what?” asked Sallycat.

“Pacifists. This is the word, yes? Tritals were designed to be peaceful,” said Hequa. “If you put one in a missile and tell it to fly the missile, it will refuse.”

“I thought they were just computers,” said Sallycat. “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard of.”

“Not so stupid to the person the missile is aiming at,” said Hequa. “Tritals have no desire to destroy. They live only to compute, and computation stops when things are destroyed.”

“They took Annie Octopus from me. They threatened to try me for treason. And now you’re telling me that our whole problem was that we were trying to use tritals in missiles? That was the whole point of our project. And you say tritals won’t fly missiles because they’re missiles? Why are you just telling me this now?” demanded Sallycat.

“Oh I’m sorry, Sallycat. You just seemed to like your new job, and I didn’t want to make any trouble for you there,” said Hequa.

“But you knew tritals were pacifists? That, more than anything you could say, made trouble for me at my job,” said Sallycat. “How do they even know? How does a trital know when it’s in a real warhead versus in a simulator?”

“Tritals are very observant,” said Hequa.

“We wasted over a billion taxpayer dollars on a project that was doomed from the start,” lamented Sallycat. “I’ll never in a million years get another job as good as that one.”

“Maybe, but now you don’t have to be working for the military industrial complex,” said Hequa. “And I may have a job for you here at Jhanya Embassy.”

“I did hate working for the man,” said Sallycat. “Problem is, it almost never felt like that was what I was doing. Mostly, the job felt like working with good people on an interesting project. And now half of ‘em think I’m some kind of saboteur or traitor or something.”

“Do you still have the molknife I made you?” asked Hequa.

“They took that too,” said Sallycat. “The molknife and Annie and all the work I did is just gone. Like it never happened.”

“Fucking fascists,” said Hequa.

“Sounds like you’ve been seeing too much of Robert,” commented Sallycat. “What’s the deal with all this stuff, anyway?”

“It is part of my new project,” said Hequa. “I am making a flying saucer. A very small one. Small enough to be carried in suitcases when it is not in use.”

“That’s cool,” said Sallycat. “But why a saucer? Didn’t you tell me the ship you flew here in was triangular?”

“It was,” confirmed Hequa. “But the saucer is not for real space travel. I am making it to use as a platform for spreading my message.”

“Your message?” asked Sallycat dubiously.

“My message of peace from beyond this world,” said Hequa.

“Full of yourself, much?” asked Sallycat.

“Perhaps,” said Hequa. “But after the government stole over a million dollars worth of molecular cutters from me, something changed in me, and now I have to do something about it. Will you help me, Sallycat?”

“Of course I’ll help,” said Sallycat. “Especially if you pay me.”

“Good,” said Hequa. “I want to make the whole fourth floor of this building into a large computer network. There are six hundred tritals with colors crystals growing there now. I want you to be in charge of them.”

“That’s insane,” said Sallycat. “What are you planning to use them for?”

“To generate reports with available data on the health of populations, ecosystems, and governments,” said Hequa. “The trials will be the think tank of Jhanya Embassy.”

“Reports, huh? Who do you think will read these reports?” asked Sallycat.

“I will,” said Hequa. “Maybe others will, too. So will you do it? I’ll pay what your last job paid.”

“Sure I’ll do it. On one condition,” said Sallycat.

“What is your condition?” asked Hequa.

“The first report has to be about 9/11,” said Sallycat.

“Sallycat, the think tank is not really designed for that,” said Hequa.

“So we’ll tweak a few things. But that’s my condition. Take it or leave it,” said Sallycat.

“Okay, deal,” said Hequa.

Chapter 47

When fully assembled, Hequa's new saucer was about seven feet in diameter. Bright yellow ffassa stretched over a frame of brownish structural chitin to form the bulk of it, while a transparent cockpit dome rose from its center. On the roof of his building, Hequa sat in this cockpit, lifting off and landing as gently as he could. The controls seemed appropriately responsive, the noise dampeners seemed to effectively turn the sound of eight propellers from a buzz into a softer, ringing whistle, and the landing skids had just the right amount of flex to them.

Exiting the aircraft, Hequa timed himself disassembling the saucer and placing its components into four large duffel bags. He then assembled and disassembled the craft three more times, until he felt confident that he could make his saucer disappear and reappear in a matter of minutes. Finally, he brought the bags back inside the embassy, and called Robert.

"Are you almost here?" asked Hequa when Robert answered.

"Just a few minutes away. I couldn't find the glow sticks you asked for, by the way," said Robert.

“Then the glow paint will have to be enough,” said Hequa. “I will come down and meet you in front of the building.”

“Sallycat, it’s time to go,” said Hequa to Sallycat, who was hunched over her laptop. “Can you take two of these bags?”

“Alright, let’s do this,” said Sallycat, closing her computer and getting up.

The drive to the saucer’s first launch site took about two hours, during which time Robert and Sallycat both tried to talk Hequa out of the action he was about to take. Robert worried about Hequa hitting power lines, Sallycat worried about farmers with rifles, and both worried about the possibility of a fatal crash. Hequa was not dissuaded. But, now that the moment had finally come, he was nervous.

Assembling the aircraft on a rarely-used dirt road just after sunset, Hequa climbed into the saucer and pulled the cockpit into its closed and locked position. Robert and Sallycat cheered when he lifted off, and Hequa himself cheered when the aircraft reached five hundred feet. At this altitude, he flew just over three miles to his designated landing place, an outdoor music festival where crowds of people were conveniently gathered together.

Looking down at the festival from above, Hequa found a mostly clear area to land about a hundred yards from the stage. When he’d descended to a height of a hundred feet or so, Hequa turned on his saucer’s lights. A bright white spotlight shone straight down from his craft’s center, while the saucer’s circumference

glowed icy blue. From fifty feet up, Hequa could see that his lights were drawing the crowd to him, while the spotlight seemed to be keeping people out of his landing zone, which was the behavior he'd been hoping for.

The gathered crowd cowered briefly as Hequa landed. But when he lifted the cockpit dome off of him and looked at the people through the bulbous ski goggles he'd donned for the occasion, the people cheered. "Hello," he said through the saucer's loudspeaker. "My name is Hequa, and I came here from a faraway planet to bring you a message."

As he spoke, Hequa saw the crowd around him growing thicker by the second. He noticed too the lights of several small electric vehicles converging on his location. "I will be brief," he continued. "Your planet is being run by people who are destroying your planet, and enslaving you with money."

"Tell us somethin' we don't know!" shouted a man Hequa couldn't see.

"9/11 was financed by Saudi elites, and the buildings of the World Trade Center were brought down using explosive charges installed as safety precautions after the World Trade Center was bombed in 1993," said Hequa.

"How do you know?" demanded the same man who'd spoken before.

"According to my supercomputer, it's the most logical explanation for what happened," said Hequa.

“What about Area 51?” asked a woman who was reaching out to touch the saucer’s edge.

“I have never been there,” said Hequa. “But we are getting off track. There is more to my message.”

“Is your mother ship in orbit right now?” asked one member of the crowd.

“Did you come to warn us about melting ice caps?” asked another.

“Is the government hiding alien technology?” asked a third.

“Yes!” Hequa interjected. “The Department of Energy is hiding molecular knife technology from the people. Technology that they stole from me.”

“People of Earth,” continued Hequa. “I have come here today to tell you that there is a problem in your thinking’s infrastructure. In the framework on which you drape your thoughts. This problem transforms every issue you look at into an issue of procedures and transactions. It puts everything in the control of money, and changes the shape of what work gets done.”

“Sounds like a bunch of bullshit to me,” said the heckler.

“Goodbye, people of Earth. Remember what I said,” said Hequa, lifting off.

After disassembling the saucer and stowing it away, Hequa got

into Robert's car. "The first saucer mission was a success," he said. "I made it there, said my message, and got away."

"Speaking of that," said Robert, putting his car in gear. "What kind of response did you get?"

"Some shouted argument, but not much," said Hequa. "Most people just listened."

"And how was the landing? Did those struts hold up okay?" asked Sallycat.

"They worked perfectly," said Hequa. "By the way, I told the crowd about what the tritals said about 9/11. The crowd did not seem to believe me."

"Figures," said Sallycat.

"The crowd also seemed unaffected when I revealed to them that their planet was being destroyed, and that money was being used to control them," said Hequa.

"Surprise, surprise," said Robert. "What? Do you really think people don't know that?"

"If people know that, why don't they change things?" asked Hequa, dumbfounded.

"Maybe they're just waiting around for you to tell them to go for it," said Sallycat sarcastically. "Seriously, I know this flying saucer thing is your gig now, but you've got to think of better

stuff to say.”

“What if we modified the audio output, so my voice sounds more otherworldly? Or maybe, authoritative?” asked Hequa. “And what do you think about changing these goggles to something with a mirror finish?”

“The sound should be no problem, and I’m sure we can find some better goggles if you want,” said Robert. “But she has a point about your speech needing work.”

“Well, what do you think I should say?” asked Hequa.

“For starters, how about you don’t tell people that their thinking is broken?” said Sallycat.

“And maybe mention nuclear disarmament,” suggested Robert. “And single-payer healthcare.”

“If you want people to really listen to you, you could try saying something positive. Like, frame your message in a positive way,” said Sallycat.

“Next time it will be better,” said Hequa.

Chapter 48

A week later, Hequa landed his saucer in another field at another music festival. This time, he didn't open the cockpit. Instead, when the crowd approached his craft, he turned on the loudspeaker, and addressed them before anyone could shout a question.

"People of Earth," said Hequa, in a soothing, slightly robotic female voice. "You already know that most of this planet's fish and a third of its insects are gone. You know that your rulers are making everything worse and controlling with money. You know that the government is keeping technological marvels hidden from the people, and that the military industrial complex and banking cartels have distorted your economy so severely that terms like supply and demand have become almost meaningless."

The impact of these words on the crowd's faces was hard to see with the cockpit closed. Most of the people surrounding the aircraft appeared frozen, their attention fixed in his direction. But when Hequa paused, his audience cheered, so he pressed on with his message.

“You know that your methods of farming and resource extraction are not sustainable,” said Hequa. “That your society’s relationship with even basic things like food and medicine is sickeningly unhealthy. That your rich and powerful are, even now, working to make sure you never learn the truth about their activities. But I didn’t fly here in my spaceship to tell you things you already know. I came, from many light years away, to bring you a message of hope.”

Through the cockpit dome, Hequa heard someone yell, “Take us with you!”

“Although you face many problems as a species,” said Hequa. “The solutions to these problems are readily available. All you have to do is nothing. Just stop ruining the planet, stop treating each other like devices in a machine, and stop giving your power to people who misuse that power. If you do these things, then your species still has a chance to avoid catastrophe.”

Lifting off and flying to where Sallycat and Robert were parked, Hequa packed up the saucer and stowed it away. Since they’d rigged the saucer’s sound system with a weak FM transmitter, Sallycat and Robert had heard every word he had said. Getting into the car and pouring a cup of hot coffee from a thermos, Hequa said nothing. Eventually, Sallycat broke the silence. “Drive,” she said to Robert.

“So what did you think?” asked Hequa after a few minutes.

“You didn’t even mention 9/11,” said Sallycat.

“I think we should try a different voice next time,” said Robert. “This one sounded too ... relaxing? Soothing? I don’t know.”

“You’re just saying that because it was a female voice,” said Sallycat.

“We could use your voice, and that’d be fine with me,” said Robert.

“I mean, what did you think about the message?” asked Hequa. “Do you think it is enough to get people to change?”

“There are still people out there who think it makes sense that WTC 7 fell down after not being hit by a plane,” said Sallycat. “I think people like that probably won’t change.”

“Jesus, Sallycat, not everything has to do with 9/11,” said Robert. “As for the message? I think it could still use some work.”

“What does it need?” asked Hequa.

“Honestly?” said Robert. “I think you should focus more on how we’re not alone in the universe, and how you escaped a totalitarian government on your own planet only to find a totalitarian corporate regime running the show on this planet with the full support of the governments here.”

“You know, you might be on to something,” said Sallycat. “But what I want to know is, what do you expect people to actually do. Like, say you get your message perfected, and say it spreads like you hope it will on social media, how do you want people

to respond to it?”

“I want them to change what they’re doing, so that in a hundred years this world is still a good place to be,” said Hequa.

“Okay. Maybe say that,” said Sallycat.

“And maybe get more specific about something,” said Robert. “You know, give people a specific action to take after they’ve heard your speech.”

“Right. The call to action is important,” agreed Sallycat.

“The call to action? Should not thinking people know what action to take?” asked Hequa.

“They should, but they don’t,” said Robert. “It’s like, when I’m teaching, I can’t just tell my students a problem and expect them to find a solution without some guidance.”

“Even when the solution is obvious?” asked Hequa.

“Hequa, none of the problems you’re talking about have obvious solutions,” said Sallycat.

“Some do,” said Hequa. “The problem of the insects dying, for example, could easily be solved by eliminating most pesticide use, changing agricultural practices, and reducing light pollution.”

“And you think a bunch of randos at a music festival can make

that happen?” asked Sallycat.

“I think I see your point,” said Hequa. “But what should my call to action be?”

“Maybe a pledge? Put a pledge up on Jhanya Embassy’s website, and have people sign it,” said Robert.

“I thought we didn’t want to do anything that connected these secret missions with us in real life,” said Sallycat.

“Good point,” said Robert. “What if we came up with a one of those hashtags that people could use on social media when they’re taking action?”

“I’m not doing that,” said Hequa. “I would rather do nothing than that.”

“I’ve got it,” said Sallycat. “You could tell them to get each other’s phone numbers, and text each other when they’re taking action.”

“Interesting,” said Robert. “Each audience is already a peer group, so something like that could actually work.”

“Good,” said Hequa. “I will try that.”

Chapter 49

By Hequa's tenth flight, word had spread about the flying saucer that sometimes landed at music festivals. As Hequa flew over his target event, he found all the property's most promising clearings overrun with people. Some were just milling around, but many rested on lawn furniture. Rather than risk a landing in such conditions, Hequa flew slowly over the crowd, about twenty feet off the ground. Coming to a stop where the crowd was the thickest, he turned on the loudspeaker, and started to deliver his speech while descending to an altitude of about ten feet.

"Greetings, people of Earth. It is I, Hequa, from the planet Jhanya, which is light years away," said Hequa in the voice of a popular documentary narrator. "I have come to tell you that you are not alone in the universe, and to warn that your planet is entering a period of great calamity."

Noticing that the saucer's exhaust had cleared enough space for him to land, Hequa brought his craft down gently to the ground before resuming. "There is nothing to fear from my coming here, but there is much to fear in the deaths of this planet's insects and marine ecosystems," he continued.

“Show yourself!” shouted someone in the crowd. “Show yourself, show yourself,” the crowd began to chant.

“Fine,” said Hequa, lifting the cockpit dome up and removing his goggles. “Here I am. Just an alien from another world.”

“It’s just some guy. He’s just some guy pretending to be an alien,” shouted a familiar voice in the crowd.

“Great Bamzini? People of Earth, do not listen to the Great Bamzini. I have a video that shows him mishandling a dolphin,” said Hequa through the loudspeaker. “There are more important matters to discuss than the accusations of that talentless hack.”

“If you’re an alien, prove it!” shouted another voice from the crowd.

“Is my flying saucer not proof enough?” asked Hequa.

“Dude, you just put rope lights on an oversize drone,” said a man who was standing at the saucer’s edge.

Sensing that the situation was getting away from him, Hequa closed the cockpit and took off as carefully as he could. Flying back to the dirt road where Sallycat and Robert were waiting, Hequa found himself overcome by a feeling he couldn’t describe. It was not anger, or sadness, or embarrassment. Neither was it fear, though he did fear the implications of the Great Bamzini knowing that he was behind the recent string of UFO sightings at music festivals. Instead, it was like a feeling of great

accomplishment, though he'd accomplished almost nothing.

"Hey are you ... okay?" asked Sallycat as Hequa got into the car.

"Tough crowd, huh," said Robert.

"The crowd was not tough," said Hequa reflectively. "They were fools who let the Great Bamzini take charge of them."

"So it was really him? We weren't sure, just listening from here," said Sallycat.

"It was him," said Hequa. "All he had to do was make noise, and tell a lie, and everybody believed it, because the lie was easier to believe than the truth."

"So what now? Are we still on for next week?" asked Robert.

"I think maybe not," said Hequa. "I may have just learned something very important about the people of Earth, and I need some time to think it over."

"What did you learn?" asked Sallycat.

"I'm not fully clear, but something about illusions," said Hequa. "I had to use an illusion to convince people that I'm not from this world. And, because my illusion was unconvincing, a hack magician was able to call it into question. So do I now create a more convincing illusion, or is there something else that I could do that I'm not seeing?"

“No matter what the Great Bamzini said, anyone who understands airplanes knows that your saucer wouldn’t be possible without a power source like your draath crystal,” said Robert.

“How many people in an average crowd understand airplanes?” asked Hequa. “How many understand biology, or systems dynamics, or the basic idea of a feedback loop? Not many. In many crowds, the answer is probably none.”

“Part of why I teach,” said Robert. “But I guess I see your point.”

“Perhaps you do, but I’m not sure,” said Hequa. “My point is that I have been speaking to the wrong audiences all along. And it might be that just saying things to crowds is the wrong approach, because every crowd has the Great Bamzini or someone like him in it.”

“Okay. So what are you thinking instead?” asked Sallycat. “I thought your messages from beyond this world were good.”

“Then maybe you can help me do them as a podcast or something,” said Hequa. “But I think it is time for me to take bolder action than talking to crowds from a flying saucer.”

“I’ll admit, it makes me a little nervous when you start talking like that,” said Robert. “What kind of action is bolder than the flying saucer?”

“There’s nothing specific I’m thinking of,” said Hequa. “But when I cut things in half, there’s a look people get that seems important. Like they’ve just seen the impossible. I want to

show people impossible things, to help them make room in their minds for new thinking.”

“What kinds of impossible things can you show people?” asked Sallycat. “The DIA won’t like it if you make too much noise about the tritals, the DOE won’t let you do anything with the molknives, your ffaasa is all tied up in textiles deals. And, no offense, but your yilanka lizards are only going to freak people out. So what else is there?”

“Sallycat, I have a trital supercomputer and a functional flying saucer,” said Hequa. “I have plants growing that could change the way medicine is practiced on this planet. I’ve also just finished a molecular cutter that is thirty inches long. And I’ve got you and Robert on my side. This is much more than I had when I arrived on this planet, and it has only been a few years. I think there are many more things I can do.”

“But Hequa, I don’t get it,” said Sallycat. “It almost sounds like you’re giving up.”

“Does it? It doesn’t feel that way to me at all,” said Hequa. “I just think that if you and Robert and me and six hundred tritals all work together, we can come up with a better plan for showing people the impossible. I will of course continue to pay you for your help.”

