



**Flying
Saucer
Shenanigans**

Mark Bailey

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Flying Saucer Shenanigans

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Chapter 1

The destruction of Gralawi Station marked the beginning of Lika's journey. In the wake of the catastrophe, she was charged with finding the terrorist Hequa and bringing him to justice on behalf of The Order. Based on his stolen ship's trajectory, Hequa was believed to be traveling to the primitive inhabited planet Aarde. For over three years, Lika studied the materials collected when this distant planet was last surveyed, training her mind and body for the mission. Finally, she departed, spending hundreds of years in stasis while her ship made its way to her destination.

Lika woke in a low orbit around Aarde, and was surprised to find many artificial objects also in orbit around this planet. Because of the noise from electromagnetic signals coming from the surface, she had to circle Aarde several times to find the faint signal still emanating from Hequa's stolen ship. Upon realizing that the ship was in the bottom of an icy sea, and would have consequently decomposed almost completely, Lika decided the best course of action would be to try and land near the sea, and begin her search from there.

Bringing her craft down in a large snow covered field as the sun

was setting, Lika checked her flight suit's supply caches, donned her Order's robes over this suit, opened her ship's hatch, and stepped out into an alien world. The first thing she noticed was the cold, which was colder than the coldest ice bath she'd ever taken. In the field where she stood shivering, the only signs that this world was inhabited were artificial trees holding wires. Although Lika did not understand the purpose of these trees, she began hiking through the snow to follow them, leaving her ship behind in the field when they led her into a forested area.

For hours in the semi-darkness of snow blanketed night, Lika followed the wire trees until she came to a road. Her fingers were too cold to consult the navigation computer embedded in her suit, so she picked a direction and continued walking until her walk became a delirious stumble. Eventually, she heard the noise of small engines, and saw the lights of small vehicles approaching along one side of the road. Lika tried to find a light orb in her suit to signal the vehicles, but her cold hands betrayed her, so she waved her arms and moved to stand in the vehicles' path. As she did this, she suddenly felt very warm, almost feverish, and fell to the ground, losing consciousness.

Lika came to a few times while strangers were strapping her to a sled and towing her behind one of their machines. Then there were bright lights, and more strangers, who seemed to be speaking a variation of one of the languages she had studied back on Jhanya. Eventually, after an unknown amount of time had passed, Lika opened her eyes, and found herself in a room that looked very much like one of The Order's torture preparation rooms.

“Am I to be kept hither for torture?” asked Lika when a uniformed man entered her room.

“Good. You’re awake,” said the man. “How are you feeling?”

“How goes’t feeling?” replied Lika. “Where are mine apparel?”

“You gave us quite a scare. You were hypothermic when they brought you in, then you had some kind of flu that kept you asleep for days. What’s the last thing you remember?” asked the man.

“Mine ship. I hast to get back to mine ship,” said Lika.

“Your ship, huh? Well, we couldn’t find any contacts for you since we couldn’t find your phone. Is there someone we should call, to let them know you’re here?” asked the man.

“What is here?” asked Lika. “I hast a mission to mere.”

“Why don’t you rest some more. It sounds like you might still be confused,” said the man before leaving the room.

For a time, Lika drifted back into sleep. When she woke, there was a tray of confusing food next to her bed. Consuming this, she slept again, and woke to find another tray of food there. After four such meals and one semi-successful trip to what she hoped was a bathroom, Lika felt ready to resume her mission. Finding her clothes in a bag in her room, she changed, and began looking for the exit.

“I might not but leave,” said Lika when she left her room and encountered a uniformed woman behind a desk.

“Oh no you don’t. Not without filling out your paperwork. Do you have an insurance card?” asked the uniformed woman, extending a clipboard in Lika’s direction.

“What is it?” asked Lika.

“Your discharge paperwork,” said the woman. “The way you were brought in, we don’t even know your name.”

“I am Lika. I hast a mission to mere. I might not but leave,” said Lika.

“Well, at least put your name and address here, then sign these,” said the woman, showing Lika the relevant sections of paperwork.

Once Lika understood, she drew her glyph, a spiral and two dots, on the paperwork in several places. “I might not but leave,” she said again, handing the clipboard back.

Chapter 2

Leaving the hospital and stepping back out into the bitter cold, Lika had not even decided which direction she should go when a blue pickup truck pulled up alongside her on the road. “Need a ride?” asked a bearded man through a rolled-down window.

“I never wot where I am going,” said Lika.

“Sure. But it’s dangerous to be standing around out there. Hop in,” said the man, opening the passenger door for Lika.

“Hey, I’m Curtis,” said Curtis, once Lika was in the truck.

“I am Lika,” said Lika. “Are thou a helper?”

“I suppose,” said Curtis. “So where am I taking you?”

“I am worried for mine ship. And mine mission,” said Lika.

“Well, you just got out of the hospital. Don’t you have a home to be getting back to?” asked Curtis.

“No. Only a mission,” said Lika. “Shall thou bring meself to the largest town ‘i a day’s travel?”

“You in the theater? That sounds like Shakespeare, but I don’t understand it,” said Curtis.

“Mine ship is this way. Hie this way,” said Lika, deciding to visit her ship before making her way to the nearest big city.

“This way it is,” said Curtis obligingly. “Just let me know when a turn is coming up.”

They drove for half an hour, with Lika using her navigation computer to guess at where to turn next. On a road that passed just a quarter mile from where her ship was, Lika told Curtis to stop. Over his objections, she hopped out of the truck and began trudging through deep snow into a wooded area. Leaving the truck running, Curtis followed Lika into the woods and all the way to her ship.

“What in the holy hell is that?” asked Curtis as the ship came into view.

“Mine ship,” said Lika, opening the ship’s hatch. “Allow us warm ourself inside.”

“An alien who reads Shakespeare. Not every day you meet one of those,” said Curtis, marveling at the ship’s visible controls as he stepped into its extremely cramped quarters.

“I might not but warm the ship so it absorb water from the

ice and start disappearing,” said Lika, fiddling with the ship’s controls. “Apace, we might not but hie!”

While Curtis didn’t understand these words, their meaning became clear as Lika darted from the ship and moved several paces away from it. While Curtis followed suit, great volumes of steam began pouring off the snow beneath the ship, until the vessel was obscured completely. “Well, would you look at that,” said Curtis, watching steam engulf the ship.

“Good,” said Lika, satisfied that her ship had warmed enough to rot away as it was intended to. “Shall thou bring meself to the largest town?”

They did not speak on the walk back to Curtis’ truck. Once inside, Curtis asked, “So are you like one of the aliens ancient people mistook for gods?”

“I am on a mission,” answered Lika.

“Right. But on the History Channel, they said that aliens have been visiting Earth for thousands of years,” said Curtis.

“I am on a mission to find Hequa, destroyer of Gralawi,” said Lika. “He would to the largest town. I would to the largest town, also.”

“Then the largest town it is,” said Curtis. “Never thought I’d be on a road trip with an alien. What’s the name of your home planet?”

“Jhanya,” said Lika. “But now Aarde is mine home.”

“Aarde? You mean Earth?” asked Curtis.

“Yes,” said Lika.

They drove for four hours with radio music in the background while Curtis and Lika asked each other question after question. When Curtis realized that explorers from Jhanya had visited Earth sometime in the Thirteenth Century, he was overjoyed. When Lika learned that something called money was exchanged whenever goods traded hands, she was intrigued. By the time they stopped at a gas station on the outskirts of a large city, Curtis knew that Lika had been sent by her planet’s version of a government on a mission to find a fleeing terrorist. And Lika knew, from what she’d so far seen and heard, that her mission would almost certainly fail.

Lika had been expecting a sparsely-populated agricultural world, not cities containing millions of people. She’d been expecting rudimentary metal work, but had found rudimentary space travel. The fugitive she was after could be anywhere, doing anything. But a person like Hequa, being from a coastal tribe, would almost certainly start at the waterways.

“Shall thou bring meself to the largest river,” said Lika once Curtis was finished pumping gas.

“You sure about this?” asked Curtis once they’d driven to a bridge over the Mississippi and parked.

CHAPTER 2

“It is good,” said Lika, getting out. “Well met, Curtis.”

Chapter 3

That night, Lika wandered the streets until she found an open grocery store. Walking the aisles of this store, it slowly dawned on Lika that she was surrounded by food. It was as if she was in one of The Order's central warehouses, but no one was guarding the food. It was just sitting there, unguarded, on the shelves. Being hungry, Lika began eating a nice-looking bunch of small fruits before she was stopped by a store employee.

"Hey lady, you can't eat those here. You got to pay for them," said the employee.

"I eat 'em if I do lack, for I am a master 'i thy orb," said Lika, stuffing another handful of the tiny fruits into her mouth.

"Come on now. I'm serious. Do I have to call the cops?" asked the employee.

"Thou are not the boss of me," said Lika.

"Alright. I'm calling 'em," said the employee.

Watching the store attendant closely as he pulled a device from his pocket and began speaking into it, Lika came to understand that this warehouse of food might be guarded after all, by soldiers who could be summoned remotely. Rather than wait to find out if soldiers were indeed coming, she grabbed what food she could carry and ran out of the store, down the street, and around a corner.

Sitting on the sidewalk, Lika ate as much stolen fruit as she could before her fingers went numb from the cold. What would The Order think of her stealing food, she wondered idly, while beginning to walk again to raise her body temperature against the frigid air. She walked a great distance, always keeping close to the river, until she came to a street that was all residential houses. One by one, Lika knocked on the doors of these houses until a white-bearded man in a bathrobe answered.

“Man, may I sleep on thy warm floor?” asked Lika.

“You lost or something?” asked the man.

“I hast no home,” explained Lika. “May I sleep on thy floor tonight?”

“Oh what the hell,” said the man. “My couch pulls out. You can stay the night, but no funny business.”

“Thank you,” said Lika, following the man into the house. “I shall not be funny.”

Although the bed the man offered was the least comfortable

thing she had ever slept on, Lika nonetheless slept soundly. When she woke, there was no one around. After using the bathroom, she went to the kitchen and proceeded to arrange all of her stolen fruit onto a platter she found. Lika was enjoying this fruit when the man — Jake, she had learned the night before — came in with an unhappy look on his face.

“Morning, Lika. Did you, uh? Did you go to the bathroom in the waste basket?” asked Jake.

“Yes. I see now that was a mistake,” said Lika. “I didst not see thy waste pile. Where is this?”

“You know what? Forget it. You should probably be on your way, though,” said Jake.

“Thank you, Jake. I shall hie,” said Lika, rising to leave. “Ere I hie, hast thou met a man named Hequa?”

“Hequa? Doesn’t ring any bells,” said Jake. “But you just be careful out there. Not every stranger you meet is your friend, understand?”

“I understand,” said Lika.

The day’s sun brought the temperature up above freezing. Lika wandered aimlessly, marveling at the buildings and cars and electrical infrastructure. She went into stores and asked about everything she saw on display. When she was hungry, she stole food. And when night came, she again began knocking on house doors at random until she found someone willing to let

her sleep on a couch.

Everywhere Lika went, she asked about Hequa the destroyer, but found no one who had heard of him. After nearly two months of this, she was exhausted, and her mission felt like a failure. She still had no base of operations, and none of her training applied to finding a man who had already been on such a densely populated planet for nearly four years. So, knocking on yet another stranger's door, Lika decided it was time to give up on her mission for the time being.

"Hello. I am homeless. May I sleep on your floor through the cold night?" asked Lika when a man came to the door.

"Homeless, huh?" said the man, taking Lika's appearance in. "Well, you can stay here, but you'll have to work for it."

"What work?" asked Lika, noting that the man's quality of manner seemed off. "I can clean, and share what food I have. I can repair small things, and I am very good with navigation."

"Okay, but how are you in bed?" asked the man.

As the meaning of this man's words became clear, Lika looked long at the balding man in flannel pajamas before her. "You wish ... to have sex with me?" she asked. "In trade for allowing me to sleep in your house?"

"That's the deal," said the man. "You want to stay here, that's the deal. Take it or leave it."

Lika considered her options in light of what little she'd learned about these people of Earth. "Shall I to thy neighbors and say to 'em thy deal?" she asked.

"I'm not gonna stand here all night," said the man. "Either come in, or don't. Your choice. But you have to decide now, because I'm going in."

More intrigued than repulsed by the alien idea of trading sex for lodging, Lika followed the man into his house.

Chapter 4

Of the houses she'd seen, Eddie's place was among the least interesting. It had no artworks on the walls, no small animals roaming around, and nothing at all in its bathroom mirror-cupboard. Eddie himself was a relatively shy man of fifty who was neither demanding nor overly gracious in bed. After a couple of nights in this house, Lika announced to Eddie that she would live there until such time as she could find a place of her own. Eddie did not argue, but said she'd have to be responsible for grocery shopping and cooking dinner if she was to stay.

The first night Lika was responsible for dinner, she served raw carrots and rotisserie chicken. Having just gotten home from work, Eddie dug into the food happily. When most of this food had been consumed, Eddie began looking very sad. "Lika," he said. "I hope you don't think I'm a bastard for making you sleep with me."

"I don't know that word," said Lika. "But I think of you only as a man who is helping me in my time of need."

"But I'm taking advantage of you," argued Eddie. "What kind of

man pressures a homeless woman into sex?”

“I don’t know,” said Lika. “All of this is new to me. On Jhanya, where I am from, things are very different. Sex is different. Trade is different. Everything is different. Here, it seems that taking advantage is simply how things get done. Why should you not use your advantage to get what you want?”

“Maybe because it’s wrong. It’s unfair. To you,” said Eddie.

“You give me money for food and a warm place to sleep,” said Lika. “You trade these things for sex and shopping. If we both get what we want, why is it unfair?”

“It just is. I don’t know, it just is. It’s exploitation,” said Eddie.

“Exploitation? I don’t know this word either,” said Lika. “It is true that on Jhanya our agreement would be impossible. Places to sleep are not scarce, and neither are sex partners. And money was just being introduced to the general population by The Order when I left. But here, the scarcity of all things a person might need seems to be the normal way, and our agreement helps each of us meet our needs. Why is this a problem?”

“I don’t know,” said Eddie. “Maybe I’m just feeling guilty. You’re the first woman I’ve been with since Dawn left me.”

“Dawn was your wife?” asked Lika. “Why should you feel guilty about being with someone after your wife? Did she die?”

“No. Nothing like that. She told me I was emotionally

unavailable, then moved to Ohio to be with an optometrist she met on the internet,” said Eddie.

“I don’t understand,” said Lika. “Are you saying she left you for a different partner? Did this just happen?”

“No, it was nearly ten years ago,” said Eddie.

“Eat some more chicken, Eddie,” said Lika. “Do you know what I feel guilty about? I was sent here by The Order to kill a man I can not find. I trained for years to go on this mission, but now that I am on it, I can see very clearly that the mission was never designed to succeed. Back on Jhanya, my mission was a big story that everyone told after Gralawi Station was destroyed. But here, now, I think that the true point of my mission was this big story told on Jhanya, and not what I might do here on Earth. So now I am trapped on a foreign planet, on a mission that doesn’t matter, feeling foolish about all of it.”

Eddie nodded slowly while chewing his food. “I’m sure I asked before, but exactly what country is Jhanya in?” he asked.

“Jhanya is all one country. A world of three planets,” replied Lika. “Each of the planets are simply called Jhanya, but my world is called Jhanya Three when the distinction is needed. Jhanya is hundreds of years away by star ship. If you want, I can pull up the navigation map on my flight suit to show you where it is.”

“Like I said before, it’s okay with me if you’d rather not tell me where you’re really from,” said Eddie. “But I wish you wouldn’t

make up stories about it like that. It makes me feel like you think I'm a fool."

"It is I who is the fool," said Lika. "I was foolish to volunteer for this mission. Foolish to have thought it could succeed. The only thing I have done that is not foolish is meet you, as our agreement has given me a place to collect my thoughts while I consider what to do now that I am stranded in this land."

"Have you? Decided what to do, I mean?" asked Eddie.

"No. But I am still learning how things are here. When I know more, I will decide," said Lika. "What I know so far is that I need money, and a place of my own, but I do not know how to get these things."

"Sounds to me like you need a job," said Eddie. "I'll check at the office tomorrow to see if there are any openings. What kind of skills do you have? Do you know your way around a spreadsheet?"

"I don't know what that is," replied Lika. "Is it like making the bed?"

"No. More like working on a computer," said Eddie. "I don't know. Maybe we could put you on phones or something."

"I am very good at killing. And stalking prey," said Lika. "I am good at pretending to be on someone's side to extract information. I can run very fast, and find hidden things, and remember anything I see or hear."

CHAPTER 4

“Great. So tomorrow, I’ll ask if we need someone on the phones,”
said Eddie.

Chapter 5

When Eddie came home the next day, he told Lika that there were no job openings where he worked, and proceeded to show her how to use a computer to search online classifieds. Seeing all of the descriptions of jobs people did, Lika found nothing that interested her, but did find the computer to be an excellent tool for researching the ways of this planet. For the next several weeks, she spent nearly all of her free time surfing the web. And, when the winter gave way to spring, she told Eddie she was leaving.

Eddie didn't try to talk her out of it. But he did insist on giving Lika a backpack, a notebook computer, and forty dollars. Accepting these things gratefully, Lika filled the rest of the backpack with food from Eddie's cupboards, and went out in search of a house of her own.

In a neighborhood close to the river, Lika found a vacant house that looked promising. It had an unkempt exterior with no real estate sign in the yard, high fences in front and back, and its neighbors were both commercial. One was a hydraulic jack service garage, the other was a vacant storefront that used to be a restaurant, and neither looked like they'd mind if Lika began

occupying the vacant house.

To gain entry, all Lika had to do was cut the back door's lock with a molknife. Once inside her new home, she examined all of its rooms, and discovered that none of the house's utilities worked. Suddenly, little comments Eddie had made about not wasting water and turning the lights off to save money made more sense. In this land, Lika realized, even basic things like water and power were made artificially scarce, so that they had to be paid for with money.

Lika's next ten days were spent making her new house livable. She stole as much water as she could carry from a nearby grocery store on a daily basis. She set her draath crystal up to provide electricity for the house and heat for cooking. She started a compost pit in the back yard and hatched yilanka lizards to keep her bathroom compost box clean. She shredded a large pile of clothes she found next to a dumpster into a nest suitable for sleeping. She even found a kitchen table and two wobbly chairs for her kitchen on the roadside.

Once the house was set up, Lika cleaned it all, from the attic to the basement. And when she was finished, she sat in her kitchen and surfed the web. From what she was learning, this world was much like the world that The Order had been trying to create back on Jhanya. It was a world where every person had to compete with every other person for everything, even basic necessities. Unfortunately, while Lika was good at competing, she was not qualified to do most of the jobs that seemed to be available on Earth.

As the days passed, Lika began venturing out farther and farther into the city. She visited many stores, explored the wooded shores of the river and nearby lakes, and scouted out potential new houses. Everywhere she went, she tried to talk with people, and found that men were usually much happier to talk with her than women were. In fact, men seemed to go out of their way to exchange even a few pointless words with her, which Lika came to find annoying.

One day, Lika was carrying four stolen gallons of water on her way home when a large man in a black jacket stood in front of her on the sidewalk and would not move.

“I must pass you,” said Lika as she approached the man.

“Come on little girlie, I know you got some money for me,” said the man, whose eyes were both wide and vacant.

“I carry stolen water. Why should I have money?” asked Lika.

“Give it up. You wallet. You phone. All of it,” said the man in a menacing way as he lunged at Lika.

“Kafak!” cursed Lika in her native tongue as she swung two gallons of water over her head and struck the man on the side of his face. The man stumbled, but did not fall until Lika followed up with three hard kicks. Once he was on the ground groaning, Lika searched the man and found thirty-seven dollars, which she took.

Leaving her would-be mugger on the ground, Lika resumed her

walk home. She didn't get far before a man in a green jogging suit stopped her. "Hey, I saw what happened back there," he said. "Are you okay? Need me to call the cops?"

"Why should you call the cops?" asked Lika. "Nothing important happened."

"You're sure?" asked the man. "It looked to me like that guy tried to mug you, and you fought him off."

"Yes," said Lika. "I am unharmed, and he will recover quickly. Cops are not needed. But there is one thing I don't understand."

"What's that?" asked the man.

"Why would a man with thirty-seven dollars try and steal money from me, when I have no money at all?" asked Lika.

"Drugs, probably," said the man. "Addicts do all kinds of stuff to get more drugs."

"I'm not sure I understand. But thank you for coming to ask if I am well," said Lika.

Chapter 6

After returning home to drop off the water, Lika felt restless, and went out to find a cup of coffee. While at Eddie's, she'd discovered that coffee had pronounced psychoactive effects on her, and she hoped that drinking some now might loosen some unproductive thinking patterns that were developing. So, after finding a coffee shop near her house and paying for a cup of the psychedelic brew with stolen money, Lika sat on an outdoor patio and tried to contemplate her situation in a new way.

By her second cup of coffee, Lika had been hit on four times by men of varying vintage. By her third cup, she began hallucinating scenes from her home world whenever she squinted. For a long moment, she became convinced that she could get back to Jhanya through a magical portal located in the sidewalk. As the moment passed, Lika was overcome by a great wave of regret over leaving her home world, and she burst into tears.

A shabby-looking man nearby looked up from the book he was reading. "Hey, are you okay?" he asked.

“No,” sobbed Lika. “I left my home to come here, but now that I’m here, I think my reason for leaving was a lie.”

“That sucks,” said the man. “I’m Dave, by the way. And you are?”

“Lika,” said Lika. “Sorry to interrupt your reading.”

“No problem,” said Dave. “It’s never easy figuring stuff out in a new place.”

Lika laughed, wiping her nose with her sleeve. “You sound like you understand. But I don’t think that you do,” she said.

“I probably don’t,” said Dave. “But I’m good at listening, if you want to tell someone about it.”

“I come from a planet called Jhanya, which is very far away,” explained Lika. “I came here to bring a fugitive to justice, but there’s no way I can find him. And even if I could, the longer I spend on this planet, the more I doubt the things I was told about this fugitive. I don’t know. It’s like I don’t know anything anymore.”

“I’ll admit — not what I was expecting,” said Dave. “So the lie you were talking about relates to this, uhh, fugitive?”

“Yes and no,” said Lika. “What I’m really talking about, in my coffee delirium, is the thing I’ve been afraid to say. That The Order, which is like the government on my planet, might have told me lie after lie to get me to come here. That my whole life has been tied to these lies, and I’m not at all sure how to live

without them.”

“That sounds hard,” said Dave. “And if there’s one thing governments are good at, it’s lying. So, what if your government on Jhanya did lie to you? Would it change what you’re doing now?”

“You believe me, that I came from another planet?” asked Lika.

“I believe you’re upset,” said Dave. “People who are upset articulate their problems in all sorts of ways. Maybe you’re from another planet. Maybe you’re just feeling alienated. It’s not my job to decide what’s true. Like I said, I’m just here to listen.”

“Is it someone’s job to decide what is true?” asked Lika. “Where can I find a truth decider?”

Dave chuckled. “Not sure there is such a thing as a ‘truth decider,’” he said.

“Well, what is your job?” asked Lika.

“I wash dishes at a restaurant. Snatty’s. Heard of it?” asked Dave.

“I have not heard of it. Is this a good job? Could you get me a job there?” asked Lika.

“I could ask,” said Dave. “What’s your number?”

“I have no number,” said Lika. “I don’t have a phone, or one of your security numbers. But I can learn how to wash dishes. Can you still ask about a job for me?”

“Why not? But I’ll need some way to contact you, to let you know what I find out,” said Dave.

“Can you not instead tell me when and where to present myself to the Snatty?” asked Lika.

“You know what? Why not? Just go to Snatty’s at four tomorrow,” said Dave. “Ask for Alex, the manager. If there’s a position open, she’ll get you all squared away.”

“Thank you. You are very kind,” said Lika. “I think you are the first person in this city who has been truly kind without fearing me or wanting something from me.”

“Just being myself,” said Dave. “Hope it made your day a bit better.”

“It did,” said Lika. “Before you, the best part of my day was kicking a man who tried to rob me.”

Chapter 7

Three days a week, Lika washed dishes at Snatty's, treating the job like a supplement to her martial arts exercise routine. She didn't mind the work itself, and she liked that her pay was handed to her in cash at the end of each shift. At first, the money meant that she no longer had to steal food and water. And as the surplus funds from weeks of work accumulated, Lika found she had enough money to begin buying things that seemed necessary.

Lika bought a pre-paid phone, a pair of shoes to wear at work, and a set of lightweight clothes to wear when the summer heat made her robes uncomfortably warm. She bought cookware and dishes, a coffee maker, and silverware to practice eating with. On one of her days off, Lika was finishing a bowl of mac and cheese in her kitchen when she heard the front door open. "Hello," said an unfamiliar voice loudly. "Hello, is somebody here?"

Lika felt panic rise, then quelled this with an exercise from her training. While a part of her wanted to run, she decided instead to remain where she was. "I'm back here. In the kitchen," she said.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” said a man in a knit cotton shirt as he entered the kitchen. “What the hell? Did you have the electric turned back on?”

“It is my electricity, generated with my draath crystal,” replied Lika. “And when I found this house, there was no one using it. If you are looking for an empty house, I found several others nearby.”

“Trespassing is illegal,” said the man. “I’m calling the police, and you’d better be gone when they get here.”

“What if I have sex with you? Will you call police then?” asked Lika.

As if by magic, the man’s anger transformed into mirth. He laughed, then looked around and laughed again. “Thanks for the offer, but I’m pretty sure my wife would kill us both if I slept with you,” he said. “Tell you what, though. I’ll give you twenty-four hours to clear out of here. But after that, I’ve got to get this place ready for sale. What do you say? Sound fair?”

“Yes. I will leave today,” said Lika. “Do you want some mac and cheese?”

“No, thanks,” said the man. “I’ll leave you to it. Just remember, twenty-four hours.”

Having already scouted out the abandoned homes in the area, it did not take long for Lika to decide where to move. Picking the house closest to her job, she broke in by cutting the lock on

a window frame, then used one of the light orbs she'd brought from Jhanya to check the place out. The house was smaller than her other place had been, but it was somewhat cleaner, and the water worked.

After a visit to a hardware store, Lika replaced the house's locks with new ones, and fixed the window frame latch she'd cut. Once night fell, she moved most of her belongings into the new place, but decided against moving the kitchen table and the nest. In an alley near her new place, Lika found a new kitchen table, and a pile of old coats that could easily be shredded into a new nest.

Connecting and carefully tuning the draath crystal to the house's electrical system, Lika screwed in a couple of light bulbs and started shredding her pile of coats. She was most of the way done with this task when her phone rang.

"Hi Dave," said Lika, knowing no one else would be calling.

"Hey, Lika," said Dave. "What are you up to? Some of us are going to Boodles for shots. You in?"

"You mean drinks and not shooting? I would rather go shooting," said Lika. "I had to move suddenly today, and I would love to go out shooting."

"Right on," said Dave. "But that's not really an answer. It'll be a good opportunity for you to meet people. We can pick you up if you want to go, but you'll have to find your own way back."

“Yes, I’ll go,” said Lika. “Does my phone tell you where I am, or do I have to go outside and check the address?”

“Maybe check the address,” said Dave.

Boodles was packed. Dave had to sneak Lika in through the back to avoid a bouncer checking IDs. Once inside, wearing only her bright yellow flight suit, Lika stood out in the crowd. “Where is the fighting cage?” asked Lika, shouting to be heard.

“Uhh, not that kind of place,” replied Dave. “C’mon, we got a table over here.”

Once seated at their table, Dave introduced Lika to his partner Chris and three others whose names Lika couldn’t make out over the noise. As one, the small crowd at this table did three shots in rapid succession, then began drinking beer poured from two pitchers. Feeling warm and mildly dizzy, Lika turned to Dave and asked, “Is this the fun? How can you have fun when it’s so loud?”

“That’s just the sound of people having fun,” answered Dave. “The louder it is, the more fun people are having.”

“Okay,” said Lika, unconvinced. “But what if I want to meet people? Is it permitted for me to leave the table and walk around?”

“Sure. You do you, we’ll just be here,” said Dave.

Walking around the bar, Lika consumed two more shots that

were purchased for her by kindly strangers, then exited the place through the rear to end up in the alley she'd arrived through. Coming to rest on a plastic crate, she retrieved a small projectile weapon from one of her flight suit's pockets, loaded the weapon with a dozen gold pellets, and looked around for a target.

Aware of her own intoxication, Lika settled on an easy target — a cardboard box leaning against a dumpster about fifty feet away. From her seated position, she proceeded to fire the weapon until it was empty, hitting the cardboard box, and the dumpster behind it, nearly every time. Whooping for joy, Lika was about to reload when the bar's door opened, and a man she'd never seen before came out. When the man saw Lika's pistol, he froze. "Is that a gun?" he asked.

"I am doing shots!" exclaimed Lika. "Do you want to do shots with me?"

"What kind of gun is that?" asked the man. "Is it, like, an air pistol? Well whatever it is, you probably shouldn't be playing with it when you're drunk."

"It is a hydrogen pistol," said Lika. "I am using it to shoot that box over there. It is very fun."

"Cool, but you should probably put it away before someone calls the cops," said the man. "Want a smoke?"

Reluctantly putting the weapon away, Lika asked, "A smoke? Like a cigarette? I will try one. But you will have to come here

and help me because I suddenly feel very heavy.”

“Sure thing,” said the man, producing two cigarettes and moving to help Lika with hers. “My name’s Derek. And you are?”

“I’m Lika,” said Lika. “Thanks for the cigarette. But is it okay if I just hold it? I like the way it smells, but it hurts when I breathe it in.”

“You’ll maybe want to puff on it a bit so it doesn’t go out,” said Derek. “But do whatever you want with it.”

After a long moment of silence, Lika spoke up. “Have you ever heard of a man called Hequa?” she asked.

“No, why?” asked Derek.

“I think,” said Lika, slurring. “I think he is the man who ruined my life. And I’ve never even met him.”

“Oh, don’t make this into that,” said Derek. “I thought we were having fun here.”

“We are,” said Lika. “But I was on a good path with The Order. A good path. On my way to becoming someone important. Then Gralawi Station was destroyed, and my whole life became about that. About finding the person responsible. About finding Hequa, here on Earth.”

“The Order? Is that like a religious thing?” asked Derek.

“More ... political, maybe,” said Lika. “But such distinctions are not relevant where I am from. There, I was like a specialized soldier. I was celebrated for being the one to go through space to this planet after Hequa. Celebrated! But here, I am just a dish washer!”

“Nothing wrong with washing dishes,” said Derek. As he said this, the door opened, and Dave came out into the alley.

“Dave! I was doing shots here!” exclaimed Lika while springing to her feet. “My words are blurred but my balance is still good.”

“Looks like someone made a new friend,” said Dave, looking at Derek. “Who’s this?”

“That’s Derek,” said Lika. “He gave me a cigarette but would not do the shots.”

“Careful with this one,” said Derek to Dave. “When I came out here she was waving some kind of air pistol around.”

“Seriously?” asked Dave. “Lika, do you have a pistol on you?”

“Yes. Do you want to come with me to see what my shots did to that dumpster over there?” asked Lika.

“Why not?” said Dave, following Lika to the dumpster in question. Once Lika had moved her cardboard target aside and illuminated the area with a light orb shining from her mouth, it became apparent that the dumpster had several holes in it.

“Holy shit,” said Dave. “That looks like it was shot with a real gun.”

“Don’t be silly, Dave,” said Lika. “Of course my gun is real. It was designed to kill people at close range.”

“Lika, do me a favor and don’t bring your gun the next time we go out drinking,” said Dave.

“But doing shots is more fun when I’m drunk,” argued Lika.

“Doing shots just means drinking,” said Dave. “What you were doing back here was just shooting.”

“Oh. Okay. So what do you want to do now?” asked Lika. “Fight? Have sex? Drink coffee and then have sex?”

“How about we just go back inside?” suggested Dave.

Chapter 8

One afternoon, Lika was growing bored of wikipedia, so she started doing random google searches. After searching 'Hequa from Jhanya', she found a video of Hequa, destroyer of Gralawi Station, performing magic tricks with a young man named the Great Bamzini. Watching the video several times, Lika realized that this was the break she'd been waiting for. All she had to do was find this Great Bamzini, and he could lead her to Hequa.

Calling the number on the Great Bamzini's website, Lika expected to reach a messaging service, and was surprised when a person answered on the second ring.

"You've reached the Great Bamzini," said the Great Bamzini. "Would you like to book a magic show?"

"Yes. Right away. Can you come to my house?" asked Lika.

"Normally, I am booked months in advance," said the Great Bamzini. "But it just so happens that I have an opening this evening. Please note that there's a fifty dollar convenience fee for shows booked less than a week in advance."

“I will give you fifty dollars if you come now,” said Lika. “Can you bring your partner Hequa with you?”

“Unfortunately, Hequa has given up magic,” said the Great Bamzini. “But if you are in the city, I can be there within two hours.”

“Very good,” said Lika, giving the Great Bamzini her address.

When Lika opened her door to find the Great Bamzini, the twenty-year-old magician took one look at her flight suit and turned to flee. Lika grabbed him from behind and dragged him inside. “Do not struggle,” she said. “I mean you no harm.”

When Lika let go of the Great Bamzini in the empty living room, he began shouting. “What is this? Did Hequa send you? Do I have to call the cops?” he demanded.

“Calm yourself, young one,” said Lika. “I will still give you fifty dollars. But I must find Hequa. He did something very bad, and I was sent here from Jhanya to bring him to justice.”

“Wait,” said the Great Bamzini. “You mean you’re not with him? This isn’t another one of his stupid practical jokes?”

“If there is a joke, it will be on him,” said Lika. “Now, tell me everything you know about Hequa, and I’ll consider my money well spent.”

“Okay,” said the Great Bamzini. “But promise you won’t tell Hequa that I told you. He harassed me pretty bad after we went

our separate ways with the magic act.”

“So you and Hequa . . . performed together? Like on the video on your website?” asked Lika.

“Yeah,” said the Great Bamzini. “He had a pretty good act, and some expensive custom gimmicks. But he didn’t understand a thing about business, and we eventually had a falling out over money.”

“Do you know where he lives? Who his friends are?” asked Lika.

“I’ve seen a couple of his friends, but don’t know their names or anything,” said the Great Bamzini. “But I do know of a building that he owns, where he might live.”

“Does he have soldiers around him? People guarding his person?” asked Lika.

“Not that I know of,” said the Great Bamzini. “But he’s the trickiest guy I’ve ever met. There’s no telling what he’s got up his sleeve.”

“So you think he will be difficult to kill?” asked Lika.

“Kill? For real?” said the Great Bamzini. “I mean, I hate him as much as I’ve ever hated anyone. But I don’t want him dead.”

“His life or death is my decision,” said Lika. “Tell me of Hequa’s habits. What does he eat? Does he have a job? You said he has a

building? Has he acquired large sums of money.”

“I don’t know about any of that,” said the Great Bamzini. “I mean, he eats bugs and worms when he thinks no one is looking. But I know for a while he was going to music festivals in a little flying saucer and trying to convince people that he was a messenger from outer space. That couldn’t have been cheap.”

“Wait. What? Why would he do something like that? Are you certain this was him?” asked Lika.

“Positive,” said the Great Bamzini. “That’s the last time I saw him. In a little homemade flying saucer with fancy lights on it, pretending to be an alien.”

“If I give you an extra twenty dollars, can you take me to his building?” asked Lika.

“Sure, but ... don’t you want to see any magic?” asked the Great Bamzini.

“On Jhanya, magic was outlawed, and for good reason,” said Lika.

“God, Hequa is always talking about things on Jhanya, too,” said the Great Bamzini. “Like, if things are so great there, why’d you come here?”

“I came here to hunt Hequa,” said Lika. “Once I’ve reloaded my pistol, we can go to his building.”

“Your pistol? No way I’m letting you ride in my car with a gun,” said the Great Bamzini.

“But I need my pistol to shoot Hequa with,” said Lika. “Of course, I could just stab him, if we see him.”

Twenty minutes later, Lika saw the sign that said ‘Jhanya Properties’ outside a downtown building near the river, and knew she was in the right place. “Here is your seventy dollars, Great Bamzini,” she said. “I will get out here.”

“See ya,” said the Great Bamzini, driving away.

Approaching the building’s entrance, Lika stopped on the sidewalk to discreetly load her pistol. Securing the weapon in her flight suit, she tried the building’s main door and found that it was locked. Within five minutes, a man exited the building and Lika caught the door before it closed. Having gained entry, she walked down a wide hallway until she came to a door marked: ‘Unistar’.

Opening this door, Lika found herself in a spacious, sparsely-populated office space. She began slowly wandering between cubicles, looking closely at the people she found intently studying their computers. Eventually, a woman in beige approached Lika, frowning slightly. “Are you lost?” she asked. “You’re dressed like one of Hequa’s people. Did he send you down here for something?”

“I am looking for Hequa,” said Lika, carefully keeping the excitement from her voice.

CHAPTER 8

“Well, he’s not down here,” said the woman. “Try the fourth floor, if he’s not up on the roof.”

“Thank you,” said Lika. “I will try that. Can you show me where the stairs are?”

“Back the way you came, on the left at the end of the hall,” said the woman patiently.

Chapter 9

Lika made her way up the old stairs to the fourth floor. Before she left the stairwell, she readied her pistol, holding this in a hand behind her back as she opened the door. Rounding a corner, Lika found herself in a very large, dimly lit space filled with rows and rows of aquariums, colorful bundles of wires, and a large quantity of what looked like computing equipment. Looking closely at the nearest aquarium, she saw that it contained a small octopus-like creature connected to a small bundle of wires.

Recognizing the creature as a trital, not so different from the one that powered her flight suit's navigation computer, Lika paused to reassess the room and its contents. There were hundreds of tritals there, all glowing softly with varying patterns of colored light. Creeping silently between rows of these living computers, staying low in hopes of surprising anyone she might meet, Lika shuddered to think of what a man like Hequa might be using such an enormous amount of computing power for.

Nearing the center of the cavernous room, Lika saw a desk where a woman sat working behind three monitors. As there

appeared to be no one else around, she decided it was time to make her move. Lika cleared the cover of the aquariums and approached the desk in three long paces, bringing her pistol up to target the woman working. “I seek Hequa, destroyer of Gralawi!” she declared.

“Just a sec,” said the woman, removing her headphones. “I’m Sallycat. Did Hequa send you here for something?”

“What? No!” said Lika. “Can you not see that I have a gun?”

“Oh,” said Sallycat. “You’re serious? That’s a gun? I thought — because of the Jhanya-style flight suit and whatever — I thought Hequa sent you as some kind of joke. I’ve been watching you on the security feeds for ten minutes.”

“It is no joke,” said Lika. “You are in great danger if you do not summon Hequa at once.”

“Yeah, he doesn’t really come down here much,” said Sallycat. “But what’s your name? I can call him for you.”

“I am Lika, of Jhanya Three, here to bring Hequa to justice,” said Lika.

“Wait. So you’re from Jhanya, too? That’s cool,” said Sallycat. “Have you been here long?”

“I have been here since winter, sent by The Order, hunting Hequa,” said Lika.

"I'm sorry, did you just say you work for The Order?" asked Sallycat.

"Yes. The Order that brought an end to the thousand years of chaos on Jhanya," said Lika.

"Well, Hequa said The Order brought an end to a thousand years of peace, and killed nearly everyone in his village," said Sallycat.

"Hequa was a Lowlander, and his village was filled with rebels and terrorists," said Lika. "The Order had to kill them to stop the rebellion."

"Hequa said they were rebelling by writing letters when they were killed," said Sallycat.

"There is nothing more terrible than rebellious ideas," said Lika.

Sallycat laughed. "So you're like, what, a space cop?" she asked.

"There is nothing funny here," said Lika, wiggling her pointed pistol.

"You know, Hequa has a gun kind of like that," said Sallycat. "But he sold all the ammo when he realized how much gold is worth here."

"I need my ammo for shooting Hequa. And maybe you," said Lika.

"You know what? Just fucking shoot me," said Sallycat. "Hequa

says that all The Order knows is violence, so shoot me now, and prove him right.”

“I will not,” said Lika, wondering how the confrontation had gotten away from her so quickly. “Just summon Hequa.”

“Well, if you’re not going to shoot, can you just put the gun away so we can talk like reasonable people?” asked Sallycat.

“Okay,” said Lika, returning the pistol to its place in her suit. “Now call him.”

“I already did,” said Sallycat. “He’s been listening this whole time.”

“Sallycat,” came Hequa’s voice from Sallycat’s phone, which was on speaker. “I am on the roof. Send the intruder up.”

“You heard him,” said Sallycat. “Just go back to the stairs and follow them all the way up.”

“How do I know it’s not a trap?” asked Lika.

“It’s not a trap,” said Sallycat. “God, you don’t know Hequa at all.”

“I know that this many tritals connected together can’t be good,” said Lika.

“Actually, it’s great,” said Sallycat proudly. “We call the room our think tank, and you’d be amazed by what we can do with

it.”

“You are foolish to be proud,” said Lika. “Everything Hequa is involved in serves chaos.”

“Like monitoring marine habitat loss by looking at satellite imagery. Or estimating the cost to institutional investors of LIBOR manipulation,” said Sallycat. “Yup. totally sounds like we’re serving chaos here.”

“Do not make fun of me, weakling,” said Lika. “If Hequa is behind it, it serves chaos.”

“Well, go tell Hequa yourself. I’ve got shit to do,” said Sallycat.

Lika left, making her way up the stairs and out onto the roof as instructed. She found a seating area surrounded by potted plants. Reclining on a piece of patio furniture, Hequa sipped a cup of coffee. “Welcome to Jhanya Embassy, assassin,” he said in his native tongue. “Would you like to have some coffee before you kill me? And how will you be getting back to Jhanya once your task is complete?”

“You know I am stuck here,” said Lika, pulling up a chair and pouring herself a coffee from a carafe on the table. “Once my mission is complete, I am to live out my days as a person of Earth.”

“Hmm. Okay,” said Hequa. “But I am genuinely puzzled by your arrival here. Why would The Order send you after someone so insignificant as me?”

“You destroyed Gralawi Station, killing nearly three thousand people,” said Lika.

“What? No,” said Hequa. “I will admit to killing two people on Gralawi Station, to make my escape. But the Station was otherwise unharmed. My hope was that others would follow my lead and escape by stealing more ships from Gralawi. Why would I want to destroy the only place that others on Jhanya Three could go to truly escape The Order?”

“Well, I am here, so you did not escape The Order,” said Lika.

“But you’ve escaped The Order, just by coming here,” said Hequa. “Do you think it still reigns supreme after all these years? On Earth, many things have changed in three hundred years. Would the same not be true on Jhanya?”

“Do not try to poison me with your words,” said Lika. “Your life is at its end.”

“Maybe it is,” said Hequa. “But I wonder — would you be willing to postpone my assassination? I won’t try to run away, or cause you any harm. And I could even help you find a place here on Earth, as I have.”

“I have found a place with no help from you,” said Lika. “I have a house and a job. I even have friends.”

“Friends like my enemy the Great Bamzini, who brought you here?” asked Hequa. “I will admit, when I put a tracker on his car, I never thought he would deliver an assassin to my doorstep.

Did you find me through his website video?"

"That is how I found you," confirmed Lika. "But I don't see how that's relevant."

"It is not relevant to you," said Hequa. "But to me, it means I must devise a suitable embarrassment for my enemy. I find it very gratifying to embarrass my enemy whenever he does something to harm me."

"I don't understand," said Lika. "If he is truly your enemy, why not simply kill him?"

"You met him," said Hequa. "Is he the type of person who deserves killing?"

"Definitely not," said Lika. "But you? You I am not sure about. I saw video of you sabotaging Gralawi Station."

"Video can be faked," said Hequa. "I once created a video that made it look like the Great Bamzini was part of a crowd that killed a helpless sea mammal. I used this video to embarrass my enemy at a party. Want to see the video?"

Chapter 10

Spraying dish after dish clean, Lika replayed the encounter with Hequa in her mind again and again. He was not at all what she expected. He'd admitted to killing two people, but denied destroying Gralawi Station. He hadn't seemed menacing in the slightest, and had obviously found a way forward for himself here on Earth. Lika found her hatred of the man dissolved by his demeanor into fear that his ways would corrupt hers. And she felt the beginning of this fear's realization in her agreement to postpone killing him.

Stacking freshly-sanitized dishes in their places, Lika tried to bring rest to her mind by focusing on the manual labor. But her mind would not rest. Was it possible that Hequa was telling the truth about not destroying Gralawi Station? If he was, then she had been told far more lies than she was comfortable with. If he was telling the truth, then all of her training for this mission had been predicated on a lie. The Order had even held a parade for Lika, before sending her on this mission. Had she been paraded before crowds of people only to cement the truth of this lie in the popular mind? Why would The Order do something like that?

Lika's shift ended and she started off towards home with the day's pay in her pocket. As she walked, she tried to tell herself that the meeting with Hequa had been a success, purely because she'd found him. Now, she knew where her target worked, and slept, and drank coffee in the afternoon. She even had his number in her phone. Lika could now, she told herself, kill Hequa at her leisure. The mission objective that had seemed impossible just the day before suddenly seemed within her grasp. She should have been appreciating her good fortune. But the whole thing seemed all wrong.

Opening the door to her house, setting her backpack down on the kitchen table, Lika knew she needed to talk to someone about all of this, so she called Dave.

"What's up, Lika," said Dave as he answered the phone.

"I found Hequa, the one that I've been hunting," said Lika.

"Holy shit!" said Dave. "Did you, uh..."

"No, I didn't kill him," said Lika. "I still might, but there is a problem."

"Oh yeah? What kind of problem?" asked Dave.

"When I found him, Hequa told me that he didn't destroy Gralawi Station, and I believe him," said Lika.

"I don't know what to say to that," said Dave. "Want to go grab a drink or something?"

“Yes. Meet me at Boodles in forty minutes,” said Lika. “Try the alley if you don’t see me inside.”

An hour later, with beers partially consumed, Lika turned to Dave and asked, “What am I going to do? What if The Order lied about Gralawi Station? What if they lied to me about everything?”

“You really want to know what I think?” asked Dave.

Lika nodded.

“Remember when we met? You told me you were worried you’d been lied to,” said Dave. “I didn’t need specifics then and don’t want ‘em now. But the way you’re acting now makes me think that something confirmed your suspicions about being lied to. That’s all. Something you thought was false turned out to be false. Which really isn’t that big of a deal.”

“But Dave,” said Lika. “The deal is big. It is very big. I might still kill a man is how big of a deal. I was sent here to kill him and I found him and I might still kill him.”

“Here, this’ll help,” said Dave as he refilled Lika’s glass from their pitcher. “Maybe you should just tell me all about it.”

“What is there to tell?” said Lika, exasperated. “I was sent here from another planet to kill a fugitive. But I found him, and he denies doing what The Order said he did, and I believe him. Now I have to decide whether or not to kill him.”

“So you’re sticking with the story that you came from another planet?” asked Dave.

“Yes,” replied Lika. “I am an alien like those mentioned on your History Channel. But I do not plan to leave clues about my existence in artworks or architecture.”

“Okay,” said Dave. “Where’s your ship?”

“My ship has rotted away to nothing in a forest,” said Lika. “But I can show you what numbers look like on my home planet. I have a small display screen in my suit that can show you this.”

“That’s pretty cool,” admitted Dave, looking at Lika’s display screen, which was filled with alien writing. “But I’m not really convinced. Seems more geek than alien is all I’m saying.”

“Just understand,” said Lika, frustrated. “I am from another world. There are more worlds than this and I am from one of them. Just understand this.”

Dave did not understand. “All I know is that you’re a friend going through tough times,” he said. “But if you want my advice, don’t kill the guy.”

“Even though he might be guilty of a great crime?” asked Lika.

“Don’t kill him. Or anyone,” said Dave. “That’s what I have to say about it.”

“For now, I will listen to you and not kill him,” said Lika. “Do

you want to drink more beer and go shooting?”

“Maybe yes to the beer and no to the shooting,” said Dave.

An hour later, they were both drunk and playing foosball. “Do you know what I miss about Jhanya?” asked Lika. “I miss going to the bar, getting naked, and fighting in the cages. Why don’t bars here have fighting cages?”

“Foosball is kind of like a fighting cage,” slurred Dave. “An epic battle between two people where only one will be victorious.”

“Epic battle?” asked Lika. “Where you cheat by spinning your guys around and around so my balls never score?”

“It’s not cheating. It’s strategy,” said Dave, scoring the final point.

“As I said, I miss the fighting cages of Jhanya,” said Lika. “I’m sure I could beat you at real fighting.”

“Yeah you could,” said Dave. “You wash dishes like some kind of kung fu master.”

“What is a kung fu master?” asked Lika. “Is this something I should know about?”

“Probably,” said Dave. “Look it up on the internet when you get home.”

“Okay,” said Lika. “Are you drunk enough to go shooting yet?”

Chapter 11

“Lika, this is Hequa,” said the familiar voice on the phone. “I am calling to tell you I am buying the house you are living in.”

“Why would you do that?” asked Lika. “I’m already living here, and can just move to another empty house if someone comes and tells me to leave.”

“You can do what you want,” said Hequa. “But Earth has many rules that you may not know about. Breaking only one of these rules can get a person into big trouble. And you are breaking many rules, living in that house. Even though you came here to kill me, I do not want to see you in big trouble. So I’m buying the house, and do not care if you pay me rent.”

“Oh? What is the normal rent?” asked Lika. “I can pay rent if it means owing you nothing.”

“Houses like yours rent for around two thousand dollars a month,” said Hequa.

“Impossible!” said Lika. “No one could afford such a sum. My

job only pays around one thousand a month.”

“Some people can afford this,” said Hequa. “Buildings on this planet are very expensive, and very tightly regulated. It will cost me nearly three hundred thousand dollars to buy your house from the company that owns it.”

“I will not pay,” said Lika. “I would rather move than pay you so much money.”

“Pay or don’t. It doesn’t matter to me,” said Hequa. “If you want, you can consider your free rent a gift for not killing me when you had the chance.”

“But I still might kill you,” said Lika. “If I kill you now, do I keep the house?”

“No,” laughed Hequa. “If I die, my business manager Robert gets everything.”

“Fine, then,” said Lika, hanging up.

Considering the call, Lika wondered if Hequa had been left feeling as confused as she had by the exchange. Was she wrong to first say she would pay and then say she’d never pay? Should she move immediately to avoid living in a house owned by her ostensible enemy? Lika didn’t know, but decided not to move regardless. This was her house now, no matter who claimed to own it. And, if Hequa bought it, that was in her mind ultimately irrelevant to her claim on the place. After all, it was she who had found the house, and cleaned it, and changed the locks. If

Hequa wanted to follow the bizarre Earth custom of remote-controlling buildings, she couldn't argue, but neither would she honor his claim.

To clear her mind, Lika went through her exercise routine for the second time that day, then went for a walk. As she passed a woman walking a large dog, she got an idea. "Excuse me," said Lika to the woman. "If I want a dog, where do I go to catch one?"

"Catch one?" asked the woman.

"Yes," said Lika. "Is there a dog forest nearby, or do I have to travel to find the dogs running free?"

"I'm not sure what you mean," said the woman. "You could maybe try the dog park by the river."

"There is a dog park?" asked Lika. "Will you tell me how to get to this place?"

The woman gave Lika directions, and Lika set off in search of the dog park. What she found was a large, fenced-off clearing where dozens of people stood watching dozens of dogs. Among the people was the Great Bamzini, with whom Lika did not wish to speak. Nonetheless, the young magician approached Lika with familiarity, and struck up a conversation.

"Which one is yours?" asked the Great Bamzini. "Mine's the little one with gray and black spots."

“None are mine,” said Lika. “I am looking for a place to catch one for myself.”

“That’s not really how it works,” said the Great Bamzini.

“Well, how does it work?” asked Lika. “How did you get your dog?”

“Mine’s a rescue,” said the Great Bamzini proudly. “Just got him fixed.”

“Was he broken?” asked Lika.

“No. Fixed. Neutered, so he can’t breed,” said the Great Bamzini.

“Oh,” said Lika, frowning. “So there are no dogs here that I could catch for myself?”

“Uhh, no. They’ve all got owners,” said the Great Bamzini.

Giving up without another word, Lika left. As she walked, an thought occurred to her. Pulling out her phone, she called Hequa. “Hequa? This is Lika,” she said when Hequa answered. “I have some information for you about the Great Bamzini.”

“What is it?” asked Hequa.

“The Great Bamzini recently got a rescue dog,” said Lika. “He is playing with it at a dog park now. It is a nice looking young dog, with gray and black spots. If you take this dog from the Great Bamzini and give it to me, I will not kill you this week.”

“That is very good information, Lika,” said Hequa. “Thank you.”

“There is something else,” said Lika. “About the house. When you buy it, can you help me get the utility companies to turn on services?”

“Maybe,” said Hequa. “If you promise not to kill me next week.”

“Okay,” agreed Lika. “I will not kill you this week if you bring me the dog, and will not kill you next week if you get my utilities turned on.”

“It’s a deal,” said Hequa, hanging up.

Late that night, Lika was using the neighbor’s wife to watch an old Bruce Lee movie when she heard a knock at the door. When she went to answer it, she found a gray and black puppy tied to a huge bag of dog food on her porch. Squealing in delight, she brought the puppy and the food into the house. “Hello, Little Bamzini,” she said. “It is very nice to meet you. Welcome to your new home.”

Chapter 12

A few weeks later, Lika was feeling restless and decided to call Hequa. “Hequa? This is Lika,” she said when he picked up. “Do you want to get drunk and go shooting?”

“Hello, Lika” said Hequa. “I am bad at shooting, but I will drink while you shoot. If you agree not to shoot me.”

“I already promised not to shoot you this week for hiring me that dog walker,” said Lika. “Do you know the bar Boodles? We can shoot in the alley behind it.”

“I can find the bar,” said Hequa. “See you in an hour?”

“Yes. See you then,” said Lika.

“Nice hydrogen pistol,” said Hequa when Lika took out her gun in the alley. “But, before you shoot it, I should tell you that if you are using gold bullets, you might want to switch to lead and sell the gold, for gold is very valuable on this planet.”

“I’ve heard gold is valuable here,” said Lika. “But is it really

valuable enough to sell?”

“Based on the size of your gun’s barrel, each pellet might be worth a thousand dollars,” said Hequa.

“Really?” said Lika. “But that’s so much. A month of my working. How can this be?”

“The people of Earth are very strange. Especially about money,” said Hequa.

“But I have already shot that dumpster many times. Fifty, at least,” moaned Lika. “Have I wasted fifty thousand dollars?”

“Did your shots go through both sides of the dumpster, or just one?” asked Hequa.

“Most went through just one side,” said Lika. “Do you think my pellets might still be in there?”

“I will help you check if you promise not to kill me next week,” said Hequa. “Has it been long since you last went shooting?”

“I fired sixteen shots here just yesterday,” said Lika. “Like throwing away sixteen months of washing dishes.”

“Here, I’ll get in and toss the trash out to you,” said Hequa. “You can check the bags while I examine the dumpster.”

Lika found three gold pellets in the trash, and Hequa found ten more in the bottom of the dumpster. While Hequa was thrilled

to have found so many, Lika was furious that they hadn't found more. When they were done, they returned the trash bags to the dumpster and went inside. With a pitcher of beer between them, Lika asked Hequa if he'd help her sell her remaining gold.

"My business manager could sell it for you," said Hequa. "His name is Robert and he can get you a good price. But If I get him to do this, you have to agree not to kill me for another three months."

"One month," said Lika. "And I also need your help making new pellets out of lead for my pistol."

"Just make a mold and use your draath crystal to melt the lead," said Hequa. "You do have a draath crystal, don't you?"

"Of course I have the draath crystal from my ship," said Lika. "But I don't have any of the things needed to make castings. Will you do it?"

"Okay," said Hequa. "But you must promise not to ever shoot me with the pellets I cast for you."

"Deal," said Lika. "For a Lowlander, you are very good at bargaining."

"When I left Jhanya, I was the last Lowlander," said Hequa. "I have had to learn to bargain here to stay alive."

In the silence that followed, Hequa gestured to the server for another pitcher. He was about to say something when Lika

spoke up. "You know I had nothing to do with The Order's campaign against your people, right?" she said.

"How do I know that, assassin?" asked Hequa. "Here and now, I can believe what you say. But everyone who serves The Order serves the power that killed my people, and tried to kill me."

"Hequa, your people were in open rebellion," said Lika. "They refused to pay The Order what they owed, and stopped listening to the commands of their regional manager."

"Yes. They did this," said Hequa. "They wanted to live in peace, and were killed for this desire. But what I don't understand is why someone like you would join The Order. From what I can tell, you're a reasonable person. So why join a gang of thieving murderers?"

"They're not thieving murderers," said Lika. "They're a government that protects the common good better than corrupt Overseers ever could."

"They did not protect my common good," said Hequa. "And they obviously lied to you, to get you to come here."

Lika sighed. "You're not wrong about that," she said. "But The Order took me in when my parents died, and made me one of their own. They might make mistakes, but I have to believe that they do what they do for good reasons."

"Are you calling the killing of all Lowlanders a mistake?" asked Hequa. "Here on Earth, the term people use is 'genocide.'"

“Maybe it was just a big mistake,” said Lika. “I was taught that the Lowlander Rebellion had to be crushed before it spread to other regions. But I was taught many things that no longer seem very true.”

“I was taught that The Order was nothing more than the spoiled children of wealthy farming families, trying to increase their power,” said Hequa. “I was taught that The Order recruited soldiers from the poorest places, and told these recruits lie after lie to make them better at killing. After talking with you, I think that what I was taught was true. But I no longer feel any anger when I think of it. Only sadness.”

“Sadness?” asked Lika, incredulous. “You think my life is a sad thing?”

“I think it was sad, just as mine was,” said Hequa. “But I also think our lives can be whatever we want them to be, in this new world.”

Chapter 13

After receiving over eighty thousand dollars in cash from Hequa for the sale of her remaining gold pellets, Lika quit her dish washing job. The first few weeks of joblessness were spent buying furniture and decorations for her house. After that, she spent a few weeks going to two restaurants a day to get a better idea of what Earth's food was like. When she grew bored of this, Lika took to spending most of her time online, ordering delivery food when she was hungry, smoking pot with Teddy the dog walker, and drinking with Dave at Boodles most nights.

One night at Boodles, Dave was in the bathroom when a woman Lika didn't know sat down and introduced herself. "Hey. I'm Molly," she said, helping herself to a sip of Dave's beer.

"I'm Lika, and that's not your drink," said Lika.

"Oh, he won't care," said Molly. "Anyways, I've see you around here a bunch, so I thought I'd come say hi. You live around here?"

"Not far," said Lika. "Why do you want to know?"

“Just making conversation,” replied Molly. “What kind of work do you do?”

“I’m an assassin from another planet,” said Lika. “What about you?”

“I’m a musician,” said Molly. “I play horns for Skatron. You saw us play here a few nights ago.”

“I remember seeing you on stage,” said Lika. “But until now, I didn’t know musician was a job.”

“It’s not much of one,” admitted Molly. “But I moonlight as a massage therapist to pay the bills.”

“I used to wash dishes,” said Lika. “But now you should move. Dave is coming back.”

“Hey guys,” said Dave, pulling another chair up to the table. “I didn’t know you two knew each other.”

“We don’t,” said Lika.

“We do now,” said Molly. “Lika was just telling me about being an assassin.”

“I told you I was an assassin. Not what it was like,” corrected Lika.

“Well, what’s it like?” asked Molly.

"I couldn't explain it without explaining about my home planet Jhanya," said Lika.

"I'll buy the next round if you tell us all about it," said Dave.

"Okay," agreed Lika. "But I don't even know where to start."

"Start with who you've had to kill," suggested Molly.

"So far, no one," said Lika. "I was sent to this planet to kill a man named Hequa. But when I found him, I didn't kill him. Instead, I got him to do many small favors for me."

"Like what?" asked Molly.

"Like he bought my house, and got me a dog," said Lika.

"Some assassin," scoffed Molly. "Bought off by a dog!"

"I never said I was a good assassin," said Lika. "I mean, I'm good at fighting, and finding people. But so far, as a killer, I'm a failure."

"Cheers to that," said Dave, lifting his glass.

"Do you like, have a gun?" asked Molly.

"I have a hydrogen pistol," said Lika. "And I just got new lead pellets for it. Want to go out back and shoot the dumpster with it?"

“Hell yeah I do,” said Molly.

“Hold up,” cautioned Dave. “Lika, what have I told you about shooting when you’re drunk?”

“Every time, you say not to,” said Lika. “And every time, I shoot anyway and it is fun. Come with us!”

“Whatever,” said Dave, following Lika and Molly out the back door.

“Now,” said Lika once they were in the alley. “It is very important to look at where you are shooting to make sure there are no people in the way.”

“Looks like it’s just us here,” said Molly.

“Good,” said Lika, pulling out her gun and loading it. “Shooting this gun is very easy. Just point at what you want to hit and pull the trigger. Like this.”

The alley was momentarily filled with the sound of Lika’s shot, and a loud metallic clang confirmed that her shot had hit the dumpster she was aiming for.

“Hell yeah,” said Molly, accepting the pistol from Lika. “This thing is crazy. Is it, like, some kind of super powered air gun?”

“It is powered by hydrogen. Made especially for killing people,” said Lika.

Molly fired three shots into the target dumpster. “Wow,” she said. “It’s super easy, with way softer recoil than the guns I’m used to. Try it, Dave.”

“Fine. Just this once,” said Dave, taking the gun and firing it at the dumpster. “There. You happy?”

“I am very happy,” said Lika, taking the pistol and firing a few more shots of her own.

For the next ten minutes, the trio took turns shooting. Lika had just put the gun away when a Boodles bouncer peeked his head out the door. “Are you geniuses lighting off fireworks?” he asked.

“No way,” said Dave. “Just throwing rocks at trash cans for no good reason.”

“Well, keep it down,” said the bouncer. “A couple of the neighbors complained.”

“Will do,” said Dave. “In fact, I think we’re about due for another round inside.”

“God, that was the most fun I’ve had here in ages,” said Molly once they returned to their table.

“It was fun, yes?” said Lika. “Dave, did you think it was fun?”

“Fun and risky,” said Dave. “What if the cops had shown up?”

“Then I would run away,” said Lika. “I don’t ever want to talk to cops.”

Molly laughed. “Assassin or no, you are some kind of bad ass,” she said.

“I am glad all of my training can be used to impress you,” said Lika.

Chapter 14

“Hello, Lika,” said Hequa as he answered the phone. “Are you calling to ask for another favor in exchange for not killing me?”

“No. Well, in a way,” said Lika. “I am calling to ask for your advice in finding a good enemy. I want an enemy who is as entertaining for me as the Great Bamzini has been for you.”

“I see. Do you know the horek tree, back on Jhanya?” asked Hequa.

“I know the fruit,” said Lika. “Why?”

“To get the fruit, the horek tree must be climbed,” explained Hequa. “But climbing the tree is risky, because poisonous snakes live in it. So a person must climb the tree expecting a snake to be in the way of getting the fruit. Do you understand?”

“Not really,” said Lika.

“The snake is like the enemy you want,” said Hequa. “To find your enemy, you must seek out the right fruit to climb

towards, and your enemy will present itself. The Great Bamzini presented himself as an enemy while I was climbing towards success as a stage magician. I have another enemy named Gabe who attacked when I was trying to sell rare technologies. Understand?”

“I think so,” said Lika. “What about the woman who works for you? Sallycat? Would she be a good enemy?”

“Do not be enemies with Sallycat,” said Hequa. “She would just try to involve me in every little thing. I’m sure you can find your own good enemy, just as soon as you do something that really bothers someone.”

“Okay,” said Lika. “Thanks. Goodbye.”

Hanging up the phone, Lika looked around her kitchen, wondering what to do next. Picking up the phone again, she tried Molly, but didn’t leave a message when the call went to voicemail. Idly surfing the web, she kept coming back to a UFO website that said all sorts of mostly untrue things about extraterrestrials. The site’s claims about faster-than-light travel particularly bothered Lika, so she sent a message to the site introducing herself as an alien and denying the validity of those claims.

Fifteen minutes later, Lika received a lengthy email response from the website. Gerald, the site’s administrator, was unapologetically convinced by a long list of military documents that the government was hiding faster-than-light technology. But Gerald was also intrigued by Lika’s stated extraterrestrial

origins, and had several questions for her. After a few hours of exchanging emails, Gerald asked Lika if she'd be up for a video chat, and Lika said she would.

"Hi Lika," said Gerald. "Uh, am I pronouncing that right?"

"Hi Gerald," said Lika. "Your pronunciation is fine. I've never done a video chat before."

"Pretty cool, huh?" said Gerald. "So Lika, you told me that you're from a planet called Jhanya. Is that right?"

"Yes," said Lika. "It's about a hundred and sixty light years away. My journey here took about three hundred years, during which I mostly slept in stasis."

"That's really incredible," said Gerald. "Why did you come to Earth?"

"I came to assassinate a fugitive from Jhanya who came here a few years ago," said Lika. "But when I got here and found him, I decided not to kill him."

"Woah. So there are others from your world here on Earth?" asked Gerald.

"Just one," said Lika. "And we're both stuck here, since the trip from Jhanya is one way."

"So what's your mission now?" asked Gerald. "What're you doing here?"

“Well, I was washing dishes. But now I just smoke pot with my dog walker and hang out at the bar,” said Lika. “Why does your website say so many wrong things about extraterrestrials?”

“As I said in our emails, we only share information from reliable sources, and leave it up to the reader to decide what’s true,” said Gerald.

“Well, the closest habitable world is twenty-three light years away, and Jhanya is the closest inhabited world,” said Lika. “A group from Jhanya visited Earth about eight hundred years ago, but your planet has always been somewhat uninteresting to my people. I now consider my own coming here an accident of politics.”

“This is all great stuff,” said Gerald. “But I wonder, is there a way for you to prove to me that you are who you say you are?”

“I could show you my draath crystal, or one of my molecular knives,” said Lika. “They are unlike anything else here on Earth.”

“Your draath crystal? That sounds cool. Can I see it now?” asked Gerald.

“Okay,” said Lika, hopping up from her seat and fetching the draath crystal from the cupboard. “Here. Can you see it?”

“I see it,” said Gerald. “But I don’t really understand it.”

“The crystal can produce electricity and heat,” said Lika. “It powered the ship I came here in.”

“Okay. So where’s the ship?” asked Gerald.

“My ship decomposed to almost nothing after I landed,” said Lika. “Like all heavy machinery built on Jhanya, it was designed to decompose once it was no longer useful.”

“I have to admit, I’m intrigued,” said Gerald. “Is there any way you would be willing to have that crystal tested by independent experts, to verify that the technology is real?”

“Hmm,” said Lika. “Only if the experts come to me. I have no identification, and so can not travel.”

“Great,” said Gerald. “I’ll try and set something up.”

Chapter 15

“**H**ere. The draath crystal is twisted this way for heat and this way for electricity,” said Lika to the technician who’d met her in the hotel room with a cameraman. “Do not twist it more than a little bit in either direction or it will become very dangerous.”

“Can I hook this meter up to it to see what kind of voltage it puts out?” asked the technician, a forty-something woman named Sue.

“Yes,” said Lika. “Just be careful not to touch it unless you want a shock.”

For three hours, Sue tested while the cameraman filmed. When they were done, Lika rose from the bed onto which she had sprawled and returned the draath crystal to her backpack. Sue, who had become more and more excited during the testing, paced around the small room muttering about the ‘free energy breakthrough’.

“I just can’t believe it,” said Sue when it was time for Lika to leave. “A crystal like that could power a house forever.”

“It powered a star ship for three hundred years,” said Lika. “But nothing could work forever. Not even a draath crystal.”

“But I. I just. I need to know how it was made,” said Sue.

“With many elements, very carefully arranged,” said Lika. “I don’t know exactly how, but I do know someone who has made a draath crystal, here on Earth.”

“Really?” exclaimed Sue. “Can you introduce me?”

“No,” said Lika. “You have seen the crystal, and have all its measurements. I have done enough.”

Two days later, Lika answered a knock on her door, and found Gerald standing on her porch. “What are you doing here?” she asked. “How did you know where I was?”

“Sorry to show up unannounced like this,” said Gerald. “But after your performance with the draath crystal, I just had to come and meet you for myself.”

“This is my home,” said Lika. “I will not let you in until you tell me how you found it.”

“Honestly? Sue followed you here from the hotel the other day,” said Gerald.

“Fine,” said Lika. “Come in. We can sit in the kitchen.”

“Great,” said Gerald, taking a seat. “So you’re really from another

planet? That's so amazing."

"It doesn't feel amazing," said Lika. "It feels like being stuck on a world where even the things that make sense don't make sense."

"I'm not sure I follow," said Gerald.

"On Jhanya, before I left, there was a revolution," said Lika. "The rules for many things were remade, and many things that had no rules were made to have rules. Here on Earth, everything is a transaction with rules, and most things are about money. It is like money is the way that the rules about everything are enforced, which makes no sense."

"Fascinating," said Gerald. "So was there no money on your home planet?"

"Before The Order came to power, there was no money on Jhanya," said Lika. "There were Overseers in every district who made sure things like food and medicine were distributed fairly, but there was no way for a central government to decide what should be abundant or scarce. When The Order took power to become a central government, one of the first things they did was introduce money by requiring it to be used to pay for the food harvest. Each district got credits based on its population, and the credits were used to buy food from the large farming families. This meant that no corrupt Overseer could distribute food across districts unfairly. It also meant that the farming families could use their credits to buy whatever they needed from any district without Overseer interference."

“Interesting,” said Gerald. “But I’m still not sure I follow.”

“From what I have seen, money here is used to keep most things artificially scarce,” said Lika. “It is not used by the government to keep peace or ensure that things are distributed fairly. Instead, it is used to keep things unfair, which makes no sense to me.”

“That’s quite the perspective,” said Gerald. “Of course, some of us believe that having free energy devices like your draath crystals would change the paradigm, making things more fair than they’ve ever been in history.”

“How?” asked Lika skeptically. “When buildings are remote-controlled, and it is impossible to travel from place to place without identity documents, how could draath crystals change anything?”

“What do you mean about buildings being ‘remote-controlled?’” asked Gerald.

“I mean that people own and control buildings without occupying them,” said Lika. “Like my house, which is owned by someone who lives elsewhere. This could never happen on Jhanya, and I see the practice as completely insane.”

“Let’s bring the conversation back to your draath crystal if you wouldn’t mind,” said Gerald. “I’m really curious. You’ve said that it powered your ship. Do you think it could power another ship?”

“I see no reason why it couldn’t,” said Lika. “But it is much more difficult to make a spaceship than to make a draath crystal. And your expert Sue did not seem to understand how my draath crystal was made, even after looking at it very closely.”

“Okay. But, hypothetically, if we could build a small spaceship, could your crystal power it?” asked Gerald.

“Yes,” said Lika. “But why do you even want a spaceship? Space is very boring and very dangerous.”

“I see,” said Gerald. “Lika, the reason for these questions is that my organization, Through the Stars Academy, is well placed to share your technology with the world, for the benefit of all mankind. I’m asking you to help me do that.”

“What you are saying sounds wrong,” said Lika. “It sounds like you are thinking too big and too small at once. I only have one draath crystal. And from everything I have seen on this planet, people are not good at sharing rare items with each other. So how could it benefit all mankind, when people can’t even share buildings without remote-controlling them?”

“We can share the information,” said Gerald. “You mentioned to Sue that you knew someone who could make a draath crystal, here on Earth. If we could get the information about how to do that out, we could change the world.”

“He will want money,” said Lika. “The person I was talking about with Sue will want a great deal of money for sharing this information. And I will want a great deal of money for putting

you in contact with this person.”

“So that’s what this is really about,” said Gerald, his mood beginning to sour. “You’re sitting on this supposedly great invention and contact me because, what, I seem gullible? You know, your story’s not even all that believable.”

“I don’t care if you believe me,” said Lika. “But if it is true that what I have has value, why should you not pay for it?”

“Well,” said Gerald. “I guess we could raise funds for purchase of a prototype. But there would need to be a lot more testing before any money could change hands.”

“It will cost you ten million dollars to buy my cooperation and a working draath crystal,” said Lika.

“Ten million? That’s outrageous,” said Gerald. “If we were to build a fundraising campaign around a video of you with the working draath crystal, we could maybe raise a hundred thousand.”

“Now it is your story that is unbelievable,” said Lika. “I thought your group was big and filled with important people. Now you tell me that you would have to have a campaign to raise just one hundred thousand dollars? I contacted you because I was bored, not because I was looking for money. But now I am starting to think that all those people online who call you a quack and a blowhard might be right.”

“This isn’t how I wanted this to go,” said Gerald. “And I’m

sorry if I've offended you. But you have to understand, me and everyone at Through the Stars thinks that you're the big breakthrough we've been waiting for. And now, I'm sitting in your kitchen feeling like this whole thing has gotten away from me."

"You seem to be very inexperienced with talking to aliens," said Lika. "It's like you're misunderstanding everything, and don't know what questions to ask. How did you even get your job?"

"This job is the culmination of my life's work, trying to get the truth about UFOs out there," said Gerald.

"Yes. But I'm an actual alien, willing to answer all of your questions, and you want to talk about making a spaceship," said Lika.

"I'm sorry," said Gerald. "Really, I am. What questions do you think I should be asking?"

"Maybe why the average lifespan in Jhanya is over four hundred years," said Lika. "Or why your government didn't notice that I landed my ship in Wisconsin. Or where exactly a draath crystal draws its power from. There are many better questions you could be asking."

Chapter 16

“**H**equa? This is Lika,” said Lika into the phone. “Do you know of a UFO group called Through the Stars Academy?”

“Yes,” said Hequa. “Sallycat calls them a limited hangout. Why? Are they bothering you?”

“Not exactly,” said Lika. “I let them examine a draath crystal and interview me. But, the more I think about it, I think it might be fun to bother them.”

“Oh? If this bothering will prevent you from killing me for another year, tell me more,” said Hequa.

“Okay,” said Lika. “There are a few parts to what I’m thinking. Maybe we should talk about this in person?”

“Fine. I’ll send a car,” said Hequa.

Sitting on Hequa’s rooftop patio, watching the last of the day’s sun disappear into the city’s violet night, Hequa poured Lika a drink, and waited for her to get her thoughts together.

“The first thing to understand about these UFO people is that they are very confused,” said Lika. “They seem not to understand even basic things like the difference between spaceships and extra-dimensional phenomena. And they all seem to believe that the world would magically change if only people knew that there was life on other worlds.”

“My friend Robert is a bit like that,” said Hequa. “Go on.”

“Well, this Through the Stars group seems to be the biggest group of that kind of person around,” said Lika. “I found its leader online, and answered some questions, and let one of their scientists examine my draath crystal in a hotel room. Right after that, the leader of this group, Gerald, came to my house to ask me more questions, even though I never gave him my address.”

“Home addresses are very easy to find in this world,” commented Hequa.

“That’s not the point,” said Lika. “The point is that I want to find a way to use this group to advance understanding. Coming from Jhanya gives me a viewpoint that could help them. But I want to do this in a way that is more fun than how this group usually operates.”

“I see,” said Hequa. “Do you have a plan?”

“I have ideas, but no solid plan yet,” said Lika. “I was hoping you would help me come up with the plan.”

“My first contribution is lighting this blunt,” said Hequa, touch-

ing a flame to a thin cigar.

“Thanks,” said Lika. “First off, what I’m thinking is that, even though this group is fixated on the draath crystal, what they should really be studying are some of the smaller things I brought with from Jhanya. Things like the yilanka lizards, the light orbs, even the mechanism of my hydrogen pistol. Things that could be applied easily to solving real problems.”

“Be careful of that thinking,” said Hequa. “When I tried to solve problems for people here with technology from Jhanya, people didn’t always want the solutions. I made cutters that would have reduced the work necessary for road construction, but the workers did not want them, because they wanted more work, not less.”

“Really?” asked Lika.

“Yes,” said Hequa. “Most of the people of Earth, in this country anyway, get paid when their work is done, but do not get paid if their work is done by machines or made obsolete by changing technologies. And, from all I have seen, the people of Earth are the main thing standing in the way of solving their problems, even when the solutions would be easy and would make the world more comfortable.”

“Thank you,” said Lika. “These are things I had not thought about. But I still want to have some fun with this group.”

“Why not invite them here, to Jhanya Embassy, to see ffaasa growing and tritals working?” asked Hequa. “If they’re like

other UFO groups, you could entice them to come with blurry pictures and vague documents which I could have Sallycat leak to them.”

“Really? That could be a good start,” said Lika. “You know, you’re not at all how I imagined you’d be.”

“Good,” said Hequa. “I’m just a simple Lowlander. If you imagined me any other way, you’d be mistaken.”

“It’s more than that. More than you being a Lowlander,” said Lika. “It’s like everything I was told about you was wrong. You’re not some evil genius terrorist. You’re just a normal person. I’m still getting used to that. Still getting used to the idea that The Order used you and me to advance their agenda regardless of the truth.”

“Yes. The Order was all lies and half truths,” said Hequa. “The Order was bad, but the governments of this planet are in many ways much worse. You must be very careful of them, especially when teaching people about our technologies.”

“Do you mean to prevent me from sharing with Through the Stars Academy with that warning?” asked Lika.

“Not at all,” said Hequa. “But there are some things you should probably keep secret, for your own good. For example, the Department of Energy claims molknife technology as its own, and will steal any molknife it sees. And there is a government group called ICE that will take you and put you in a cage if they discover you’re an alien.”

“Good to know,” said Lika. “How many groups are in the government?”

“Thousands,” said Hequa. “And this is no exaggeration. There are federal, state, county, and city governments, and they all work together to make it easy for the wealthy to remote-control everyone else.”

“Weird,” said Lika. “But I guess that makes sense, given everything I’ve seen.”

“An idea just came to me,” said Hequa. “Have I told you that I made a flying saucer?”

“The Great Bamzini told me this,” said Lika. “He said you had a small saucer that you used to visit music festivals.”

“Yes,” said Hequa, chuckling. “It is very maneuverable, and runs on a draath crystal I made. If you want to have some fun with the UFO people, maybe it could be of some use.”

Chapter 17

Once Lika saw the blurry photos leaked by Hequa's friend up on the website of Through the Stars Academy, she called Gerald and got him to agree to meet her at a secluded cabin Hequa rented. Gerald, Sue, and a camera operator named Thomas arrived just before sunset. An hour later, once everyone was settled in and eating sandwiches, Lika turned on her signals disruptor when no one was looking, then stood up from the table dramatically. "They're coming," she said in an urgent tone. "Come. Let's go outside. They'll be here soon."

"Hey, wait, there's something wrong with my camera," said Thomas, who was the first to his feet after Lika.

"Who is coming?" asked Gerald.

"Come on. There is no time. Grab your cameras," said Lika, leaving the door open behind her as she stepped out into the night.

Outside, the trio from Through the Stars each held their phones with looks of chagrin on their faces.

“There’s something wrong with my phone,” said Thomas.

“Me too,” said Sue.

“Mine’s not working either,” said Gerald. “Lika, what’s happening here?”

“They’re coming from the west,” said Lika. “Can you not hear? They’re almost here.”

As she spoke, a low ringing noise began to get louder. Soon, a flying saucer appeared. The craft moved to hover over the cabin’s small yard, shining a bright light down from its center. Lika moved to stand in this light. As she did, a soothing female voice was projected from the saucer. “Lika,” it said. “The people of Earth are not ready for what you plan to tell them. They are not ready.”

Lika faced upward to shout at the saucer. “They are ready,” she shouted. “Let me tell them of the wonders of Jhanya, and of the things they could do to make their world better.”

“The Galactic Federation has a plan for Earth,” replied the saucer. “You are interfering with the grand plan.”

“Your plan will have to change,” Lika shouted. “These people deserve to know the truth.”

“If you insist on this course of action, then you are responsible for what happens to these Earthlings,” said the saucer before flying upwards and away.

Lika stood in the cold grass, turning around slowly to face Gerald. Her hand moved to deactivate her signals disruptor before anyone's eyes could adjust to the darkness.

"Holy shit!" exclaimed Thomas. "No wonder the cameras stopped working! Have you guys ever seen anything like that? Because I haven't."

"I knew it," said Sue. "I knew this was the real deal."

"Lika, are you okay?" asked Gerald. "Want to come inside and talk about what just happened?"

"Yes," said Lika. "Guess I may as well tell you everything."

Back in the cabin, everyone sat down except Thomas, who set his camera on a tripod and began filming.

"Lika? Lika, what was that?" asked Gerald.

"You saw," said Lika. "That was not a ship made on Jhanya. It said it was from the Galactic Federation. But how could they know what we were doing here?"

"You never mentioned any Galactic Federation before," said Gerald. "But you knew that ship was coming. How'd you know?"

"I heard it. Or felt it. Or maybe I just knew," said Lika. "For a person like me, there are some moments in life that seem to have been designed by greater powers. This was one of those

moments.”

“I definitely get that,” said Gerald. “I got the same feeling, seeing that saucer. But what are we supposed to do now, if the Galactic Federation is against us learning what you have to teach?”

“You heard them,” said Lika. “They are not against it. I can still teach you, but if I do, I will be responsible for how you use the teachings.”

“Is that something you’re willing to take on?” asked Gerald.

“I could,” said Lika. “If you promise to only use my teachings for good.”

“I think we can all agree to that,” said Gerald.

“Of course,” said Sue.

“Yeah,” said Thomas.

“Good,” said Lika, holding a pea-sized, faded blue sphere up for everyone to see. “The first thing I will teach you is about the light orb.”

“Can I see?” asked Gerald.

“Just watch this,” said Lika, popping the light orb into her mouth, where it began emanating brilliant white light. “As you can see, the light orb is activated by water. As long as it is wet, it will shine brightly.”

“Woah. How’s it do that?” asked Thomas.

“The orb charges from light, and emits light when activated by water,” explained Lika, spitting the orb into her hand and drying it on a pants leg. “See for yourself,” she said, passing the light orb to Gerald.

“I don’t get it,” said Sue. “How exactly does it work?”

“The deeper mechanics of that are not for me to reveal,” said Lika. “But you can keep that light orb and examine it however you like.”

“Really? That’s incredible,” said Sue.

“That is amazing. But I’d like to come back to this Galactic Federation if we could,” said Gerald. “Lika, is Jhanya part of the Federation?”

“They weren’t when I left, but that was three hundred years ago,” said Lika.

“But have you heard of them? Have you ever seen a ship like that before?” asked Gerald. “I mean, it talked directly to you. Even knew your name.”

“I saw a ship like that once, but in the daytime. And here on Earth, not on Jhanya,” said Lika. “Maybe the people of Earth are more important to the Galactic Federation than the people of Jhanya are.”

“I knew it!” exclaimed Gerald. “It’s just like I always said. There really is a group of E.T. intelligences just waiting to welcome us into the fold once we’ve evolved enough.”

“There is more,” said Lika. “When I saw the new leaked material posted to your website, I recognized it right away. The pictures are of technologies brought to this planet by another person from Jhanya. That’s what I planned to talk to you about, before the Galactic Federation ship showed up.”

“Really?” asked Sue. “Most of us thought those were a hoax.”

“No hoax. Just bad pictures,” said Lika. “Those pictures and that memo come from Jhanya Embassy, which is where a man from my planet named Hequa lives. Originally, I came to Earth to kill Hequa, but then I decided to let him live.”

“So ... you know where those pictures were taken?” asked Sue.

“Yes,” said Lika. “And Hequa has agreed to let you tour the location tomorrow, if this is something you would like to do.”

“Absolutely,” said Gerald. “Wow. What an incredible series of events!”

Chapter 18

“**H**equa! Hequa, I brought the people from Through the Stars to see your embassy,” called Lika as the group stepped out of the elevator on Hequa’s building’s fifth floor.

The entire floor was a single, cavernous room. The walls and ceiling were covered in bright yellow webs of what Lika recognized as *ffassa fungus*. Off to one side were a dozen aquariums, populated with octopus-like tritals hooked up to computing equipment. And in the center of this room, there was a large plywood dome.

“Hello Lika,” said Hequa, appearing from around the other side of the dome. “And hello people from Through the Stars. Welcome to Jhanya Embassy.”

“Thanks,” said Gerald. “I’m Gerald. This is Sue and Thomas. Quite the place you’ve got here. Really incredible.”

“Has Lika told you that I am an alien from the planet Jhanya, and that she came to Earth to assassinate me?” asked Hequa.

“More or less,” said Gerald. “But I’m wondering now — are you the one she said could make a draath crystal.”

“Oh yes,” said Hequa. “But I will not do this for you unless you give me a great deal of money.”

“Hey, what’s this?” asked Sue, who had wandered over to examine the aquariums. “Is that octopus on twitter?”

“Yes,” said Hequa. “Tweetly now has almost a million followers.”

“Okay, but why does it say ‘Alan Dorkowitz is where the Deep State and the Pedo State overlap?’” asked Sue.

“It should not say that,” said Hequa. “Would you mind deleting that tweet? Alan Dorkowitz will sue me if that one stays up for too long.”

“Sure thing,” said Sue.

“So this yellow stuff ... ?” asked Gerald.

“Ffassa fungus,” said Hequa. “Used for textiles, like the suits that Lika and I are wearing. See the color similarity? It is grown outside on Jhanya, but here I grow it inside because it is fun to climb around on.”

“And the octopuses?” asked Gerald.

“They are called tritals. They are living computers,” said Hequa. “The floor below us has hundreds of them all networked

together to solve big problems.”

“Amazing,” said Gerald. “Are you getting all this, Thomas?”

“Sure am,” said Thomas, who was slowly walking through the space with a bulky camera.

“How long have you been on Earth, Hequa?” asked Gerald.

“Over three years,” said Hequa.

“Yeah? In that time, have you had any contact with a group of extraterrestrials that call themselves the Galactic Federation?” asked Gerald.

“Oh yes,” said Hequa. “The Galactic Federation has great plans for Earth. I will help them however I can.”

“So you’ve been contacted by them?” asked Gerald. “How did they contact you? What did they say?”

“I am not supposed to reveal these things to the people of Earth yet,” said Hequa. “What I can say is that there are many things that have to happen on this planet before it will be ready for the Galactic Federation.”

“I guess I respect that,” said Gerald. “But is there anything at all you can tell me that might help, I don’t know, speed up the process?”

“I’ll think about it,” said Hequa. “For now, can I get anyone

something to drink? I have old coffee, peach schnapps, and water.”

“How old is the coffee?” asked Lika.

“From this morning,” said Hequa. “It has not yet molded.”

“Sounds good,” said Lika.

“Nothing for me,” said Sue.

“I’m good, too,” said Thomas.

“Maybe I’ll try a schnapps,” said Gerald.

Once everyone had their beverages, Hequa took Lika aside. “Did I say the right thing about the Galactic Federation?” he asked in a hushed tone. “Is there more that I should say?”

“You’re doing great,” replied Lika. “The only other thing you could say now is that you’d be happy to make a list of all the things the people of Earth need to do to be accepted into the Federation.”

“Yes. That’s good,” said Hequa. “We will talk again soon.”

Holding two fingers of schnapps in a paper cup, Gerald approached the pair. “Hequa? Lika? We were wondering if we could get a picture of you two climbing up the ffassa?” he asked.

After a few pictures in the ffassa, Gerald wanted pictures of them in front of the tritals, and then in the doorway of Hequa's sleeping dome. After this, even though Gerald wanted to take more pictures, Hequa was ready for his guests to leave. Lika took the hint right away, but the crowd from Through the Stars appeared oblivious to Hequa's desire. Finally, Hequa said, "You must leave my home at once." And that got everyone moving towards the door.

"I hope we haven't offended you, Hequa," said Gerald.

"Not at all. I'm just tired," said Hequa. "There is a bit more I could share about the Galactic Federation, but I would like to do this by email."

"Really? That's wonderful," said Gerald. "And thanks again for sharing so much with us already."

Chapter 19

Late that night, Lika and Hequa sat on Hequa's rooftop, passing a blunt and reflecting on their Galactic Federation.

"What should we say the Federation wants?" asked Hequa. "I asked Sallycat, and her contribution was '9/11 disclosure'. I asked Robert and he said 'nuclear disarmament'."

"Do we want the Federation to be demanding possible things, or impossible things?" asked Lika. "I like the idea of a Federation that demands very specific and very funny things from people. Like wearing silly costumes? Or holding your breath for as long as you can when meeting an emissary of the Federation?"

"The holding your breath one is good," said Hequa. "But maybe hats instead of entire costumes. With people like we're working with, we could say that a special hat has to be worn to resonate with higher frequencies, then they'll accept it and take it very seriously."

"That's what they'll take seriously? You may as well teach them Lowlander magic, if that's the case," said Lika.

“Not a bad thought,” said Hequa. “But if I teach them the truth-trance, and they use it right, they’ll figure out that the Galactic Federation is a hoax,” said Hequa.

“Maybe that’s a good thing,” said Lika. “Maybe you could teach them the truth-trance, and when they figure out the hoax, we tell them it was all a test to make them ready for the real truth about extraterrestrials.”

“But we’ve already been telling them the truth. They just want more,” said Hequa.

“So we tell them about the extra-dimensional entities if and when the hoax is revealed,” said Lika. “But we need to think of more funny things to ask them to do.”

“Agreed,” said Hequa. “The people here are very funny about food. What if I tell them to eat only crickets when the moon is full?”

“Make it something they’ll actually eat. Like corn,” said Lika. “Tell them to only eat corn on full moons.”

“But corn isn’t funny,” said Hequa. “How is corn funny?”

“What about popcorn?” asked Lika. “I find popcorn very funny.”

“How about popcorn and honey?” asked Hequa. “Their fingers will get very sticky if they eat that.”

“Okay,” said Lika. “Popcorn and honey. And holding their

breath. And funny hats. And the truth-trance. What else?"

"To teach them the truth-trance, I must first teach the learning-trance," said Hequa. "Normally, the trances are taught to children in a pool of water. I can tell them to practice in their bathtubs, but they may not be able to learn the trances without more direct instruction than I can give them from the flying saucer."

"Well, the idea of them doing Lowlander trances wrong in their bathtubs is pretty funny," said Lika. "Unless this would be too dangerous for them."

"No, it should be fine," said Hequa. "And you are right. It could also be funny. What else?"

"Definitely tell them that they were chosen from all Earth's people to represent this planet in the Federation," said Lika. "Make that the reason for the hats."

"Good thinking," said Hequa. "Should I say anything about the government?"

"Oh yes," said Lika. "Tell them the government rejected a formal offer to join the Galactic Federation in 1964."

"Brilliant," laughed Hequa. "So what about 9/11 and nuclear disarmament?"

"Talk about those things if you want," said Lika. "But any jobs we give them must be possible for them to do."

“An idea just came to me,” said Hequa. “I’ve been cultivating zanzi plants here, and already have many pounds of zanzi leaves. No one else on Earth knows of this plant’s medicinal value. What if I drop a bundle of zanzi leaves as a gift, with instructions on how to chew it to rid a body of infection?”

“That’s good,” said Lika. “Then, they could test the leaves however they want, and would find only that the plant was from another world.”

“Should I make my first approach during the day or at night?” asked Hequa.

“Maybe night,” said Lika. “I can loan you my signals disruptor if you don’t have one, to defeat any recording devices nearby. But I expect my signals disruptor to be returned to me when you’re done.”

“Of course,” said Hequa. “I can visit both Gerald and Sue at their homes tomorrow night, within an hour of each other. But we will have to find a way to get them outside at the right times.”

“I can order them pizzas,” said Lika. “The pizza delivery people can watch. They will make excellent witnesses to back up the stories of Gerald and Sue, since all recording devices will be disabled.”

Chapter 20

“Lika? Lika, you’re not going to believe it,” said Gerald into the phone. “I was visited by the Galactic Federation at my home, here in Utah. And Sue was visited at her place in Nevada at the same time. They said we were chosen to be emissaries.”

“Oh? That’s great,” said Lika. “But what do you think it means?”

“Well, there are a few formalities to being an emissary, but nothing we can’t handle,” said Gerald. “And you know what else? They gave us each a bundle of some special medicinal plant from out of this world. And started to teach us how to enter into mystical trances.”

“You sound very happy about this,” said Lika. “But why are you calling me about it?”

“I thought you’d want to know, after your encounter outside that cabin,” said Gerald.

“I see,” said Lika. “I guess it is interesting. Do you think they’ll come back?”

“They said they would, after we complete our first tasks,” said Gerald. “We have to have special hats made, and pass the day of the full moon eating only popcorn and honey, and learn to do a special kind of meditation. All to better understand their next message.”

“Special hats? Tell me more,” said Lika.

“They’re supposed to be made of copper and plastic layers, with three points on top, and with wires wound around quartz crystals dangling from the points,” said Gerald. “We’re supposed to wear these at all times, unless we’re sleeping. Apparently, the hats will make it easier for us to align our energies with the vibration of the Galactic Federation.”

“Amazing,” said Lika, covering a chuckle with a cough. “Was there anything else?”

“There’s so much more,” said Gerald. “Lika, I’m telling you, there’s so much more. Apparently, the Galactic Federation hasn’t been active on Earth since 1964. But your arrival here — yours and your fellow Jhanyan Hequa’s — somehow got them to start paying attention to us again. It’s a watershed moment for humanity, and I feel you somehow helped set it in motion.”

“Maybe the Federation saw how well you Earthlings have treated me,” commented Lika. “But as I’ve said, the Galactic Federation is as new to me as it is to you. And I am a suspicious person, so I will advise you to be very careful of this. Have you thought about why you might have been chosen for this kind of contact?”

“Well, yes,” said Gerald. “I run one of the biggest UFO truth organizations out there, and Sue has even more experience with this sort of thing than I do. I think they chose us because we can get the truth out there, and they chose you because you were meeting with us to reveal secrets about technologies from your home world.”

“Okay,” said Lika. “So what can I do to help?”

“We’re playing this whole thing close to the vest,” said Gerald. “Until we have more solid evidence, we can’t go public with the Galactic Federation encounters. But when the results of our tests of that medicinal leaf come back, Sue and I plan to hold a press conference and tell everyone about the Federation. When we do that, we’d like you to go on record about your experiences, too.”

“Gerald, I am from another world and have no identity here,” said Lika. “If you want me to do anything big and public, I’ll need protection from the government here. Protection from ICE. Can you offer this protection, or get me an identity that will protect me from your ICE?”

“Well, not exactly,” said Gerald. “That’s kind of a tough one.”

“It should be an easy one,” said Lika. “If this planet is ever to be considered good by alien worlds, it should be easy for an alien to create a legitimate identity.”

“I’m not arguing,” said Gerald. “I just don’t know how to help you with that.”

“Do you see my situation?” asked Lika. “You don’t have money for me, or an identity. I remain happy to help you, but do not see at all how this benefits me.”

“What about getting the truth out there?” asked Gerald. “Isn’t that what this is all about?”

“Maybe,” said Lika. “No matter, I must go now because my dog walker is about to arrive.”

Hanging up, Lika scratched Little Bamzini’s head, and shouted for Teddy to come in when she heard him reach the porch. As Teddy entered the house, Little Bamzini jumped up off of Lika’s lap and rushed to the dog walker’s side.

“Bong load before I walk the pup?” asked Teddy.

“Not today,” said Lika. “But when you return, we can have sex if you want.”

“Really? Well, okay then,” said Teddy. “I’ll be back in an hour.”

With the house empty, Lika replayed the conversation with Gerald in her mind. Had she made a mistake mentioning money and identity? Should she have shown more interest in the details of Gerald’s encounter? Lika didn’t know, but overall felt like the exchange had gone as well as could be expected. Picking up her phone, she called Hequa.

“Hequa? This is Lika,” said Lika. “Gerald just called me to report our project’s success.”

“Excellent,” said Hequa. “Are they making the hats?”

“Yes,” said Lika. “They’re making the hats and testing the zanzi leaf. And soon they will do something called a press conference. Is that what it sounds like?”

“It is,” said Hequa. “They’ll get up on a stage and tell their story to everyone who will listen.”

“Gerald said they’re doing a press conference when the tests of the zanzi leaf come back,” said Lika. “I think we should expect to see it in a week or less.”

“That sounds right,” said Hequa. “Should we wait until after to make contact again?”

“I wonder,” said Lika. “What if we made contact during the press conference itself, just outside of wherever it is to take place?”

“That sounds very risky,” said Hequa. “I could maybe drop down to the location very quickly, from a great height, with the signals disruptor on. But I would need to scout the area first to see where all the power lines and other obstructions are. I think I could do it, but would it be worth it?”

“Maybe ... only if the conference is outside,” said Lika. “I’m just trying to think of ways to build momentum.”

“Let Gerald and Sue build the momentum,” said Hequa. “And maybe we can do our next contact during the next full moon.”

CHAPTER 20

“When their fingers are sticky from honey popcorn,” said Lika.
“Yes.”

Chapter 21

No major news outfit ran with the story told at Through the Stars Academy's Las Vegas news conference. But several online-only news organizations posted articles about the Galactic Federation and the alien drug that had come into Through The Stars' possession. The ridiculous hats worn by Sue and Gerald began catching on, and someone began selling these hats online within a week. Though they were priced at a steep hundred bucks a piece, prominent UFO community commentators began appearing in these hats on social media, which Lika considered a rousing success.

Sitting at the bar with Dave and Molly, Lika reflected on this success. "I think we should all do an extra shot, on me," she said. "A plan I had is starting to work out."

"I'm game," said Molly.

"Me too," said Dave. "Was your plan to get us both drunk for a threesome?"

"No, but I like that plan," said Lika. "Especially if we get drunk enough to go shooting first."

“I like that plan too,” said Molly. “But seriously, what are we celebrating?”

“I can’t tell you how exactly, but I managed to get many people to wear very funny hats,” said Lika.

“Hats? We’re celebrating hats?” asked Dave.

“Yes,” said Lika. “Made of copper and plastic, with quartz crystal dangles, to help the wearer align their energies.”

“Do you have one? Or can you show us a picture?” asked Molly.

“Here,” said Lika, pulling up a picture of an ‘E.T. crown’ on her phone.

“People are wearing these?” asked Molly.

“Yes. To align their energies,” said Lika. “You can order one yourself for just a hundred dollars.”

“This is you, isn’t it? You’re the one selling them?” asked Dave.

“I’m not selling them,” said Lika. “But I do get a percentage of the sales.”

“So you’re a new age crap seller?” said Dave. “I knew you must’ve had something going when you quit Snatty’s. Just didn’t figure it’d be this.”

“Hey, be nice,” said Molly. “I think it’s awesome. But I just can’t

picture people actually wearing those.”

“UFO enthusiasts are wearing them,” said Lika. “And only the most serious enthusiasts. The ones who want to be in tune with the Galactic Federation.”

“I can’t tell if you’re kidding,” said Dave. “I know you say you’re from another world. But a Galactic Federation? Come on.”

“Why not?” asked Lika. “The people of Earth want very much for there to be a Galactic Federation. The hats help them vibrate at this Federation’s frequency.”

“What, like twenty megahertz?” asked Dave.

“No. Not their radio frequency,” said Lika. “Think of the frequency as a metaphor, and not a measurable thing.”

“So why use the word frequency?” asked Dave.

“I could just say mood. Like the hats adjust the mood,” said Lika. “Dave, would you feel better if I said mood?”

“I’d feel better with another round,” said Dave, motioning to call a server to their table.

“Well, I think it’s awesome that your hats are selling,” said Molly.

“But do you think it’s funny?” asked Lika. “It’s supposed to be funny.”

“Maybe it’s a little funny,” admitted Dave. “But no funnier than the crazy foam hats that sports fans wear to games.”

“Do those hats have quartz danglers?” asked Lika. “If not, my hats are funnier.”

“Okay, fine. Since you’re buying,” said Dave.

“The E.T. crowns are buying,” said Lika. “But seriously you guys. We’re celebrating more than hats. We’re celebrating the successful launch of the Galactic Federation.”

“Whatever that means,” said Dave, finishing half a beer in one gulp.

“I want to know what it means,” said Molly. “Lika, what does that mean?”

“It means the people of Earth are finally getting the extraterrestrial contact they’ve been craving,” said Lika.

“Right. Because you’re an alien,” said Dave.

“I am not the only alien on this planet,” said Lika. “And now me and the other one have started working together.”

“Hey, wait,” said Dave. “Is this other alien the one you said you were going to kill?”

“You were right to talk me out of it,” said Lika. “I still threaten to kill him sometimes. But the truth is I like him better alive

than I'd like him dead."

"Sounds like cause for celebration," said Molly.

Chapter 22

“**T**he Galactic Federation is most pleased with all the progress you’ve made,” said the electronic voice from the flying saucer hovering twenty feet over Gerald’s head. “We are so pleased that we would like to offer Earth a chance to become a probationary member of our Federation. We have etched instructions for how to proceed into a crystal. We are dropping the instruction crystal now.”

As the saucer sped upwards and away, Gerald blinked several times to readjust to the dimness of his Salt Lake City yard. Moving to where he had heard the saucer’s gift thump down onto the ground, he found a very large lab-grown quartz point, its sides rough with etching. “Holy shit,” he said, hefting the crystal and moving towards his house. “They’re not going to believe this.”

Sitting at his dining room table, Gerald examined the crystal. The first thing he noticed was that the etching was in English, albeit with characters too small for him to fully make out without a magnifying lens. There were six panels of writing, each measuring about two by three inches. One panel was helpfully labeled ‘Start Here’, so this is where Gerald started

transcribing.

When Gerald got to the last panel, labeled 'Extra-Dimensional Beings,' his phone rang. "Hi Sue," he said. "Listen, you're not going to believe what just happened."

"Did a visitor drop a big old etched crystal for you?" asked Sue. "Because that's what just went down in my back yard in Reno."

"Fantastic," said Gerald. "I'm just transcribing what it says now. You think they both say the same thing?"

"Guess we'll find out soon," said Sue. "Mine actually has one panel labeled 'Start Here'. You believe that?"

"Mine says the same," said Gerald. "Listen, looking at this thing, I'm starting to worry that this whole thing is a hoax. Now, I don't know who could pull something like this off. Or how they'd do it. Or why, for that matter. But ever since that first encounter at that cabin, this whole thing has just, I don't know. It's just felt like it's too good to be true."

"I know what you mean," said Sue. "Like, I'm pretty sure the etching is Times New Roman. Wouldn't a Galactic Federation at least have their own font? And why etch giant blocks of Chinese quartz? You'd think they'd have more efficient ways of getting their message across."

"Why don't we just transcribe 'em and compare notes when we're done?" asked Gerald. "You think we're the only ones who got these things?"

“No,” said Sue. “Thomas just texted that he got one too. Let’s do a video chat in the morning to share what we’ve found?”

“Sounds good, Sue,” said Gerald. “Until then.”

“Bye,” said Sue, hanging up.

As Gerald finished transcribing the crystal’s etchings, he felt a great wave of tiredness wash over him. When he woke, he was still sitting at the table with his head resting on on the notebook he’d been writing in. Reviewing this writing with a critical eye, he wondered again if the whole thing was a hoax. But, rereading the text, he decided maybe that was a question that didn’t need an answer just yet.

The first panel read:

The Galactic Federation is peaceful. We will not join with the military-industrial complex that rules Earth with threats and violence. We will not join with the banking cartels that use money as a weapon to further the aims of the military-industrial complex. We will not join with the governments that serve tiny fractions of the population at everyone else’s expense. But we will join with the people of Earth, if the people of Earth overthrow their corrupt rulers.

The Galactic Federation holds all life sacred. We will not join with industries that ruin ecosystems. We will not join with companies that damage Earth’s food and water supplies. We will not join with those who make the world less habitable for insects. But we will join with the people of Earth, if the people of Earth change their ways.

The Galactic Federation values freedom. We will not join with systems that cage or enslave people. We will not join with groups that stifle free thinking. We will not join with those who seek betterment in limiting the mobility of others. But we will join with the people of Earth, if the people of Earth become free to join with us.

Conferring with Sue and Thomas, Gerald learned that only the first and last panels of text were the same for all of their crystals. While Gerald's second panel was titled 'Emissary Requirements', Sue's second panel was called 'Galactic Federation Communication Protocols', and Thomas' was 'The Learning Trance'. The third, fourth, and fifth panels were likewise different. None of them knew what to make of these differences. But they all three decided to put all of the information up on the website right away, albeit without fully disclosing the origin of the cryptic texts.

Chapter 23

“Lika? This is Hequa,” said Hequa into the phone. “Have you seen Through the Stars website? It looks like our crystal messages are up.”

“I’m looking now,” said Lika. “But I don’t see any pictures of the actual crystals. Only the writing from them. Are they keeping the crystals a secret?”

“Could be,” said Hequa. “Maybe I should have made them myself, instead of relying on my Chinese supplier.”

“We both saw them. They looked fine,” said Lika. “But maybe we should have written in binary or something instead of English.”

“Maybe,” said Hequa. “But I like how they looked, and doing them in English was much easier than binary would’ve been.”

“How far apart were the drops in time?” asked Lika.

“I dropped all three within an hour,” said Hequa. “It was the fastest I’ve ever flown in the saucer. After that, I’m thinking of making some modifications to make flying at such speeds safer

and more comfortable.”

“Probably a good idea,” said Lika. “You’ll have to show me how to fly that thing sometime. Or better yet, help me make a saucer of my own.”

“Making the saucer was very difficult,” said Hequa. “If I made you one, you would have to promise not to kill me ever, and no more favors.”

“I could maybe promise that,” said Lika. “But right now, I’m thinking of getting my signals disruptor back. Can I come by today to pick it up?”

“Yes. I’m here all day,” said Hequa. “But please wait at least an hour before coming. I’m examining the disruptor to make one for myself.”

“Okay, but don’t break it,” said Lika. “I’ll see you in two hours.”

Later, at Hequa’s loft, Lika stood next to Hequa’s workbench with a look of dismay on her face. On the workbench, her signals disruptor sat partially disassembled. Hequa was fiddling with the parts when she came in. “I thought you said you’d wait an hour before coming?” he said.

“I waited nearly three hours,” said Lika. “Don’t you know how to reassemble a signals disruptor?”

“I thought I did,” said Hequa. “But every time I try, it is like two hands aren’t enough to make it go together.”

“You didn’t damage the vacuum tube, did you?” asked Lika. “Because if you did, reassembling it is pointless.”

“I was very careful,” said Hequa. “I just don’t see how it goes back together.”

“It needs a special tool to press on the connecting tabs,” said Lika. “Here. I’ll press the tabs while you snap the tube casing into place.”

“It worked!” exclaimed Hequa as the signals disruptor snapped back together. “Sorry. And thank you.”

“We’ve still got to test it, to make sure it still works,” said Lika. “What signals can I disrupt?”

“I’ll call Robert and you disrupt the call,” said Hequa, pulling out his phone.

Lika pointed the disruptor and activated it.

“It worked!” exclaimed Hequa again. “See, I did not break it.”

Chuckling at Hequa’s antics, Lika put the signals disruptor away. “Yes, it seems fine,” she said. “Now, maybe we can talk about the next step with the UFO people.”

“Sure,” said Hequa. “Should we each put on E.T. crowns and have a video chat with the chosen ones?”

“The chosen ones?” asked Lika.

“Gerald, Sue, and Thomas,” said Hequa. “This is what I’ve started to call them in my thinking.”

“I like it,” said Lika. “I can probably get them to agree to a chat, but what should we say?”

“I want to make sure they understand the importance of the learning-trance, and the truth-trance,” said Hequa. “I still have mixed feelings about writing how to do those on a crystal. As you know, the trances are sacred to my people. Even if I’m the only Lowlander left, I want the trances done correctly.”

“Instructions for the trances were on Thomas’ crystal, yes?” said Lika. “Should we just conference with him, or should we video chat with all of them?”

“Let’s try Thomas by regular phone first,” said Hequa. “Can you call him? I’ll talk.”

“Okay,” said Lika, dialing the number and handing Hequa the phone.

“Hello, Thomas? This is Hequa, from Jhanya. You visited my building and filmed many things,” said Hequa into the phone.

“Yes, I’m calling about the messages you just received from the Galactic Federation,” Hequa continued. “About the learning-trance and the truth-trance. I have been using these trances for a long time. I am calling to see if you need any help with them.”

Lika walked away while Hequa talked. She lingered for a long

moment in front of the the tweeting trital's tank, found some fresh fruit on a plate nearby, and was just helping herself to a cup of coffee when Hequa called out. "Lika, I'm finished," he said.

"I am having some coffee," replied Lika. "Is it still nice up on the roof? I think we should go up there."

"Good idea," said Hequa. "You bring the coffee pot. I have a cup up there. I'll bring a computer and two E.T. crowns."

After drinking enough coffee to begin feeling its intoxicating effects, Hequa and Lika both put on their E.T crowns and called Gerald on video chat. Gerald answered right away, and got Sue and Thomas in on the call in short order. After agreeing to have the session recorded, Lika waited patiently for the chosen ones to find and put on their E.T. crowns. Once everyone visible was crowned, she took a big gulp of coffee and waited for the right words to come to her.

"You probably know already why I wanted to arrange this call," said Lika. "Even though we are from a planet that was never invited to join the Galactic Federation, Hequa and I have some knowledge of the material that has just appeared on your website, and we would both like to help the people of Earth join the Galactic Federation in any way we can."

"I'd like to just say for the record that Hequa just called me and shared some really great information on the trances written about on my crystal," said Thomas.

“Oh? What crystal is that?” asked Lika. “Your website didn’t mention any crystal.”

“Guess the cat’s out of the bag,” said Gerald. “The new material on the site comes from etched crystals that were dropped for Sue, Thomas, and I. The crystals themselves look like lab grown quartz from China, but the writing on them was English. We’re keeping their existence hush hush for now, but I see no problem with telling you two about them.”

“Crystals or no, the new information seems like it’s important,” said Lika. “Now, Hequa knows about the trances, and we both know about extra-dimensional beings. What can we do to help?”

“You know about extra-dimensional beings? What can you tell us?” asked Gerald.

“On Jhanya, these beings sometimes appear as lights or objects in the sky,” said Lika. “Other times, they appear around a person, as distortions of the normal way of things. No one knows what they truly are, but everything I have learned about Earth makes me think that such beings are as active here as they were on Jhanya.”

“Now that’s just fascinating,” said Gerald. “What do you mean by ‘distortions of the normal way of things?’”

“That depends on the person these beings get stuck to,” said Lika. “Some people merely see strange lights in the sky or space around them. Others have more unusual experiences, like time

distortions or even direct encounters with the beings' strange intelligence."

"Wow. So you're saying these beings get stuck to people?" asked Gerald. "How does that happen?"

"No one knows for sure," said Lika. "Often, there is an instability in the person, like a trauma that creates big emotions, or an important knowing that the person ignores for too long. But such people are common, and these beings are very rare. There is no way to know what they really want, or what exactly they're doing. On Jhanya, the people call them helpers, but we don't know if they're really helping, or doing something else entirely."

"Fascinating," said Gerald. "Anything to add, Hequa?"

"Yes," said Hequa. "As a Lowlander, I was taught more about these beings than the average person on Jhanya was. I was taught that they are made from unusual interactions between perception and material reality. Every year, after our largest seaweed harvest, some of my village's elders would bring some of these beings over the water to make a show for us, so it is possible to work with these beings directly. But after those elders died, no one remained to tell the story of how to do that direct interaction."

"What about the truth-trance?" asked Thomas. "Hequa, you told me that that trance can be used to find the truth of anything. Could it be used to find the truth of extra-dimensional beings?"

"Maybe," said Hequa. "If you master the learning-trance, and

then the truth-trance. But finding that answer in the truth-trance might require many years.”

“Something to aim for then,” said Thomas.

“I have a question for Lika or Hequa,” said Sue. “My crystal had a panel labeled ‘Galactic Federation Communication Protocols’. You might have read that bit on the website. Now, these communication protocols amount to dressing in a funny outfit and waving a laser at the sky, then waiting a few days to see if anything comes back. I just want to know what you make of that.”

“Have you tried doing this?” asked Lika.

“Not yet,” said Sue. “I’m still not sure where to get a suit made of ‘many objects that reflect the light’. I guess my question is, how important do you think these ‘communication protocols’ are? I mean, do you think they’re just having some fun with me?”

“Could be,” said Lika. “How would you have fun if you were the Galactic Federation?”

“I don’t know,” said Sue, bemused. “But the protocol itself implies they’re always watching. I’m not sure how I feel about that.”

Chapter 24

“**M**olly? This is Lika,” said Lika into the phone. “Want to go out drinking today? I tried calling Dave, but he won’t return my calls since our threesome.”

“Really? What a lame-o,” commented Molly. “Well, I’m up for hanging out. The usual spot?”

“Maybe somewhere else,” said Lika. “If Dave wants to avoid me, I prefer to let him be.”

“Okay, so what were you thinking?” asked Molly.

“Let’s each get bottles of something good, then walk around the city shooting things like signs and lights,” said Lika.

“Sounds like a great way to get into trouble,” said Molly. “I vote we get bottles and sneak into the sculpture park.”

“Okay,” said Lika. “But I’m bringing my pistol to shoot one of the sculptures.”

“Lika, you can’t wreck art. It’s wrong,” said Molly.

“Okay. But I’m still bringing my pistol,” said Lika. “Can you buy the bottles? I still don’t have I.D..”

“Only if you pay me back,” said Molly. “Meet at your place in two hours?”

“Yes,” said Lika. “See you then.”

Hanging up the phone, Lika looked at the device for a moment before dialing Hequa. “Hequa? This is Lika. What are you doing tonight? Want to fly your saucer to the sculpture park to help me impress my friend Molly?”

“The one here in the city?” asked Hequa. “There are too many power lines. It would be too dangerous.”

“What if you just hovered above the power lines and shined that bright light on us?” asked Lika.

“Can’t I impress your friend some other way?” asked Hequa. “What will you two be doing at that park, anyway. Doesn’t it close at night?”

“We are sneaking in,” said Lika. “Sneaking in to get drunk. And maybe go shooting.”

“That sounds very fun,” said Hequa. “What if I just met you there for drinking and shooting? Afterwards, I could show your friend the saucer parked on my roof.”

“Deal,” said Lika. “But you’ll have to bring your own bottle,

since Molly is only picking up two.”

After carefully sneaking into the park, Lika, Molly, and Hequa were quickly chased out by a flashlight wielding guard. Not yet drunk enough to sneak back in, the trio decided to walk all the way to Hequa’s place, causing what trouble they could along the way. Making their way through downtown, where small crowds spilled into the warm September night from several bars and music venues, Molly got distracted by a stage magician performing on a pedestrian mall.

“Can we get closer? I want to check him out,” said Molly.

Lika and Hequa exchanged a glance. “Molly,” said Lika. “That’s the Great Bamzini, sworn enemy of Hequa.”

“You guys are enemies?” asked Molly. “So are you trying to avoid him or something?”

“I will meet him,” said Hequa, charging towards the young magician. “Great Bamzini! Your tricks were stale one year ago, and your dog was stolen by me earlier this summer!”

“Oh my fucking god!” exclaimed the Great Bamzini, stopping the act.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” bellowed Hequa to the small crowd. “Does anyone want to see an embarrassing video of the Great Bamzini? I have a video showing him harming a dolphin in my phone.”

“Is he serious?” asked Molly. “I want to see the video!”

“I want to see the video, too,” said a man from the crowd.

“Why can’t you just leave me alone?” shouted the Great Bamzini.

“Because you still haven’t taken the video of me off your website!” shouted Hequa. “And you brought an assassin to my doorstep! If I had been less charming, she might have killed me!”

“It wasn’t your charm that saved your life,” said Lika.

“You?” said the Great Bamzini upon recognizing Lika. “God, is everyone in on this?” he asked, jumping down from his wooden crate and fleeing while his crowd began mulling around in confusion.

“So let’s see that video,” said Molly.

“Let’s watch it at my place with a big screen,” said Hequa. “I also have one of the Great Bamzini in a racist parade, and another of him giving a speech where he says not all pedophiles are bad. The Great Bamzini has not done these things, but I make videos that make it look like he has. Making these videos is one of my hobbies.”

“Lika, you have some crazy friends,” said Molly. “Let’s go check those vids out.”

The remainder of their walk across town was uneventful, save

for Lika shooting the tire of a car whose look she didn't like. As they walked, they grew drunker, until the group began operating in its own little pocket of hazy reality. By the time they reached Hequa's building, their bottles were empty, and Hequa had to try several times to punch the correct access code on the entryway keypad.

"Why did I let Sallycat make this seven digits?" lamented Hequa as he pulled the door open. "Molly, since you are new here, you can choose. Should we go to the roof or the Embassy?"

"The Embassy sounds fancy," said Molly. "How about we go there first?"

"This doesn't look like any kind of embassy," said Molly when they arrived to the fifth floor. "It just looks like some kind of artsy loft."

"It is Jhanya Embassy," said Hequa proudly. "It is also my loft. Do you want to climb on the ffassa while I set up the big screen?"

"Climb on that?" asked Molly, pointing to the large web of fungus covering a wall and most of the high ceiling. "Yeah I want to climb on that!"

"First one to the middle of the ceiling wins!" shouted Lika, who dashed quickly over to the wall to begin climbing.

"We are ready for the viewing," announced Hequa a few minutes later. "And I found a new bottle of whiskey. And some blunt. Come down here."

Disentangling themselves from the ffassa and climbing back down to the floor took Lika and Molly a minute. When they rejoined Hequa, he was holding a remote and looking at menu after menu on a large screen. "I can't find the right one for the input device," he complained.

"No worries," said Molly. "Lika told me you have a special surprise for us waiting on the roof. Maybe we could just go see that, and watch the videos later."

"Did Lika also tell you that we are aliens from another planet?" asked Hequa.

"Uh, yeah," said Molly. "She tells that to everyone at the bar whenever she gets drunk."

"It's true," admitted Lika. "I tell everyone. Some people act like I'm crazy. Some say they believe me. But I get the feeling that no one really believes me."

"I'll believe you when you show me your flying saucer," said Molly.

"Then let's just go to the roof," said Hequa, setting down the remote to lead the way.

Chapter 25

“It’s pretty dark up here. What am I supposed to be looking at?” asked Molly once they were seated on Hequa’s rooftop patio.

“It’s over there,” said Hequa, pointing to a shadowed area of rooftop. “Lika, can you pull the tarp off and show Molly the surprise?”

Lika jumped up from her seat, went over to the shadowy lump, pulled the tarp off of it, and said, “Surprise!”

“I still can’t see anything,” said Molly.

“It is more impressive in daytime,” said Hequa, getting up. “Here, I’ll power it on so you can really see.”

Making his way over to the saucer and into its cockpit, Hequa turned the aircraft’s lights on and lifted the craft to hover a few feet above the rooftop. The low, haunting whistle of the saucer’s engines rang through the night for less than a minute before Hequa set the craft down again. Turning the lights back off, Hequa climbed out of the cockpit and looked around nervously

to see if the stunt had attracted any attention. As usual, it had not, so Hequa retook his seat on the patio and lit the joint he'd been saving behind his ear.

"Holy shit!" exclaimed Molly. "You've got an actual, honest-to-god flying saucer."

"I'd let you try it, but taking off from here is too dangerous for someone who has never flown before," said Hequa.

"Hequa's saucer is cool, yes?" asked Lika. "It is the coolest flying saucer I know of."

"No shit it's cool," said Molly.

"So you are impressed?" asked Hequa. "I designed it myself. You want to see the controls? I'm very proud of the controls. I watched many movies about the future to learn how to make the controls seem futuristic."

While Hequa showed Molly the controls, Lika saw a man she didn't know emerge onto the rooftop and approach the seating area. "Hello?" said the man. "Hequa? What's going on up here?"

"Hello to you," said Lika, startling the man who hadn't yet seen her. "Hequa is showing Molly the saucer. Are you Robert? I'm Lika."

"Ahh," said Robert. "The infamous assassin Hequa's been flying missions for. Good to finally meet you. Is that a doobie you're holding? Can I see that?"

Lika laughed and handed Robert Hequa's joint. "Hequa says you are an excellent business manager," she said. "And thank you for getting me a good price for my gold pellets."

"Happy to help," said Robert. "But what's all this you're doing up here tonight. Hequa should know better than to power up the saucer like that. What if someone saw? Or heard it?"

"It is fine. No one saw," said Lika. "And if they did, what did they see? Only some lights."

"I don't know," said Robert. "You guys are playing a pretty dangerous game with that saucer. More dangerous than you even know. I've tried telling Hequa, but he won't listen to me about it. So I'm telling you now. Be very careful of those people from Through the Stars Academy. They've got serious government connections, and they might find it upsetting to learn that their recent encounters were staged by you and Hequa."

"Okay, but we're just giving them what they want," said Lika. "They were barely interested to learn that there were two real aliens on this planet. But the first mention of a Galactic Federation got them very excited. All we're doing is putting on a show that makes them want to learn the things we have to teach them."

"Alright," said Robert. "But then why the funny hats? You know, I was a card-carrying member of Through the Stars before all this started. They were doing great work on disclosure. Respectable work. So why make them wear those funny hats?"

And don't give me any nonsense about changing vibrational frequencies."

"So the hats are funny? Good," said Lika. "What else would be funny to make them do?"

"I think you're missing the point," said Robert.

"Maybe," said Lika. "But maybe it is you who is missing the point. Things like the hats are devices of psychology. They're like the special decorations on the uniforms of soldiers. They are easy to recognize, and they set people apart. Everything we are doing with Through the Stars is like this. No matter the surface appearance, there is a hidden usefulness. So why shouldn't the surface part be funny?"

"Because there are people in that organization who have made it their life's work to get the truth about UFOs out there," said Robert. "And I think they deserve a little more respect than that."

"We told them about the extra-dimensional entities," said Hequa, having returned from showing Molly the saucer to retake his seat. "And gave them instructions about how to enter into sacred trances. Robert, please pass that joint this way and stop complaining."

"Hi, I'm Molly," said Molly to Robert as she sat down.

"Robert," said Robert. "But Hequa, I'm not complaining. I'm just trying to get you and Lika here to understand what kind

of people you're dealing with. Like, what happens when they confirm those inscribed crystals came from a lab in Guangzhou? Or if someone puts it together that the saucer being used by the Galactic Federation is the same as the one that was used to visit those music festivals last year? Hequa, there's footage of you landing at those festivals. It's only a matter of time before someone figures it out."

"I wouldn't be teaching them the truth-trance if I wanted them to be fooled forever," said Hequa.

"Yes, it's all part of the plan," said Lika.

Robert laughed. "Gods, you're just like Hequa," he said. "Care to clue me in on this master plan of yours?"

"I have not seen much of this world," said Lika. "Not as much as Hequa has, anyway. But what I have seen is filled with problems. Did you know that most breakfast cereal contains sufficient pesticide residue to alter a person's hormones, and consequently their thinking? Did you know that microplastics can now be found in falling snow? Or that this country's government spends more money on war than on social programs, even as it imprisons millions of people?"

"I do know these things, and I'm not seeing your point," said Robert.

"My point is that our plan is to make it easier for people to solve these problems," said Lika. "These problems and more. By giving them zanzi leaf and teaching Hequa's Lowlander trances,

at first. Then by giving them tools to challenge the current power structure.”

Robert looked back and forth from Lika to Hequa and back again. “You can’t be serious,” he said. “Hequa? Is this why you’ve been avoiding me since you started flying those saucer missions? Has she turned you into some kind of revolutionary?”

“She has turned me into nothing,” said Hequa. “You know I have been struggling with the problems I see here. We just came up with a way to help people along in solving these problems.”

“So you guys are what? Alien revolutionaries?” asked Molly. “That’s cool.”

“It’s dangerous is what it is,” said Robert. “And you still haven’t told me what happens when Through the Stars realizes it’s been duped.”

“Our plan is to tell them they’ve been duped at their next convention,” said Hequa. “We will tell them exactly how we fooled them, and explain the alien technologies that made it possible to fool them.”

“And we will also tell them the best part,” said Lika. “That the Galactic Federation is for them to start, with the full support of Jhanya’s representatives here on Earth.”

“To the trekkie revolution!” shouted Molly before imbibing a mighty sip of Hequa’s whiskey.

“Yes!” said Lika. “That’s the kind of enthusiasm we need. Not the questions and doubts of Robert.”

“He’s helping,” said Hequa. “If we had more people helping like him, our job would be much easier. And revolution is not the goal at all. We just want people to make the world better.”

“Thanks,” said Robert. “But I’m still way fuzzy on your plan. What’s your timeline?”

“Through the Stars Academy will learn the truth in October, during its convention in New Mexico,” said Hequa. “After that, we will just have to wait and see.”

Chapter 26

“**H**equa! I love it!” exclaimed Lika when Hequa pulled the tarp off of her new flying saucer.

“Good,” said Hequa. “With this, I want you to be done with threats of killing me.”

“Okay,” said Lika, marveling at her new yellow and black saucer. “Show me how to work the controls?”

Hequa walked Lika through the controls, pointing out the switches for the integrated voice modification system, loud-speaker, lights, and signals disruptor. “The throttle is here, and directional controls are done with this joystick,” he said. “Now, tell me everything I just told you. We’ll keep practicing until you have it all ready in your memory.”

Lika learned the machine quickly. In a few hours, she was able to gently lift off and land on Hequa’s rooftop. Within days, she was able to fly a circle around the city without hitting anything and then come back to land safely. After that, Lika and Hequa practiced together, learning to coordinate their movements well enough to make their upcoming stunt in New Mexico into

something plausible.

When Through the Stars Academy's UFO convention began, Robert was already on site, having driven to the hotel on the outskirts of Taos where the event was taking place. The plan called for the saucers to land just outside the hotel's dining hall in the middle of breakfast on the convention's second day. Robert's job was to watch for the saucers out the dining hall's floor-to-ceiling windows, and to draw attention to them when they appeared.

"Look at that! What is it?" exclaimed Robert as the first flying saucer came into view. "Is that a drone? Wait! There are two of them. Everybody, look!"

Dozens of convention-goers looked out the windows, then stood up when they saw the saucers approaching. Many began filming with their phones. Several people raced outside, and Robert joined these. By the time the saucers stopped overhead, a small crowd had gathered where the hotel's property met the desert. As the saucers hovered above, everyone's phones and cameras stopped working. And as the crafts landed gently on the sand, Lika and Hequa both opened their cockpits and climbed out to greet the crowd.

"Hello, people of Earth," announced Lika. "It is I, Lika from the planet Jhanya. And Hequa, also from Jhanya. We have come here today to tell you that we are the ones who have been masquerading as emissaries of the Galactic Federation."

"Using technologies from our home planet, we were able to

fool you very easily into believing in the Galactic Federation,” announced Hequa. “Please do not be upset. Our only intention was to increase your understanding.”

“But my camera just stopped working!” shouted someone in the crowd. “Interfering with electronic devices violates FCC rules!”

“And those aircraft don’t look legal!” shouted someone else. “You’re sure as shit not allowed to just land them here!”

“What do you mean fool us?” shouted Robert. “Why go to all the trouble of fooling us just to come clean about it now?”

“Those of you who are learning the truth-trance would have learned the truth soon enough,” said Hequa. “The trances, and the plant we gave you, and the statements we claimed came from the Galactic Federation are all powerful tools you can use to advance human understanding.”

As Hequa spoke, Lika saw a sheriff’s SUV come around the hotel to approach the scene. “We will tell you more later,” she announced. “But now, we must depart!”

Lifting off, Lika and Hequa each fastened their flight suits’ breathing masks in place and sped home as quickly as they could. Rather than risk a daytime landing on Hequa’s building, they came down in the unused parking lot of an out-of-business big box store where Hequa’s friend and employee Sallycat was waiting with a rented van. There, they disassembled the saucers, placing their parts in eight large duffel bags, and drove the van

to Hequa's place. Loading the duffel bags into a secret storage area Hequa had installed underneath his basement's floor, the trio proceeded up to Hequa's loft, where the amateur pilots ate fruit and nuts while Sallycat called Robert on speaker.

"Sallycat?" asked Robert. "Is the, uh, business meeting you've been in with Hequa and Lika all morning still going on?"

"Yes, Robert," said Sallycat. "I'm just calling because we need the wisdom of Hequa's business manager. Sorry to interrupt your convention. How's it going there, anyway?"

"Well, we've had some excitement," said Robert. "I won't bore you with the details, but we had some unauthorized aircraft land at the hotel, which stirred things up some. It was nothing major, and the sheriff lost interest right away, but I get the feeling some of the people around here are going to be writing letters to their editors about it. Especially since no one seems to have been able to get a picture of these crafts or who was flying them up close. Was there something specific you wanted to ask?"

"Oh yeah," said Sallycat. "Have you finished setting up Lika's company, so she can do business with us without having a social?"

"Sure did," said Robert. "It's in the blue folder next to the coffee pot."

"Thanks, Robert. You're the best," said Sallycat.

“Did we do it?” asked Lika when the line went dead. “Are we a success?”

“Sounds like it,” said Hequa. “But why don’t I make some coffee while you call your UFO people to make sure.”

“I’ll try to set up a video chat, so they can see all of us,” said Lika.

A few minutes later, Lika had Gerald and Sue up on Hequa’s big screen. “Boy am I glad you called, Lika,” said Gerald. “Hopefully, you can clear some big things up for us.”

“Oh?” said Lika. “What big things are those?”

“Lika, did you and Hequa there fly into our convention this morning?” asked Gerald.

“We have video evidence showing that we have been in a business meeting here in Minneapolis from morning until now,” said Lika.

“Well, there are dozens of witnesses that put you two down here a few hours ago,” said Gerald.

“I saw you here with my own eyes,” said Sue.

“How interesting,” said Lika. “What if we were there? And we told you something very important? What if we had to tell you this important thing in this special way, but didn’t want to get into trouble for it?”

“Lika, do you and your friend Hequa have working flying saucers?” asked Gerald.

“We might,” said Lika. “We have many amazing things. But most of these things must be kept secret from your government and others who would threaten us.”

“I ... see,” said Gerald.

“Wait. You say you’re in Minneapolis right now?” asked Sue. “How did you get from here to there in under four hours in those tiny saucers?”

“We are from the planet Jhanya,” said Hequa. “Our ways are a mystery.”

“Oh, just cut the crap,” said Sue. “You used draath crystals like the one I studied as your power source. Didn’t you?”

“What if we did?” asked Lika. “Would that change the importance of the message that was delivered?”

“Ahh, the message,” said Sue. “You show up in UFOs to tell us there is no Galactic Federation? That message leaves me wondering what the point of all your stunts could possibly be.”

“Maybe the point was to create a way for our alien technologies to be shared safely,” said Lika. “On Jhanya, these things we would share all come with structures in peoples’ thinking and in social organizations — structures that prevent the technologies from being used in wrong ways. Maybe we want to make such

structures here so we can share what we know without it being put to bad uses.”

“Incredible,” said Gerald. “That’s a perspective that would never have occurred to me.”

“That might just make sense,” said Sue. “I guess I’d hate to see what would happen if one of your draath crystals was made into a weapon.”

“Do you know what I hope?” asked Lika. “I hope that you can make the Galactic Federation from a hilarious hoax into a real thing capable of guiding wise action.”

“An hilarious hoax?” said Sue. “You had me dressed in a hat made of copper and crystals, waving a laser around in the sky, trying to contact extraterrestrials.”

“What part of that is not hilarious?” asked Lika.

Chapter 27

As autumn turned to winter, Hequa put Lika on the payroll as Jhanya Embassy's official ambassador to Earth. In this capacity, she began holding weekly livestreamed video chats with the leadership of Through the Stars Academy. Following Lika's lead, everyone in these chats wore an E.T. crown, knowing full well that the hats had nothing to do with raising vibrations. They were just copper hats with crystal dangles, sold by only one company online, which Lika had a financial interest in.

Early on in these chats, Lika answered question after question about the technologies and history of Jhanya, and the crowd from Through The Stars stopped complaining about being tricked by her and Hequa. When the conversation gradually shifted to the finer points of the learning-trance and the truth-trance, Hequa joined in the chats to share his expertise. Having not used these trances herself, Lika joined with the people of Earth in learning to enter these trances from Hequa's instructions. By springtime, she found a revelation in the truth-trance, and decided to share it with Through the Stars Academy while it was still fresh in her mind.

“I found an important truth in the trance,” said Lika once the weekly chat’s greetings were finished. “Would you like me to share?”

“Please do,” said Gerald.

“Okay,” said Lika. “Well, you know that people from Jhanya came to Earth about eight hundred years ago. They came to Earth near the place called Stonehenge and returned to Jhanya, which is how Hequa and I knew there was an inhabited planet here.”

“Yes,” said Gerald. “Some of us think your people are responsible for some of the old tales of magic from that part of the world.”

“Right, but that’s not the important part,” said Lika. “The important part is the person who flew to Earth and back from Jhanya. His name was Yanhtorek. The important part is that Yanhtorek lived for almost nine hundred years, although six hundred of those years were spent in stasis.”

“That’s hard to believe,” said Sue.

“Normally, the people of Jhanya live four or five hundred years, total,” said Lika. “Now Hequa and I are both over four hundred years old. But because we’ve lived three hundred of those years in stasis, we may yet have two or three hundred years of life left, here on Earth.”

“That’s astounding,” said Gerald. “Just astounding.”

“Maybe, but it frightens me,” said Lika. “So I carried this fear into the truth-trance, and saw the true shape of this fear. And do you know what I saw? I saw your planet, and your people. I saw that my fear was for you, not me. It was the fear of losing you to short lifespans, and of losing the planet’s health to the foolishness that such short lifespans seem to produce. So now, knowing the true face of this fear, I share it with you.”

“Okay, wow,” said Thomas. “But I thought the truth-trance was for getting rid of fears?”

“Is it?” asked Lika. “Hequa told me it was for revealing the truth, no matter what this truth might be, by making sure all thoughts are correctly proportioned.”

“Right,” said Thomas. “But isn’t fear just, like, an illusion in a universe made of love?”

Lika giggled. “No more than my face on your screen is an illusion,” she said. “Fear is just a signal, and the truth-trance helped me to interpret this signal in a better way.”

“Okay, but what are we supposed to do with that?” asked Gerald.

“I was just sharing,” said Lika. “But I do have a hope that your organization might be able to help.”

“Well, what are you thinking?” asked Sue.

“I’m thinking of the many things that can change in three hundred years,” said Lika. “Fields can become forests, or

wastelands. Groups like governments and companies can transform completely, or disappear, or carry on regardless of time. People can carry on traditions or set off on new paths. In the time I've been away from Jhanya, there is no doubt that many things have changed. But here, now, there are many things I see changing in your world that trouble me, for these things will make your planet less habitable for me in a mere hundred years or less."

"That makes some sense," said Sue. "But really, how can we help?"

"Through the Stars Academy was made to get the truth out there," said Lika. "Well, you have the truth about two aliens, Hequa and I, and you have the truth about some of our most important alien technologies, like zanzi leaf, and the trances. I know you are sharing these things that you're learning, but I wonder if there's a better way to get it out there that Earth still needs to be a good place in a hundred years?"

"We could certainly try," said Gerald. "I mean, we're all in agreement about that. But what exactly were you thinking?"

"You know the first panel of those crystals we dropped?" asked Lika. "The one that said 'Start Here'? That panel sums up my and Hequa's thinking on what the people of Earth would be wise to do. As for what I would like to see Through the Stars Academy do, I would like to see you begin sharing the idea that it is wrong for people to remote-control places and each other. Right now, too many people are remote-controlled, and there is no way to make the world better while the controllers have

all of the power.”

“Lika, we’ve heard you talk before about the remote-control thing,” said Sue. “But if I’ve got your meaning, you’re asking our organization to speak out against something so common that it seems perfectly natural to most people. Is that what I’m hearing here?”

“Yes,” said Lika. “The whole idea of remote-controlling buildings and property is madness. So is having an office that controls many stores, and having people who control others at a distance using money or threats of force. Surely you see how this madness makes it impossible for the world to get better, by making it impossible for most people to do better things than they are currently able to do. So why not use your organization to help change that?”

“That is a bit outside our purview,” said Gerald. “I mean, I suppose we could issue some kind of statement in support of the material from your ‘Start Here’ panel. But, practically speaking, there’s not a lot we can really do.”

“A statement is a start,” said Lika. “But what if you also agree to not be remote-controllers yourselves?”

“What would that entail?” asked Sue. “I have rental properties in Georgia and Florida. Does that make me a big bad remote-controller?”

“Maybe,” said Lika. “Do people pay you and pay you without ever earning the right to call their places their own?”

“Well, yes,” said Sue. “It’s a legitimate income stream.”

“I’m not sure what that means,” said Lika. “Can anyone have such an income stream, regardless of how much money they have?”

“Well, no,” said Sue. “But lots of people have rental properties. And I for one won’t be bullied for it. I’m certainly not giving up my income just to make some kind of statement for Through the Stars.”

“No one is asking you to,” said Gerald. “Are they, Lika?”

“It was just an idea,” said Lika. “Sue, if you want to keep being a remote-controller, that is your choice. But I see no way forward to a better world so long as the remote-controllers are in power.”

“So what exactly would you have me do?” asked Sue. “Those rental properties are my whole retirement plan. And I don’t think there’s a thing wrong with it, or with charging people rents for that matter. Lika, I’m sorry, but you’re way off base here.”

“The information Hequa has shared with me suggests that the ownership of homes has fallen sharply in this country in the last twenty years,” said Lika. “It suggests that banks own a disproportionate share of homes, and that the price of rents has risen sharply while incomes have remained stagnant. If the world is to become better, people need to be free to make it better, and they are not free to do so if they have to keep paying and paying remote-controllers just to have a place to

sleep. Sorry, Sue, but I am on base. Though I understand now that you see things differently.”

“Lika, what you’re talking about sounds political,” said Gerald. “And our organization is strictly educational, not political. Let’s try and keep to relevant subjects.”

“Okay,” said Lika. “Housing on Jhanya is free. Even after The Order came to power, it was seen as a basic right, like food or medicine, or access to communication systems. After The Order came to power, there started to be some regulation of these things, but even then, The Order never tried to say that houses could be remote-controlled. I wonder, would Through the Stars be able to educate people about how housing worked on Jhanya?”

“I think the report we got from Hequa called ‘Housing on Jhanya’ covers that in as much detail as we need,” said Sue flatly. “Anyone can download that report from our website, so I say we move on.”

“I will move on,” said Lika. “My dog walker is almost here, and I wish to have sex with him before he walks Little Bamzini. So I’m hanging up.”

Chapter 28

Having lied about her dog walker's impending visit purely to avoid further conversation with Sue, Lika called Hequa to ask him about the 'Housing on Jhanya' report. When the call went to voicemail, Lika collected Little Bamzini, and took the dog out into the bright spring day. As she neared the coffee shop that allowed dogs, Hequa called back and agreed to meet her. By the time Hequa arrived, Lika was sitting at a table on the sidewalk with her dog, halfway through a cup of coffee.

"Is this urgent, or should I get a coffee, too?" asked Hequa in greeting.

"Get some coffee," said Lika. "I have something to talk about, but there is no rush."

"Okay," said Hequa after visiting the shop for his beverage. "So what's this about?"

"It's about a few things," said Lika. "But it starts with what I learned from a truth-trance. I learned that I will probably live at least another hundred years here, and that the people of this

world seem determined to make this world unlivable by then.”

“Ahh,” said Hequa. “I came to a similar realization when I first arrived here. I understand this to be a difficult thing to accept.”

“So you just accepted it?” asked Lika.

“No. Of course not,” said Hequa. “Why do you think I built my flying saucer? I wanted to try and offer the people of Earth some guidance from beyond their world. Guidance they could accept.”

“Is that why you’ve been helping me with Through the Stars Academy?” asked Lika. “I thought you were just doing it for fun.”

“I am doing it for fun,” said Hequa. “Trying to help the Earth people be less foolish is fun for me.”

“Well, I didn’t have fun with it today,” said Lika. “Today, everything was going fine in my regular video chat with Through the Stars, but then Sue got mad at me for suggesting that it’s wrong for people to remote-control each other.”

Hequa laughed. “Did she get mad, or just disagree?” he asked.

“A little of both,” said Lika. “Did you give them a report called ‘Housing on Jhanya?’”

“Oh yes,” said Hequa. “I had Sallycat help me. We put together a very nice document that compares housing on Jhanya to

housing on Earth. If you look at it, I would love to know what you think.”

“I will look at it,” said Lika. “But what happened in the chat meeting today was that Sue said Through the Stars shouldn’t do anything about the remote-controllers because it was enough to have your housing report available for download.”

“I see,” said Hequa. “What about Gerald and Thomas? What did they say?”

“Thomas was quiet. I think he agrees with me,” said Lika. “Gerald seemed, I don’t know, afraid to take sides?”

“Try not to make it about sides,” said Hequa. “You know, they are mostly just doing their group for fun. I think they are all sincerely looking for the truth, but some truths are outside of what their thinking will allow them to accept.”

“That makes sense,” said Lika. “The truth of the damage remote-controllers do to society seemed unacceptable to Sue, because she gets money from remote-controlling homes.”

“What a strange problem this is,” said Hequa. “All we’ve done with this group has been to share with them truths that they say they want to know. Even when we tricked them to do this, our goal was always simple sharing. But now, I wonder if your goal has changed from sharing to something else?”

“Maybe it has,” said Lika. “At first, I thought that just sharing was enough. But now, after considering my own lifespan in

the truth-trance, I am starting to feel like there should be more to it. It is like I secretly expected some response to all we've shared — some action — and now that I see that there will be no response beyond more talking, I am disappointed."

"Hmm," said Hequa, idly scratching Little Bamzini's head. "What do you know of the politics of this country we're in?"

"Not much," said Lika. "I know it is a class system, where tax rules place a disproportionate burden on the lower classes. I know military spending and interest payments to financial firms are too much of the government's budget. I know millions of people are locked in cages or are remote-controlled by legal authorities. And that there are two political parties that maintain a strong rivalry. Is that what you mean?"

"Yes, about the parties with a rivalry," said Hequa. "One of these parties works to weaken government protection of public resources while reducing every decision to a contest of tribal power. The other party works to strengthen government protection of public resources while reducing every communication process to a contested intersection of special interests with narrow policy objectives."

"Really?" asked Lika, mulling that over. "Okay, why is that important here?"

"Because, even though it might not feel political, these stupid parties have made everything in this country political," said Hequa.

"I don't follow," said Lika.

"The people here have no power over most parts of their lives," explained Hequa. "Most can not even imagine the possibility of changing the world directly with the power that they do have. So they instead imagine that they have power in the political realm, though this is clearly not the case. They then adopt the character of their favored party in their everyday lives, transforming all of their decisions into imagined political decisions, so as to pretend like they have political power that they do not, in fact, have."

"That's the craziest thing I've ever heard," said Lika. "But what does this have to do with Through the Stars Academy?"

"A few things," said Hequa. "There may be politics in Sue's mind that prevent her from really hearing about the problem of remote-controllers. Because both parties promote the idea that people should be enslaved by an elite class of remote-controllers, there is no way to know precisely what her thinking is, but her shutting you down strikes me as a political move, regardless of parties. Also, with an organization like Through the Stars Academy, there may be secret politics at play that we don't know about. These could have to do with funding, or people, or something else. The point is, it might be that you've just found the limits of the organization's usefulness."

"Watch Little Bamzini while I get more coffee?" asked Lika.

"Yes. Get me another one too," said Hequa.

“So if I’m hearing you right, I should just give up on Through the Stars if I want to see some action?” asked Lika once she returned with the coffees.

“Maybe give up on trying to understand them,” said Hequa. “But I feel we are doing good using them as a tool for sharing information about Jhanya.”

“So ... what?” asked Lika. “I should just accept that Sue is a remote-controller who won’t let progress happen?”

“Yes,” said Hequa. “Accept that, keep having fun with them, and find another way to tell people about the problem of remote-controllers.”

“Okay,” said Lika. “I do still find it funny to see us all in our copper hats when we video chat.”

“Good,” said Hequa. “If talking with them becomes too bothersome, just let me know and I’ll find some new job to pay you for.”

Chapter 29

Walking home with Little Bamzini, her thoughts pleasantly distorted by coffee intoxication, Lika thought about Hequa's take on the politics at play in *Through the Stars Academy*. Although she had come to trust Hequa's perspective on such matters, she wondered if something important had been left out of the conversation. By the time she reached her house, Lika decided she needed more information, and called Sue directly. "Sue? This is Lika," she said when Sue picked up. "Do you have a few minutes to talk?"

"Is it about this remote-controller business?" asked Sue.

"In a way," said Lika. "Sue, I feel like I started bumping into invisible politics during our video chat today. It seemed like you took offense to my ideas, and did so in a way that made it impossible for me to correct the situation. I'm calling now to see if you can help me avoid doing this in the future."

"Boy, you really are from another planet," said Sue. "Look, I took offense because you made my livelihood out to be the bad guy. You suggested that people like me are a big bad problem that needs to be solved, and made it seem like I should apologize

for being myself, which I'm never going to do."

"Okay," said Lika. "I wasn't trying to make you feel any way. But I do see this Earth habit of remote-controlling one another as a problem. The habit is just so different from how things worked on Jhanya. I understand now that it is how you get your money, and don't want you to feel that threatened. But I still think remote-controlling people is wrong. I wonder, is there a way for us to talk about it without getting offended?"

"Probably not," said Sue. "Just knowing that you think it's wrong offends me. And having you bring it up in Through the Stars offends me more."

"But one of the most important things I have to offer the group is the perspective of someone from a planet where people and places are not remote-controlled," said Lika. "Are you saying you want me to quit the group?"

"Lika, the technologies and information you've shared with us are extremely valuable," said Sue. "But there's a whole lot about our world that you just don't seem to get. Personally, I hope you keep working with us. But if you do, I hope you can get better at respecting your elders."

In spite of herself, Lika laughed. "Sue, I am hundreds of years old," she said. "When you were born, I was already in a spaceship headed for Earth. You are not my elder, but I can respect you and your choices. Is there a way for our disagreements to be made small while the big work of Through the Stars Academy continues?"

“Sure, if you stop attacking my way of life,” said Sue. “And stop trying to get our group to adopt your personal philosophy.”

“I will try,” said Lika, hanging up.

After snacking on fruit and sunflower seeds, Lika tried calling Gerald, but couldn't get through. She then tried Thomas, and was again sent to voicemail. Finally, not wanting to just sit in her kitchen alone, she called Molly, who picked up on the second ring.

“Hey stranger,” said Molly. “I was beginning to think you'd forgotten about me.”

“I remember about you,” said Lika. “Do you want to go out for food and drinking?”

“Sure, but let's not go to Boodles,” said Molly. “I want to go somewhere nicer, especially if you're buying.”

“Select the place and I can buy,” said Lika.

“Pick you up in half an hour?” asked Molly.

Forty minutes later, Lika and Molly arrived at the restaurant and were taken to a booth.

“I like the arts on the walls,” said Lika after their drinks were ordered.

“You know it's just 'art', right?” said Molly. “Not arts?”

“But each one is its own single art,” said Lika. “Why shouldn’t many of these be called ‘arts’?”

“Hey, I don’t make the rules,” said Molly.

“Right. Well who does?” asked Lika. “Who does make the rules?”

“I don’t know,” said Molly. “Not with this kind of rule, anyway.”

“Yes, well, how would you feel about breaking some rules?” asked Lika.

“Let me guess. You want to go shooting after we eat,” said Molly.

“Not exactly,” said Lika. “I mean, yes to the shooting. But I was talking about something else. I need help with my flying saucer.”

“The one you used to mess with those UFO people?” asked Molly. “Is that what you want me to help you with?”

“No, this isn’t about the UFO people,” said Lika. “It’s about me getting tired of having many skills that I’m not using. And having a flying saucer that’s just sitting in duffel bags in Hequa’s storage instead of being used.”

“Okay,” said Molly. “So what can I do to help?”

“You can help me get my saucer from Hequa’s building,” said Lika. “And you can help me make a good landing place for it in my back yard. The vehicle is less than nine feet across,

so making a landing place surrounded by garden in my yard should be possible.”

“Hauling shit and landscaping, huh?” said Molly. “That might cost you more than a nice dinner.”

“Oh? What will it cost me?” asked Lika.

“I don’t know, but something big,” said Molly. “Some big favor, and I’ll let you know when I think of it.”

As Hequa was indisposed, Sallycat met Lika and Molly to help them retrieve Lika’s saucer from its storage place beneath Hequa’s building. Sallycat seemed bothered by Lika’s reluctance to say how exactly the aircraft would be used, but helped them nonetheless. By the time Lika and Molly made it to Lika’s house with the disassembled craft, it was getting late, so they just dropped the bags in the house and set out to find a suitable place to go shooting. They ended up in the alley behind Boodles, shooting their favorite dumpster.

“Lika, are you fucking serious right now?” asked Dave when he came out the back door into the alley for a cigarette. “How many times do I have to tell you? You’re going to get in trouble shooting here.”

“You’ve told me many times,” said Lika, pulling a swig from a bottle of whiskey with one hand while firing off two more shots with the other. “But we are not drinking at Boodles. See? We have our own bottle.”

“That ... actually makes it worse,” said Dave. “Can’t you find somewhere less — I don’t know — less populated to go shooting?”

“If you want to shoot, you have to drink,” said Molly. “That’s the rule. You can only shoot while drinking.”

“I’m sorry but this is just too dangerous,” said Dave. “Lika, someone is going to get hurt if you don’t stop this.”

“Who should get hurt?” asked Lika. “Would you rather I use my pistol for assassination, like I was trained to do? Who is good to kill, Dave? Tell me that and we’ll go right now.”

“I’m not telling you who to kill,” said Dave. “Not that there aren’t plenty of people out there who deserve it.”

“Spoken like someone who is no fun at all,” said Molly, grabbing the whiskey from Lika.

“Jesus, you two are perfect for each other,” said Dave, opening the door to return to the bar. “I’m going in. Just be careful out here, okay?”

“Bye, Dave,” said Molly, as she sent two more pellets through the dumpster they were targeting.

“Come back if you think of who I should assassinate,” said Lika.

Chapter 30

Lika and Molly spent the next day creating a saucer landing pad in Lika's back yard. After visiting a big hardware store for supplies, they pressed a ring of garden walkway lights into the ground to form a circle ten feet in diameter, moved Lika's compost pile to keep it clear of the landing zone, and made a small wall of twigs and mud to protect Lika's zanzi seedlings from the bursts of wind that would accompany her craft's takeoffs and landings.

"This is more fun than I've had in, like, forever," said Molly as they put Lika's new hose away after washing up. "But you still haven't told me where you're going to fly."

"Wherever I fly, now I have a good landing place to come back to," said Lika.

"That's not an answer," said Molly. "Hey, are we going to actually put the saucer together? I want to see how it looks here."

Lika considered the prospect. "Yes," she said. "Let's put it together on the landing pad, then take pictures of us in it for the internet."

With both of them working, it took about two hours to put the flying saucer together. Most of this time was not spent on construction, but on Molly's many questions about the aircraft and its capabilities. Once the yellow and black flying saucer was assembled, Lika and Molly took turns in the cockpit, taking pictures of each other with their phones.

"Hey, what's this switch here?" asked Molly. "The one marked 'N, F, M, R'?"

"It's the loudspeaker control," said Lika. "The speaker can sound like your normal voice, a soothing female voice, a soothing male voice, or a neutral robot voice."

"Cool," said Molly. "Does it have a tractor beam?"

"What's a tractor beam?" asked Lika.

"A beam of light that pulls objects into it," said Molly. "You know, a tractor beam."

"That's not a real thing," said Lika. "But it does have a signals disruptor, to stop nearby electronic devices from working."

"Like your little Star Trek disruptor thing?" asked Molly.

"My signals disruptor is from Jhanya, not Star Trek," said Lika.

"Same thing," said Molly. "Can we turn it on so I can hear myself in robot voice?"

“Okay, but let me push all the buttons,” said Lika, moving to manipulate the saucer’s controls. “There. Just speak into the microphone when you’re ready.”

“Puny Earthlings, your zanzi wall will never withstand my wind,” said Molly in a robot voice, causing Lika to burst into laughter.

“I will take all your clothes and shred them for an uncomfortable sleeping nest,” said Molly in robot voice.

“I told you, my nest just needs to be raked and fluffed up,” said Lika defensively. “That’s why I bought two rakes at the hardware store. One for the garden, and one for the nest.”

“Just messing with you,” said Molly as she climbed out of the cockpit.

“Fine,” said Lika. “Make sure to latch the cockpit dome on your way out.”

“So what’s this really for?” asked Molly once she was standing on the ground next to Lika. “You still haven’t told me.”

“Maybe it is just that I envy your cars, and want a vehicle of my own next to my house,” said Lika.

“So why not just get a car?” asked Molly.

“Because my only identity is a corporation set up by Hequa’s people for me to receive money and property,” said Lika. “I

can't get a car license, because I have no real identity."

"Pretty sure you could still get a car," said Molly. "You'd just have to make sure you never get pulled over."

"It is much harder to get pulled over in a flying saucer than it is to get pulled over in a car," said Lika.

"Right, but I'm pretty sure the saucer would get you into more trouble," said Molly. "Anyway, I'm not trying to knock your choices, here. I'm just curious about what you have planned."

"This is my plan," said Lika, gesturing to the saucer. "Some people have tables in their gardens. Some people have fountains, and dense shrubberies. I want there to be a working flying saucer in my garden. That is all of my plan."

"So you're not even going to take it out for a spin on occasion?" asked Molly.

"If it had room for two people, we could take it out, just for fun," said Lika. "But there is room for only one person, and I want it for more than just fun. I want to use it to visit faraway places. Places people normally fly to."

"Oh yeah?" asked Molly. "Like where?"

"Tonight, I may fly to Thunder Bay," said Lika.

"Huh. Why there?" asked Molly.

“I like the name, and it is not too far of a trip,” said Lika. “I can make it there and back while it is dark out.”

“Okay,” said Molly. “What exactly would you do there?”

“Maybe just find people to talk to in robot voice,” said Lika.

Chapter 31

“**H**equa? It’s Lika,” said Lika into the phone. “I’ve had it with these Earth people. How have you managed to live among them for so long?”

“Hello, Lika,” said Hequa. “As you know, I consume intoxicants on a regular basis. This makes things easier.”

“I’ve tried that,” said Lika. “Just today, I’ve consumed three cups of coffee. But I haven’t found any new insight that makes this planet seem less crazy.”

“Is this about Through the Stars Academy?” asked Hequa.

“No,” said Lika. “I stopped doing weekly chats with them because Sue is too much of a remote-controller. But this isn’t about them. It’s about everything.”

“Sometimes the problem can be the place,” said Hequa. “Have you tried going other places in your saucer?”

“Yes,” said Lika. “I’ve been to several other states, and a few other countries. But Earth people are Earth people, and I am

tired of them.”

“I don’t believe you can be tired of seven billion people,” said Hequa. “Have you tried the truth-trance?”

“Yes, and that’s part of the problem,” said Lika. “The truth-trance just keeps showing me all of the ways that the world is wrong, without showing me how to fix it.”

“The truth-trance does not show problems. Only opportunities,” said Hequa. “Every problem it shows is an opportunity to relate with the world in a new way.”

“But what of the remote-controllers?” asked Lika. “The truth-trance showed me how big of a problem they are, and showed me that the people who are the biggest problem are impossible for a person like me to get close to. How can I solve a problem that I can’t even get close to?”

“Maybe you can not,” said Hequa. “The people in charge of this world are impossible to reach, and will not change their ways no matter what people like us might do.”

“So your advice is to just give up?” asked Lika, exasperated.

“Maybe,” said Hequa. “But there is more that can be done.”

“Like what?” asked Lika.

“Have you seen that garments made of ffassa are now in some clothing stores?” asked Hequa. “Unlike garments made of

synthetic fibers, these ffassa clothes do not shed microplastics when they are washed. Finding manufacturers willing to switch to ffassa is part of my contribution to a solution.”

“Great, but how is that supposed to help me?” asked Lika.

“Maybe it wasn’t the best example,” said Hequa. “But the point is that there are problems we can help to solve.”

“What if I want to solve the problem of money?” asked Lika.

“Ha!” said Hequa. “This is a problem that some Earth people seem well on their way to solving.”

“Really?” asked Lika. “How do you mean?”

“Well, the big problem of money is that governments only accept national currencies for tax payments,” said Hequa. “And that problem, like all of the other problems with taxation, won’t be solved anytime soon. But the small problem of money, the problem of its artificial scarcity, is being solved right now by forms of money called cryptocurrencies.”

“I’ve heard of those,” said Lika. “Dave has talked about them sometimes. But I don’t see why they’re important.”

“Because they are money without the structurally corrupt banking system,” said Hequa. “They can be created by anyone, and used for any purpose. I even met a person at the coffee shop who created a token called Rstory, designed for making the world better, which trades on the Bitshares DEX as RUSTY.”

“Okay,” said Lika. “But that doesn’t mean anything to me. How does that help me solve the problem of money being distributed unfairly?”

Hequa laughed. “This world is not like Jhanya, where The Order invented money and then distributed it according to its own standards of fairness,” he said. “There is a concept here, called ‘universal basic income’, which is similar to what The Order did. But this concept is considered to be very politically radical, and no one in government takes it seriously.”

“Forget the politics,” said Lika. “You know I have no political identity. I want to know what I can actually do to make a change.”

“Maybe the change you need to make is to accept your circumstances,” said Hequa. “We are both trapped here in this backwards world. But I have accepted this place as my home. Is this a reality you are still fighting against?”

“Maybe,” said Lika. “But I still don’t see why I should have to accept the rules of these people. It is like their rules were all made out of fear of bad things, and their fear of bad things made the world into too limited a place for anything good to happen.”

“It is like that,” said Hequa. “It is exactly like that. But so what? At least here, people can speak out against the rulers without The Order sending soldiers to silence them.”

“I think people can speak out here only because the rulers know that speaking out accomplishes nothing,” said Lika.

“Maybe,” said Hequa. “But if that’s the way it is, what does that mean for you?”

“It means I can stay silent, or say anything at all, and the result will be the same,” said Lika.

“If this is hard for you, maybe your first problem is that you’re feeling unimportant,” said Hequa. “Most Earth people are unimportant, so you could try seeing this feeling as a way to connect with the people here.”

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard,” said Lika. “I don’t care if I’m important or not. I just want to be done with the insanity of money and remote-controllers and Dave being mad at me for shooting in the alley behind Boodles. I want to fly my saucer without neighbors telling me it is too noisy. But they do tell me this, and they threaten to call the cops. If cops come, what do I tell them? That I’m from another planet and have no Earth identity? Hequa, I need an identity!”

Chapter 32

Two hours before dawn, Lika landed her flying saucer in her backyard and opened the cockpit. Having spent the previous day in a pub near Stonehenge, she was tired, and was thinking only of her nest as she climbed out of the aircraft and stepped out into the garden. Moving towards the house, she felt something amiss. But before she could react to the feeling, someone shined a flashlight on her face.

“Lika Jhanya!” bellowed a voice behind the flashlight. “Put your hands in the air. You’re under arrest.”

Lika felt time slow as she listened to the small movements of the people around her. Once she knew their positions, she kicked hard and fast, sending the flashlight in her eyes flying off into the night. With three more kicks and a punch, she put out another flashlight, and subdued her two assailants.

“You’re going down for this,” complained the man who had told Lika to put her hands up.

“For what? What is the problem with stopping the people who attack me in my yard at night?” asked Lika. “Here, let me help

you up.”

“Listen lady, we found your dog,” said the grumbling officer. “The dog you stole has a chip in it, and we found the dog earlier today, tied up back here. You’re in a mess of trouble.”

“Little Bamzini?” asked Lika. “This is about Little Bamzini? Well, I didn’t steal him. I was admiring him at the dog park, and then later someone left him for me on my porch. I don’t know who left him, since he was alone when I found him.”

“But you call the animal ‘Little Bamzini,’” said the officer who had previously been silent. “You know his owner goes by the ‘Great Bamzini’, don’t you?”

“That’s why I named him that,” said Lika. “If Great Bamzini wanted to give me his dog, the least I could do was name the dog after him.”

“You thought the dog was a gift?” asked the grumbler.

“Yes. But what I can’t figure out is why you’d be waiting for me in my garden in the middle of the night,” said Lika. “Isn’t this the kind of thing that could wait until morning? And why aren’t you talking on your radios like crazy right now?”

“Well, see we uh, got a tip that you’d be back here at this time,” said the grumbler.

“Wait. Where are your guns?” asked Lika. “Are you fake cops sent by the Great Bamzini?”

“Technically, we’re actors,” said the mostly silent one. “And we’re not at liberty to discuss who our client is.”

“Well, I have a gun,” said Lika, pulling out her pistol. “And both of you together are no match for me. Go ahead and take my dog back to the Great Bamzini, if that’s what you need to do.”

“But,” argued the grumbler. “But we just saw you land that flying saucer here, in this residential neighborhood. Like, what’s up with that?”

“Not your business is what’s up with that,” said Lika. “Now you can either leave, or leave after I give you more of a beating.”

“Fuck this. Let’s get out of here, Jim,” said the grumbler.

Lika didn’t sleep well with Little Bamzini gone, but she did sleep well into the afternoon. When she woke, she heard Teddy in the entryway calling for the dog. Getting up, Lika went to tell the dog walker that he no longer had a job to do. Teddy took the news harder than she expected.

“Aww, I miss your little guy already,” said Teddy.

“Sorry,” said Lika. “Would sex make you feel better? It might make me feel better.”

“Thanks, but not today,” said Teddy. “You’re the third client that’s canceled on me this week. I’m in real trouble here.”

“Are you still selling pot?” asked Lika. “I can buy some from

you.”

While Teddy weighed out a bag on the kitchen table, Lika fetched some money. “Can you roll me a joint while you’re here?” she asked.

“Sure thing,” said Teddy. “But man. What am I going to do?”

“Remember what you told me to do last week when I was feeling bad?” asked Lika. “You told me to stop being a bumner. Now, it is my turn to tell you to not be a bumner.”

“Guess that’s always good advice,” said Teddy. “But, like, what happened to your dog? He was just here yesterday.”

“The Great Bamzini somehow found out that I had Little Bamzini, and hired two men to come and take the dog away,” said Lika.

“Oh, right,” said Teddy. “I remember you telling me the dog was stolen. Guess maybe I should have believed you.”

“Yes, but I have a bigger problem than the stolen dog now,” said Lika. “The men who took the dog saw me doing a secret thing in the garden. What if they tell others what they saw?”

Teddy chuckled. “A secret thing, huh?” he said. “What kind of secret thing?”

Lika gave Teddy an appraising look. “You know the structure in the backyard that I call my seedling greenhouse?” she asked.

“You mean the flying saucer?” asked Teddy.

“Yes,” said Lika. “I was flying in my saucer when the men came. They saw me land and deplane in the middle of the night.”

“Okay, but I don’t see the problem,” said Teddy. “I mean, they took your dog, but no one’s going to believe them about something like a flying saucer.”

“You’re probably right,” said Lika. “Plus, I think the men were breaking rules, pretending to be cops. They probably don’t want it known what they were doing in my yard last night, especially since I beat them up a little.”

Chapter 33

Twenty minutes after Teddy left, the doorbell rang. Grudgingly donning a robe to cover her nakedness, Lika answered the door and was surprised to see the man from last night called Jim standing there, casually wearing the black eye she'd given him.

"Miss Jhanya, sorry to bother you, but do you mind if I come in?" asked Jim.

"Call me Lika," said Lika. "What's this about?"

"Sorry," said Jim. "It's just, I can't get your flying saucer out of my head. I mean, I know I didn't imagine it."

"Maybe you did imagine it," said Lika. "You are an actor, yes? I've heard actors are very imaginative. Some even imagine they can pretend to be police without consequences."

"Look, I really am sorry about all that," said Jim. "It was, well, that magician kid paid us three hundred bucks each to get the dog back and scare you a bit. We never meant it to get physical."

Lika laughed. "So you did a bad job of scaring me," she said. "Why exactly are you here now?"

"Because I just have to know," said Jim. "I have to know if you're a visitor from another planet."

"Yes. I am," said Lika. "I came to Earth from the planet Jhanya. And now I am stuck here."

"But ... your saucer?" said Jim.

"My saucer would never survive space," said Lika. "It is only for flying around Earth. Right now, I mostly use it to visit Stonehenge, because there are very good pubs around there."

"Okay, but why did you come here?" asked Jim.

"I came here to kill someone else from my world," answered Lika. "But when I got here, I made friends with him instead."

"So now you just live in this neighborhood and fly to Stonehenge when you feel like it?" asked Jim. "That's so ... far out."

"It is far out," said Lika. "Now, if there's nothing else, I have things to do."

"Wait," said Jim. "There is something else. I want to learn from you. Learn about your alien planet. Will you teach me?"

"Teach you?" asked Lika. "What could I teach you that would be of any use? Well, I guess I can teach you how to heal that

bruising on your face. Come inside, I'll get some zanzi leaf."

In the kitchen, Lika showed Jim how to make a poultice by chewing zanzi leaf, then applied this poultice to Jim's bruised face. While they waited for the zanzi leaf to work, Lika smoked the joint that Teddy had rolled, and gave Jim a meandering lecture about how zanzi was as healing for the circulatory system as marijuana was for the nervous system. Jim, who was not much older than the Great Bamzini, listened attentively, even as the lecture gave way to stream-of-consciousness non sequiturs related to gardening and composting habits on Earth versus on Jhanya. After an hour, they moved from the kitchen to the garden, where Lika showed Jim her healthy young zanzi plants.

"Woah, so those came from seeds brought here from your home planet?" asked Jim. "What else did you bring from there?"

"I brought a few things," said Lika. "These robes I'm wearing. The pistol you saw last night. Various useful eggs and seeds and crystals."

"But this saucer, it looks so alien," said Jim. "Did you bring it in a larger ship, or make it here?"

"Someone made it for me here," said Lika. "But the yellow panels are a fungus called ffassa, from my home planet. The power crystal is also a design from Jhanya. So the saucer is like a merger of technologies from two worlds."

"That's really cool," said Jim. "Sorry again for ambushing you

last night.”

“You’re just lucky I didn’t shoot you,” said Lika. “Now, go into the bathroom and wash the zanzi off of your face.”

When Jim returned from the bathroom, the bruising on his face appeared to have faded, and the swelling had mostly gone away. “I can’t believe how well that worked,” he said when he got back to the garden.

“Good,” said Lika. “I may have hit you harder than I needed to. How is the pain?”

“It hardly hurts at all,” said Jim.

“An idea has just come to me,” said Lika. “I have a question for you, but first, I need to make a call.”

“Hequa? This is Lika,” said Lika into the phone, which was on speaker. “The Great Bamzini had people take his dog back, so you don’t need to pay the dog walker anymore.”

“Lika, I’m glad you called,” said Hequa. “I’ll tell Robert to stop paying the dog walker. But I’m having a problem with Sallycat that you might be able to help with.”

“What’s wrong with Sallycat?” asked Lika.

“Well, you know she started dating your friend Molly?” asked Hequa.

“Molly mentioned something like that, yes,” said Lika. “Why? What’s the problem?”

“Sallycat gets very ... involved with the women she gets involved with, understand?” said Hequa. “And Molly has apparently not called Sallycat back in a few days. Now Sallycat is very sad, and drinking too much, and being a bad worker for me. I just don’t know what to do about it.”

“I can try talking to Molly,” said Lika. “I will call you again if I can not get a hold of her.”

Lika looked at Jim and shrugged before placing the call to Molly. “Molly? This is Lika,” she said. “I’m calling about Sallycat.”

“You’re calling me about Sallycat?” asked Molly. “Has something happened? Is she okay?”

“Hequa tells me she is being too sad and drinking too much,” said Lika. “He said it was because you haven’t called her back in too many days.”

“Uhh, you know this stuff should just be between me and her, right?” asked Molly.

“Can you just call her?” asked Lika. “Hequa says she is very sad.”

“Fine. Whatever,” said Molly. “Hey, you want to hang out later?”

“Maybe,” said Lika. “Today has been strange, and I don’t know where it is going. Let’s talk about it later.”

“Sounds good,” said Molly. “See ya.”

As the phone went silent, Jim looked at Lika expectantly. “You said you had an idea?” he said. “A question for me?”

“Oh yes,” said Lika. “Have you ever heard of Through the Stars Academy?”

“I think so,” said Jim. “They’re that UFO group, right? The one started by that famous rock star?”

“That’s right,” said Lika. “I was working with them. Teaching them the ways of my home planet. I taught them many things. My idea was that you would be better off learning of Jhanya from them than you would be learning directly from me. They have a large amount of information on their website, and have worked very hard to make this easy to understand.”

“Okay,” said Jim. “I guess I can check it out.”

Chapter 34

As the summer wore on, Lika spent more and more nights flying aimlessly in her saucer. Sometimes, just for fun, she flew directly over the cars speeding down highways. Other times, she hovered above parking lots and shined her spotlight on the people walking to their cars. But, as fun as these things were, they were solitary endeavors. And, by the end of August, feeling bored and lonely, she was ready for a change.

“Hequa? This is Lika,” said Lika into the phone. “I want to do something big, but I don’t know what to do.”

“Hi Lika,” said Hequa. “Something big, you say? Why don’t we have a party at my loft?”

“A party?” said Lika. “You know, that could work. Is this something you want to do?”

“I’ve already got a party planned for this Saturday night,” said Hequa. “Sallycat’s handling most of it, but I was going to invite you later today.”

“Saturday? That sounds good,” said Lika. “What do I need to know? Should I wear something special, or bring something?”

“Wear what you want,” said Hequa. “Bring friends if you want. Arrive after eight.”

“That’s great, Hequa. See you there,” said Lika, hanging up.

That Saturday, Lika arrived to Hequa’s building with her friends Dave, Teddy, and Jim.

“Is this, like, an alien party?” asked Jim as they rode the elevator up to Hequa’s loft.

“Is it 420 friendly?” asked Teddy.

“Is Molly going to be here?” asked Dave.

“It is a friendly alien party and Molly should already be here,” said Lika as the elevator door opened.

Entering the loft, they saw a few dozen people engaged in various forms of partying. Several stared at a large screen playing a video of the Great Bamzini disrespecting a tribal elder. Others fussed over trays of assorted snacks, or climbed around in the ffassa web that covered one of the loft’s walls and its entire ceiling. A few took turns playing an old arcade version of Space Invaders.

Molly and Sallycat danced with each other, appearing oblivious to the party around them. Hequa worked a remote, changing

the video to one of the Great Bamzini throwing rocks at baby ducks playing in a pond. Hequa's right hand man Robert was absorbed in conversation with Sue from Through the Stars. To distract herself from the sight of Sue, Lika went over to the wine table, snagged a freshly opened bottle of wine, and climbed up into the web of ffassa. Dave and Teddy went immediately over to Space Invaders, while Jim followed Lika up into the ffassa web.

"Stupid Sue," said Lika when Jim was close enough to hear her over the music. "Why is she even here? Don't the remote-controllers have their own parties to go to?"

"Who is Sue?" asked Jim. "Man, this party is kickin'."

"Let's climb until we are directly above her," said Lika, pulling her way through the rubbery yellow ffassa. "I want to try dropping small pieces of garbage in her drink."

Jim climbed after Lika, trying to see who had so raised her ire. "So what's the deal?" he asked. "Who is this Sue, anyways?"

"She is with Through the Stars Academy," replied Lika. "She does very good work for them. But she is a remote-controller, and she was always putting down my ideas when I worked with them."

"I don't get it," said Jim. "What do you mean by 'remote-controller'?"

"She remote-controls properties, so that the people who live

there pay and pay without ever being able to call their homes their own,” explained Lika.

“Okay,” said Jim. “But that’s a pretty normal thing for people to do. Why’s it such a big deal to you?”

“Imagine a world where people could just live in their houses and not have to pay someone for it,” said Lika. “This is how it was on my home world. On Jhanya, people just live without their houses being remote-controlled. But here, people like Sue remote-control houses, so no one has the time or money to make the world better because they’re too busy paying their remote-controllers.”

“Well, how does dropping trash into Sue’s drink help?” asked Jim. “Hey, I recognize her now, from Through the Stars’ videos.”

“Dropping trash won’t help,” said Lika as she got into position and fished a couple of receipts out of a pocket. “But it seems like a fun thing to do at a party, so I’m going for it.”

Jim laughed as Lika very deliberately wadded one of her receipts into a small ball and let it fly. It missed its target by several inches, and Lika had her next receipt wadded up and ready to go when Sue looked up.

“Hi Lika,” said Sue loudly. “Why don’t you and your friend come down here and say hi instead of lurking up there in the ffaasa?”

“Hi Sue,” said Lika. “Okay, we’ll come down.”

“Was that all you hoped it would be?” asked Jim as they climbed through the fassa and down to the floor.

“No,” said Lika. “Maybe you can help me find another way to have fun at this party.”

“The whole thing seems pretty fun to me,” said Jim. “Can you introduce me to everyone?”

“Sue. Robert. This is Jim,” said Lika as they approached the snack trays.

“Boyfriend? Or just ... ?” asked Robert.

“He surprised me when I was getting out of my saucer one night,” said Lika. “I hit him pretty hard, then helped him with his injury.”

“It’s true,” said Jim. “But then Lika introduced me to Through the Stars Academy, and now I’m a big fan.”

“Really?” asked Sue, eyeing Lika suspiciously. “The way Lika left things, I wouldn’t have thought she’d be advertising for us.”

“Even if you are a remote-controller, you do good work,” said Lika.

“Oh, not this again,” said Sue. “You know, Robert here manages several properties for your friend Hequa. Do you give Hequa as much guff as you give me?”

“I give Hequa much more guff,” said Lika. “But Hequa allows people on his properties to move towards ownership of their own places over time. You just take from your people, year after year, leaving them with nothing to show for years of paying you.”

“Let’s talk about something else,” suggested Robert. “Jim, what do you think of the new video library on Through the Stars’ website?”

“I guess it’s pretty cool,” said Jim. “I just saw one that made it easier to figure out the right postures for practicing those enlightenment trances.”

“Oh, he likes the trances,” said Robert. “Have they taught you anything interesting?”

“All kinds of stuff,” said Jim. “I think they should, like, teach them in schools.”

“What’s the best thing they’ve taught you?” asked Lika.

“Probably to be more patient with myself when I’m learning something new,” said Jim. “Like, I’m an actor, so I always have lines I’m supposed to remember. When I’m patient with learning the lines, I remember them better, and never have to waste time re-learning things I’m already supposed to have memorized.”

“Interesting,” said Sue. “Yes, the trances do seem to help with memory.”

“Hello friends,” said Hequa as he walked up to the food area. “Lika, your friend Teddy has just offered to provide blunts on the rooftop. I’m heading up there now.”

Chapter 35

When she realized that Sue was staying put, Lika joined Robert and Jim in following Hequa to the roof. As the promised blunts circulated around the dimly lit rooftop patio, Lika looked at the surrounding city, allowing all thoughts of Sue to leave her mind.

“Your friends are awesome,” said Jim to Lika. “I mean, look at this place. How cool is it, right?”

“It is very cool,” agreed Lika. “Hey Hequa, how much did this lovely view cost you?”

“For the building, and the repairs, and all the other expenses? Almost a million dollars,” said Hequa.

“Totally worth it,” said Jim. “Someday, I want a place just like this.”

“Knowing you, you will never get such a place,” said Lika.

“Right, but I can dream,” said Jim.

“I wonder how many people sit dreaming of better things instead of just making the better things?” asked Lika.

“Hey, is that supposed to be insulting?” asked Jim.

“Not in a personal way,” said Lika. “I only mean that the people of Earth seem very ready to accept imaginary things instead of demanding actual things.”

“Lika, are you trying to wreck my party with your bad mood?” asked Hequa.

“No. Maybe. Sorry,” replied Lika. “I think I just miss Jhanya. Even with all of the problems there, I miss it.”

“Do not forget, I barely escaped Jhanya with my life,” said Hequa. “And by the time I left, the traditional trances of my people had been outlawed. So had writing things down that The Order didn’t like. They even made it illegal to grow zanzi plants on private plots of land. Can you imagine that? Outlawing basic medicine?”

“I remember,” said Lika. “And after all that I’ve learned, I know The Order was a mess. But here? The way people damage the planet and put money in charge of everything? That’s a mess, too. And one I can’t stop thinking about today.”

“I miss Jhanya sometimes, too,” admitted Hequa. “But what I miss is how it used to be, before The Order seized control. I miss the seaside ffaasa farms and the little boats my people used to move between islands. I miss the marsh fish and flying over

my village in my glider. I miss my family and friends. But here, I've found new friends, and even something like a new family."

"Cheers to that!" said Teddy, lifting his drink in salutation.

"Cheers indeed," said Hequa, sipping his wine. "Lika, when we're done up here, there is something I want to show you in the basement."

"Okay," said Lika.

Twenty minutes later, Lika watched Hequa pull a tarp off of a pile of familiar-looking objects in a back corner of his basement. "Draath crystals?" she said. "But there are so many of them."

"Yes," said Hequa. "I have made one hundred draath crystals. I'm going to give one to Through the Stars Academy, to study. But I saw that you have a problem with Sue, and I was going to give it to her. Is there reason not to give Sue a draath crystal inside of your problem with her?"

"No. Not at all," said Lika. "We just have clashing personalities is all."

"Good," said Hequa. "If you want, we can both present Sue with a draath crystal. We should do it soon, though, before people get too drunk."

"Yes, let's do it," said Lika. "But what about all the other crystals? Are you going to sell them?"

Hequa laughed. “No way,” he said. “These are only to be used as gifts. Some will go to groups like Through the Stars Academy. Some will go to people who are living off-the-grid, without electricity. In fact, I was hoping you would be willing to give some of these away for me.”

“Let’s just give this first one to Sue and go from there,” said Lika. “If you have a big plan for these, tell me about it when I haven’t had half a bottle of wine.”

Sue was still hovering over the food trays when Lika and Hequa made it back to Hequa’s loft with the draath crystal. Lika carried the crystal, and Hequa turned the music off as they approached.

“Sue,” announced Hequa. “Lika and I would like to present you and Through the Stars academy with your very own draath crystal. Use it. Study it. Put what you discover online. Do you accept this gift?”

“Oh my,” said Sue, accepting the heavy crystalline object from Lika. “Of course I accept. This is really ... well, what an honor.”

“Good,” said Hequa. “If you look closely, you will see that I carved ‘Through the Stars Academy’ into the crystal just above the controls.”

“So you did,” said Sue. “Lika? You’re in on this? I thought you hated me?”

“Of course I don’t hate you, Sue,” said Lika. “I don’t like that you act as if your ideas are better than mine, but I know you

are a good person who is doing good work for your group.”

“Plus, you’re already very familiar with draath crystals from when you studied Lika’s,” said Hequa. “We think there is no one better to accept this gift from us.”

“Well, okay then,” said Sue. “Is it okay if I put it down? I want to call Gerald and let him know.”

“Just set it down anywhere out of the way,” said Hequa.

“Hey, what is that thing?” asked Jim, who had looked immensely relieved when Lika returned to the party with Hequa.

“It’s a draath crystal,” said Lika. “Think of it like a special battery that never needs recharging.”

“Really?” asked Jim. “Did you bring it from your home planet?”

“Hequa made it by copying one from our home planet,” said Lika.

Just as Hequa turned the music back on, a quiet argument between Molly and Sallycat grew into something everyone could hear.

“What are you even doing with me?” yelled Sallycat. “She’s right over there! You can’t stop looking over at her, so just go and be with her if that’s what you really want!”

Once she realized that the fight was about her, Lika set aside her

embarrassment and approached the arguing couple. "What's this?" she asked. "Sallycat, I don't know you well, but believe me when I say there is nothing more than friendship between me and Molly."

"Yeah, well, someone didn't get that memo," said Sallycat.

"Molly, the threesome we had with Dave was fun, but we are just friends," said Lika.

"Wait. What threesome?" asked Sallycat. "Molly, you had a threesome? With a man?"

"With Dave, our drinking buddy," said Molly. "I think he's here. Up on the roof if you want to meet him. Lika, maybe you should just let us work this one out."

"Okay," said Lika, grateful for the excuse to leave the unhappy couple to their argument.

"Woah, what was that about?" asked Jim, who had again appeared by Lika's side.

"Nothing I care to describe," said Lika. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Yeah I am," said Jim. "This is, like, the coolest party I've ever been to."

Chapter 36

One early autumn night, Lika was flying her saucer over the mountains in southern Colorado when a huge updraft followed by an even larger downdraft caused her to lose control of the aircraft. She crashed into a large sand dune, hitting her head on the throttle control bar, and lost consciousness. When she came to just after sunrise, she found that her saucer had half buried itself when it crashed.

Sand poured into the cockpit when Lika opened it to assess the damage. After drinking a long sip of water, she climbed out of the aircraft and began attempting to dig her saucer out of the sand with her hands. As Lika was discovering the futility of such digging, she saw a large black pickup truck approach. Relying on her weapon, she continued her futile digging, hoping the truck was just passing by on some other business.

The truck pulled up twenty feet from the downed saucer. A man got out and walked over to where Lika was digging. "Greetings, visitor," greeted the man. "I saw something come down here last night and was hoping for a meteorite. But this is way more interesting. Do you need some help?"

Lika stood, turning to face the man, her bright yellow flight suit closely resembling the color of the sand all around her. “Greetings,” she said. “Do you have a shovel I could borrow?”

“You’re obviously not military,” said the man. “And your aircraft obviously didn’t come from space. So, what’s up? Who are you?”

“My name is Lika,” said Lika. “I come from the planet Jhanya. But this saucer is just for flying around Earth.”

“Well, I’m Greg,” said Greg. “And if you’ve got a place to hook a tow line, my truck should be able to pull you right out of there.”

“Thanks,” said Lika. “I don’t know what happened. The wind just went up and down too quickly, and I lost control.”

“Yup, those mountain gusts are treacherous,” said Greg. “Where are you coming from? I mean, here on Earth. Where’s your base?”

“My house is a thousand miles northeast of here,” said Lika. “I am embarrassed to have crashed this way.”

Once Greg had pulled the saucer out of the sand, Lika examined the craft and didn’t like what she saw. There was sand in everything, and it was clear that turning on the engines risked damaging important rotors and couplings. “The whole thing needs to be cleaned,” she said, half to herself. “Taken apart and cleaned before it is safe to fly again.”

“Well shit,” said Greg. “You’re welcome to use my shop. I’m just right up the road. All I ask is that you let me watch you work. See, I’ve never seen an actual flying saucer before.”

Considering her options, Lika shrugged. “Thanks,” she said. “If we partially disassemble the craft, it should fit in your truck.”

Back in Greg’s shop, a large pole shed powered by solar panels, Lika methodically disassembled and cleaned her flying saucer while Greg watched.

“Those look like regular electric motors,” Greg observed. “But what’s that power supply all about?”

“It is a draath crystal,” said Lika. “A design from my home world. It produces electricity and heat as needed.”

“And what about those funny cavities on the thing’s underside?” asked Dave.

“Those make the noise of flying more pleasant,” answered Lika. “But what I don’t understand is how you knew where I crashed last night. I wasn’t flying with any lights.”

“I’m something of a UFO buff, and this is something of a UFO hotspot,” explained Greg. “I have a special telescope pointed at the sky and hooked up to a computer. Mostly, it just finds meteorites for me to sell on ebay. But sometimes, like now, it finds things that are a little more interesting.”

“Sorry I wasn’t a meteorite,” said Lika.

“I’m not,” said Greg. “Once we get this thing cleaned up, will you let me watch you take off?”

“Okay,” said Lika. “But I must wait for dark to fly again, so there is less of a chance of the government noticing.”

“The government isn’t noticing shit out here,” said Greg. “Except when I put up the solar panels. They noticed that right away, and sent someone out with a clipboard to give me a hard time. But if you only fly at night, you only fly at night.”

“I do ... have a gift to offer you,” said Lika after a moment of indecision. “I have a draath crystal that I was going to bury for people to find in New Mexico. But I can instead make this a gift to you, if you promise to use it only to help people.”

“A draath crystal? Like the one that powers this thing?” said Greg. “Yes, definitely. Sign me up.”

“There is no need for signing,” said Lika. “I can just give it to you. Here, it is in my backpack.”

Greg carefully accepted the draath crystal while Lika explained its controls. Setting the crystal on a workbench, he asked, “So why were you going to bury this thing in New Mexico again? I don’t get it.”

“This is technology that me and someone else from my home planet wish to share with the people of Earth,” replied Lika. “We can’t share it with the government, or the big companies, because they’ll just try to keep it a secret. So we’ve shared it with

a UFO group, Through the Stars Academy, and now I'm trying to share it with regular people all over the country. People like you."

"Well, shit," said Greg. "No one has called me a regular person in a long time. But I guess I'm happy to help."

"Will you help me now by blowing your compressed air on this flange?" asked Lika. "I'm having a hard time getting it all off by brushing."

"Sure thing," said Greg, obliging. "Hey, before you go, do you thing I could get a picture of you in front of the saucer? No one in town will believe me about this otherwise."

Chapter 37

Returning home after the crash, Lika decided to avoid flying for a while. And since she was also avoiding most of her friends for reasons she couldn't quite articulate, she began spending her days surfing the internet and doing little else. Browsing social media sites, and news sites, and online stores, Lika increasingly found herself wondering what the point of it all was. Wondering this, she had an epiphany, and called Hequa to talk about it.

"Lika, it has been some time," said Hequa when he picked up. "Are you well?"

"I crashed my saucer in Colorado, but I got it fixed, and I'm okay," said Lika. "That's not why I'm calling, though. I'm calling to talk about the internet."

"Oh? What about the internet?" asked Hequa.

"The more I look at it, the more it seems like a giant blob of money vacuums," said Lika. "It's like an advertising delivery network, combined with a network of stores that sell things. Some of the ads mess up my laptop, and the stores send me

garbage email after garbage email. I'm wondering what the point of it all is."

"You want to know what I really think?" asked Hequa.

"I wouldn't be calling you if I didn't," said Lika.

"Do you want the long version or the short one?" asked Hequa.

"Long is fine," said Lika. "You've been on this planet longer than I have. I'm hoping to benefit from that perspective."

"Okay," said Hequa. "The first thing to remember is that the internet is where more and more contests of influence take place."

"I can see that," said Lika.

"These contests of influence, from big ones to small ones, happen in an increasingly automated way," said Hequa. "Do you remember how, on Jhanya, we had robots that helped us with all of the most menial tasks?"

"Yes," said Lika. "I have been wondering why there aren't more robot workers here."

"There are many robot workers on the internet," said Hequa. "There are also many robots working industrial jobs. But people on Earth are just learning about robots, and this learning process is messy, which is part of why the internet is how it is."

“Okay,” said Lika. “But all the ads seem designed to make the internet worse and drive people crazy.”

“Yes,” said Hequa. “But you know about corporations. These are basically invisible robots that have been given the same rights as people. These corporation robots do not care if what they do drives people crazy. They care only about money. I think that the people of Earth still have much learning to do about how to make their robots harmless.”

“That sort of makes sense,” said Lika. “And it is funny to think that bad robots might be the problem.”

“They are just part of it,” said Hequa. “The larger problem is that wealth is distributed unequally. This problem is underneath most problems.”

“Are you saying the internet is stupid because wealth is distributed unequally?” asked Lika.

“Maybe,” said Hequa. “The revenue model of much of the internet is ad sales. But ads only work if there’s a consumer base capable of funneling revenue to the advertiser. If there’s not enough money in the consumer base to support the advertiser, it makes no sense to advertise at all. But companies are not sensible, so they begin advertising in worse and worse ways to get people to pay attention to them. In the process, they collect more and more information on people, and sell this information to create new revenue streams. This information is warehoused and sold to other advertisers, who then repeat the procedures of unsuccessful advertising and selling collected

information.”

“That’s the weirdest thing I’ve ever heard of,” said Lika.

“It’s actually much more complicated than what I’ve described,” said Hequa. “It is like the ruling class has the smartest people in the world all working together to undermine individual autonomy on a massive scale. But robots do do most of the work, whether these robots are companies or computer programs.”

“Interesting,” said Lika. “So are you saying that the internet is mostly made up of robots owned by the ruling class?”

“Yes,” said Hequa. “But everything is owned by the ruling class here. What I’m really saying is that the internet is stupid because the ruling class can’t stop paying smart people to use the internet to try taking more from everybody else than they’ve already taken.”

“So this is why a car commercial on a newspaper website flashed and flashed and froze my computer?” asked Lika.

“Yes,” said Hequa. “Some stupid robotic company designed that ad to be impossible to look away from, then sent it to your computer without knowing that you are a bad ad target because you travel by flying saucer.”

“Okay, so what is the point of that?” asked Lika.

“What I think?” said Hequa. “In a big sense, I think the secret

point of it is to help people connect with each other better while things like communities and ecosystems are destroyed by the ruling class.”

“Really?” asked Lika.

“Yes,” said Hequa. “There is a mass extinction event underway. And the globalization of capital has pitted all of the world’s laborers against one another in a contest that everybody loses. The internet gives everybody in this contest a way to connect with each other, and therefore an opportunity to stop this madness. I think people know the madness needs to stop, and are just starting to learn how to use their connections with each other to stop it.”

“That’s so strange,” said Lika. “I know people here have been trained to believe that capital and labor are the economy’s two sides. In that context, I guess what you say makes sense. But I still don’t quite believe it.”

“It might be that a better way to say it is that the internet appears ready to help people understand that capital and labor are not two sides of anything,” said Hequa. “If people can learn to understand that, maybe they’ll get better at cooperating with each other.”

“I still don’t understand,” said Lika. “But thanks for trying to help. There is another thing I’m calling about. A more personal thing.”

“Oh? What is it?” asked Hequa.

"I've decided to get pregnant," said Lika. "By one of the Earth people. Teddy, my dog walker."

"Really?" said Hequa. "Fantastic. Your Teddy has agreed to this?"

"He will," said Lika. "I haven't told him yet."

"But you are not coupled with him," said Hequa. "Will you take him for a husband?"

Lika laughed. "No," she said. "I will raise the child myself. This is the last part of why I am calling. Raising a child here is expensive. I was wondering if you had some new job I could do for money?"

"I can ask Robert what we need done," said Hequa. "I just bought a new building. Maybe you could be the building's manager or something? I will look into it and see what I find."

"Thank you," said Lika. "Even though I came here to assassinate you, you have become a truly good friend."

"Good," said Hequa. "It is funny that we can be such good friend here, but on Jhanya all we could have been was enemies."

Chapter 38

When Teddy the dog walker arrived to Lika's house, he was expecting only to sell Lika a bag of weed. While he weighed this bag out on the kitchen table, Lika paced, trying to figure out the best way to bring up her maternal ambitions. Seeing no easy way to raise the subject, Lika stopped her pacing and sat down. "Teddy," she said. "I want a baby, and you would make a good father for my child."

"Uhh, what?" asked Teddy.

"I want you to father my child," said Lika. "You are strong and smart and always arrive to sell me weed at the time you say you'll arrive. You're good with animals and we're already sex partners. What do you think?"

"Uhh," said Teddy. "You know I'm not really in a position to settle down and be a dad, right?"

"Oh Teddy, all you have to do is have sex with me," said Lika. "All the rest, I can take care of."

"But, like, kids are really expensive," said Teddy. "And I don't

want to be some deadbeat dad, but I don't exactly have a lot of extra money laying around."

"I will pay what needs to be paid," said Lika. "My friend Hequa said he'd find me a good job. You can be involved or not, it is up to you. Your only critical involvement would be the sex."

"Okay," said Teddy. "I mean, were you thinking right now, or ...?"

"Today would be perfect, yes," said Lika. "If we have sex today and tomorrow and the day after that, my pregnancy would be assured."

"Right. But how do you know that?" asked Teddy.

"As a soldier on my home planet Jhanya, I had a special contraceptive installed," said Lika. "Yesterday, I switched this contraceptive off. That started me ovulating, so this is the best time for me to get pregnant. Otherwise I will have to wait another month to try."

"Sure, but are you sure you want a kid?" asked Teddy. "I mean, really sure?"

"Yes," said Lika. "I want to have the first child born of a person from Jhanya and a person from Earth. I'm not a soldier anymore. I'm not an anything. But I would like to become a mother, and I'd like you to help me do that."

"I guess I can help you," said Teddy. "But I've got to walk

someone's dog in an hour, so we'd better get to it."

Lika knew she was pregnant after the second day of trying. Teddy didn't believe that she could know this so soon, but didn't argue with Lika when she told him. From this point on, Lika forwent Teddy's weed, but continued to invite him over every week for a meal and conversation. During these weekly meals, Lika learned the history of her child's father, and shared more of her own history with him.

"I just don't think there's any point in telling my parents about this," said Teddy a few months into the pregnancy. "Like I've said before, we barely talk, and I just think involving them would make everything more complicated than it needs to be."

"But they are the family, whatever their problems," argued Lika. "I feel like I should at least meet them."

"You want to meet my parents?" asked Teddy. "Just drop by and tell them you're the unwed mother of my child? I guess you want to tell them that you're an alien, too?"

"Family should know each other," said Lika. "And why should it matter that we are unwed? Or that I am from another planet?"

"Because they believe it's wrong to have a child out of wedlock," said Teddy. "They're very conservative. And don't even get me started on the alien thing. They'd just never believe it, and would think we were both crazy if you told them about it."

"Okay," said Lika. "So what if we wait until the child is born,

then bring it to them so they can at least meet their grandchild?”

“Fine,” said Teddy. “But you have to promise not to say anything about being an alien.”

“Okay,” said Lika. “Where should I pretend to be from? Mexico? Turkey?”

“Maybe somewhere in this country,” said Teddy. “My parents don’t really like people from other countries. My dad especially.”

“Really? Okay,” said Lika. “Then I will tell them that I’m from Washington and my parents are fish catchers.”

“Good enough,” said Teddy. “By the way, how’s the new job going?”

“It is very easy,” said Lika. “People from Hequa’s building call me when there is a problem. I have a list of the people who solve building problems, and call the person needed to solve whatever problem when it arises. No one calls me most days, then some days I receive many calls. The truth is I can’t even believe this is a job. It would make much more sense to just give the building people the numbers of the building repair people. But Hequa is paying me well for doing this job, so I keep doing it.”

“Have you thought more about how you want to have the kid?” asked Teddy. “I mean, in a hospital or at home or what?”

“I think at home,” said Lika. “I found a midwife, and was thinking that both you and Hequa should attend.”

“Why do you want your boss there?” asked Teddy. “I mean, of course I can come, but having Hequa there seems a little weird.”

“Hequa is from Jhanya like me,” said Lika. “He should witness the birth of the first child to come from merging our two species.”

The child arrived in what the midwife said was the easiest birth she’d ever seen. Lika spent a few weeks afterwards being cared for by Teddy and Hequa in her home. The baby, a boy Lika named Flikka, was unusually quiet but otherwise healthy. He had Lika’s light brown skin and pale gray eyes, and a wispy tuft of yellow hair that probably came from Teddy.

When Flikka was several weeks old, Lika began bathing him in zanzi leaf tea daily, as was traditional on Jhanya. When he reached six months, the tea baths were discontinued, and Lika began taking him out, bound with cloth to her body, to begin seeing the wonders of the world. Though obviously weirded out by the whole thing, Teddy continued visiting Lika and the child almost daily. And Hequa, who started referring to himself as ‘uncle Hequa’ in the child’s presence, checked in on Lika every few days, sometimes leaving a small, hand-carved animal as a gift for Flikka when he got older.

Chapter 39

“**A**re you sure it’s wise to take such a young child up in a flying saucer?” asked Hequa on the phone.

“I’ve already taken him up just a little ways, and he seems to like it,” said Lika. “He will of course be bound closely to me the whole time.”

“But didn’t you crash once?” asked Hequa. “It wouldn’t be safe for a baby to be in a crashing flying saucer.”

“When I crashed, it was because I was flying over big mountains and judged the air currents wrong,” said Lika. “All I want to do now is fly Flikka to Stonehenge. It is an easy flight that I’ve made many times.”

“I think it is too dangerous,” said Hequa. “If you have to fly somewhere, what about somewhere closer?”

“But I’m so bored,” argued Lika. “And it has been such a long winter. Plus, I’m not asking for your permission. I only wanted you to inspect my saucer because I haven’t flown it a long distance since I got back from Colorado.”

“Fine,” said Hequa. “I can come over to do an inspection tomorrow.”

When Hequa arrived to inspect Lika’s saucer, he found Lika in the kitchen feeding Flikka. “He’s almost done, and then he’ll sleep,” she said quietly. “Can you do your inspection without me? The saucer is in the back yard.”

“I don’t like this,” said Hequa. “I’ll look at your saucer, but I don’t like it. Babies shouldn’t fly around in saucers.”

“Well, what would you have me do?” asked Lika. “Sit around at home for years doing nothing until the child grows up?”

“Is there nothing between flying to Stonehenge tomorrow and waiting around for years?” asked Hequa. “What if you just walk down to look at the river? Or come over to climb in the fassa at my loft with Flikka bound to you? The child is young enough get as much from these things as he would from your saucer trip. I just don’t understand your thinking.”

“My thinking is that I have spent months being bored here,” said Lika. “I feel like I’ve read the whole internet. And I want my child to know more than this house, especially now that winter is over.”

“Back on Jhanya, I had a sister who got this way after her first child,” said Hequa. “But for her it was boat trips up and down the coast that she wanted to go on, which are much less dangerous than saucer trips.”

“I would take a boat trip if I had a boat,” said Lika. “Or a car trip if I had a car. But all I have is a saucer, so that’s the kind of trip I’m taking.”

“What about an R.V. trip?” asked Hequa. “Robert just bought an R.V. for me. Maybe we could all take a trip to somewhere nice. The vehicle has enough space for a packed-up saucer, so you could even fly a little if we found the right place.”

“But where would we go?” asked Lika. “It would have to be somewhere as good as Stonehenge.”

“What about the place where you crashed your saucer in Colorado?” asked Hequa. “The place where big sand dunes strangely rise up from a different kind of desert next to purple mountains?”

“That could be a good trip,” admitted Lika. “Are you thinking to go with your Robert and Sallycat?”

“Yes,” said Hequa. “They can take turns driving, and we could be there in two days.”

“Okay, I’ll agree to it if we can leave right away,” said Lika.

“Let’s leave at noon tomorrow,” said Hequa.

In the R.V., Lika held Flikka while Hequa sat next to them on a narrow bench. Robert and Sallycat sat up front, taking turns with the driving. They stopped every few hours, giving everyone a chance to stretch their legs and Lika a chance to

show her child somewhere new. Soon, the plains gave way to mountains, and Flikka cried loudly when his little ears began to pop.

“Imagine that in a small flying saucer,” commented Hequa as the child’s wailing died down.

“That’s what I was just imagining,” said Lika. “The child is usually so quiet, but when he screams, he screams.”

“Listen Lika, there is something that I’ve been meaning to talk with you about,” said Hequa. “It’s about our plan to share things from Jhanya with the people here.”

“Oh?” said Lika. “What about it?”

“Well, we’ve shared many things with many people at this point,” said Hequa. “Draath crystals. Zanzi plants. All of that. But we haven’t shared much of our philosophy, and I’m starting to wonder if that should have been the first thing we shared.”

“More and more, you sound like one of our philosophers,” said Lika. “You are certainly vague enough to be one.”

“I’m just talking in general,” said Hequa. “I turned my back on the philosophers after The Order killed my people. My thinking was so twisted around that I started thinking of Jhanya as a failed world. But now, hundreds of years later and on a much more warlike planet, I’m beginning to think of The Order as a small thing. Like a group of children whose misbehavior reflected failures in their upbringings. And the biggest failure

I can point to was that these children never really learned the philosophies that kept Jhanya a peaceful place for a thousand years.”

“In The Order, I was taught that the philosophers promoted a way of life at odds with nature,” said Lika. “Most of my schooling was for combat, and the primary lesson I learned outside of combat training was that superiors were always to be obeyed, because nature had selected them to be the superiors.”

“And now?” asked Hequa. “Now that you know those superiors lied to you, what do you believe?”

“What is there to believe?” asked Lika. “I’ve read some of the Earth philosophers. The old ones seem disconnected from the way life has become here, and the modern ones all seem preoccupied with contests of power between claims of truth. Some of the religions have nice ideas, but these ideas are bundled together with absurdities that I can’t make sense of. So I don’t know. I don’t know what to believe, but I’m hoping I have it figured out by the time Flikka is old enough to begin asking questions.”

“I just keep coming back to the sayings of the Overseers,” said Hequa. “Even after everything I’ve seen, their sayings about lights on the water ring true to me.”

“I’m not familiar with those,” said Lika. “The Order didn’t exactly let us listen to the Overseers.”

“Oh?” said Hequa. “There’s one poem I’m thinking of. I

translated it to English, but the translation made it less poetic. The basic idea is that consciousness is a light flickering on primordial black water. That the soul is the flame and consciousness is the movement of this flame's light. That every thought and action is a flickering of this light, and every flickering of another's flame is both an opportunity to see their truth and an opportunity to misinterpret things. Understand?"

"Can you say the poem in our native tongue?" asked Lika.

Hequa obliged, and Lika closed her eyes to hear it. "Very good," she said. "Can you teach that to Flikka when he is old enough?"

"Of course," agreed Hequa. "But I'm hoping to make a better translation of this and other sayings of the Overseers much sooner, to share with the people of Earth. Will you help me with this?"

"I will try," said Lika. "I've certainly got enough time on my hands lately."

Chapter 40

“What do you think, Flikka? Aren’t the sand dunes amazing?” asked Lika while holding the child up to better see the view.

“They are very interesting,” said Hequa. “It’s like some giant just dumped some dunes here accidentally. Or like the Sahara decided to open up a franchise in southern Colorado.”

“So this is our final destination?” asked Sallycat. “I mean, the sand dunes are cool and all. But I guess I was expecting something, well, something better.”

“This whole valley is a UFO hot spot,” said Robert. “And these dunes are at the center of all kinds of reports of paranormal activity. Seeing them now, I can almost sense something like that.”

As they spoke, a truck approached, and parked just behind their R.V.. “It’s my friend Greg,” said Lika. “Greg! Greg, come over here and meet my baby!”

“Lika?” said Greg as he approached the group. “I almost didn’t

recognize you without the saucer.”

“Greg, this is Flikka,” said Lika, holding the baby up for inspection. “Everyone, Greg here rescued me when my saucer crashed in these dunes. Greg, this is everyone.”

“So Lika, did you notice anything unusual when I pulled up?” asked Greg once introductions had been made.

“No,” said Lika. “Why?”

“Well, I used that draath crystal you gave me to convert my truck to electric,” explained Greg. “It’s only a little bit quieter, especially on these dirt roads, but I’ll never need to buy another gallon of gas for it again.”

“That’s great,” said Lika.

“You gave him a draath crystal?” asked Robert.

“Yes,” said Lika. “I was going to bury it for some random person to find. But then Greg helped me clean a bunch of sand out of my saucer, so I gave it to him.”

“And wouldn’t you know it, it’s the best present anyone ever gave me,” said Greg.

“Did Lika tell you she is from another planet?” asked Hequa. “Her and I both are. The planet Jhanya. Did she tell you the draath crystal is technology from Jhanya?”

“She told me something like that,” said Greg. “And I’ve been doing lots of thinking about it. So you’re the father, then?”

“The father?” asked Hequa. “Of Flikka? No, I am father to no one.”

“I had my dog walker father the child,” said Lika. “I wanted Flikka to be born of parents from different worlds.”

“How ... progressive,” said Greg. “Say, how would you all like to come over to my place for beers and a barbecue?”

“We could do that,” said Hequa.

“Yes, let’s do that,” said Lika.

When Sallycat and Robert both nodded their agreement as well, the group piled into the R.V. and followed Greg to his property. Once there, Greg started some steaks on a grill and got beers for everyone but Lika, who was avoiding alcohol while nursing.

“Greg tracks objects in the sky with a special computer,” said Lika when everyone was comfortably seated at an outdoor table.

“That I do,” confirmed Greg. “That’s how I found your crashed saucer.”

“Really?” asked Robert. “How long have you been doing that?”

“Years,” said Greg. “I usually pick up on one or two nice

meteorites a year. The saucer was something totally new.”

“Crashing the saucer was new for me as well,” said Lika. “I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t found me.”

“Someone would have found you,” said Greg. “I could see the crash site from the road. But I bet if someone else got to you first, they’d have made you pay for their help.”

“I paid you one draath crystal,” said Lika.

“That you did,” said Greg. “I only mean that some of the folks in this valley these days wouldn’t lift a finger to help without some incentive. And if you’ll recall, I didn’t ask you for anything.”

“Do you want a prize or something?” asked Sallycat.

“If you’re handing out prizes, I’ll take one,” said Greg. “But I only brought it up to say how lucky it was. Like it was fate that we met. Like it was meant to be.”

“I understand,” said Lika. “But I see things differently. You say it was meant to be. But I say we made it be — me by crashing my saucer and you by coming to investigate.”

“Let’s come back to that,” said Greg. “There’s a question I want to ask. Why would you leave your home planet for somewhere like Earth?”

“I left to escape from The Order after they killed everyone in my village,” said Hequa.

“And I came here to assassinate him on behalf of The Order for leaving,” said Lika. “But when I got to Earth, I changed my mind about the assassination, and now we are friends.”

“Really? Far out,” said Greg. “But why Earth, and not some other planet? Maybe somewhere less populated and more peaceful?”

“Jhanya is less populated and more peaceful,” said Hequa. “But I had to leave there. Here seemed the next best choice.”

“I was a soldier just doing my job coming here,” said Lika. “I quit this job when I arrived, and now I like living here as much as I ever liked living on Jhanya.”

“I just mean, isn’t there somewhere better?” asked Greg. “Somewhere better you could go to just be at peace and live in harmony with your surroundings?”

“Like you’re doing here, with pole sheds and picnic tables in the desert?” asked Sallycat.

“More or less,” said Greg. “What I’ve got may not seem like much, but my power comes from solar, I grow most of my own food, and no one’s bothering me out here. Hey, want to see my garden?”

“Half of your garden is pot!” exclaimed Hequa after following Greg to a tended plot of land behind his pole shed house.

“That it is,” laughed Greg. “See how it holds space between the cottonwoods and the food crop mounds? It doesn’t mind that

the soil is mostly sand, as long as it gets some fertilizer and enough water.”

“This is a very nice garden,” said Lika. “I’m surprised you didn’t show me when I was here before.”

“If you’ll recall, your mind was only on getting back up into the sky then,” said Greg.

“But this really is an incredible garden,” said Lika. “If I was you, I’d want to show it off at every opportunity. How do you keep it watered enough?”

“Buried irrigation lines and a solar pump,” said Greg proudly. “I’ve been at it for nearly thirty years.”

“Woah, what’s that?” asked Sallycat, pointing to a very large bird wandering near the garden.

“Ha! Just a turkey,” said Greg. “The desert changes how they look. There are chickens and a couple of goats around here, too. They usually hang out close to the beehive, over there.”

“Incredible,” said Robert. “You do all this yourself?”

“These days I do,” said Greg. “When I first moved out here, I was married. My wife and I came out here with three other couples to start a commune. And for the first few years, that’s what it was. A commune. But then we all started getting into some crazy fights with each other. The other couples left, and my wife left not long after. Since then it’s just been me, for

some twenty-five years.”

“I don’t know whether to see you as sad or heroic,” said Lika.

“Maybe just stubborn,” said Greg. “Maybe I’m just stubbornly waiting for some UFO to come along and take me away to a better world.”

“There is no better world than this,” said Hequa, idly touching a knee high corn plant. “What more could you ask for than a garden in the desert?”

Chapter 41

Returning home, Lika invited Teddy over to see pictures from the road trip. With Flikka asleep, once Teddy had come and gone, Lika went through her exercise routine twice, then turned on her computer to begin browsing the internet. Finding nothing of interest there, she called Molly, who picked up on the second ring.

“Molly? It’s Lika,” said Lika. “I just got back from Colorado, and was wondering what you’re doing tonight.”

“Hi Lika,” said Molly. “Sallycat told me about your trip. Said you went to visit some old prospector in the desert or something?”

“Yes. We visited my friend Greg, who helped me when my saucer crashed into sand dunes,” said Lika. “So do you want to go to a restaurant for dinner tonight?”

“Um. You know me and Sallycat are together, right?” asked Molly. “And she’s made it pretty clear that she doesn’t trust me around you. Why do you think it’s been so long since we’ve hung out?”

“I thought you were just avoiding the baby,” said Lika. “Dave is avoiding the baby by always being at the bar. I thought you were doing something similar.”

“Ha!” said Molly. “Your baby’s fine with me. And Dave was always at the bar long before you got pregnant.”

“But you won’t go to dinner because you’re with Sallycat,” said Lika. “What if Sallycat came? She might be sick of me after the road trip, but can you ask her?”

“Ugg,” said Molly. “I almost want to go and not tell her. She can be so controlling, and I just want to live my life. But I guess I can ask her. It really would be great to see you.”

Molly and Sallycat were already seated when Lika and Flikka arrived at the restaurant. The place was not crowded, but it was noisy, having been designed to always be noisy. As Lika sat down, Flikka added to this noise with a series of shouted unformed exclamations. Sallycat looked annoyed, but Molly was thrilled.

“He’s already so big,” said Molly. “How’d you get to be so big?”

“By eating milk and baby food,” said Lika. “How are you Molly? Sallycat?”

“We’re good,” said Molly.

“I’ve been better,” said Sallycat.

“Sallycat, are you mad at me?” asked Lika.

“Not really. Maybe a little,” said Sallycat. “Sometimes it just seems like you’ve got to be the center of attention wherever you go.”

“Is this because I offered to pay?” asked Lika. “You can pay if you want the attention from that.”

“Lika, she’s still mad about the threesome,” said Molly. “She brings it up at least once a day.”

“I think about it much less often than that,” said Lika. “Sallycat, haven’t you ever had sex just to have sex? That was all that was.”

“I know,” said Sallycat slowly. “But I don’t have to like it. Plus, I think Molly’s still holding a candle for you.”

“You know I’m sitting right here,” said Molly. “And I’m not holding any candles.”

Sensing tension, Flikka found a nearby spoon and threw it into the path of a nearby server.

“What’s this?” said the server, smiling broadly. “I’ll get you another spoon. Are you ready to order?”

With the food ordered, the conversation resumed.

“Sallycat, what if all three of us go out shooting after we eat?” asked Lika. “This is the activity Molly and I did the most as

friends. So why don't all three of us go and do it?"

"But ... the baby," protested Molly.

"I can shoot while holding a baby," said Lika. "Come on, it will be fun. And if we make enough noise behind the bar, maybe Dave will come out and yell at us."

"That does kind of sound like fun," said Sallycat.

"Yeah, okay," said Molly.

After dark, in the alley behind Boodles, they stacked some cardboard in front of a dumpster and began shooting, taking turns with Lika's pistol. Having never used Lika's pistol before, Sallycat was amazed by the weapon's easy balance and apparent accuracy. "This really is fun," she said, firing a few more shots. "I'm glad Earth guns aren't this much fun. Can you imagine how much more people would shoot if they were?"

"I haven't been shooting since Flikka was born," said Lika, taking her turn. "I feel out of practice."

"You don't seem out of practice," said Molly. "Still as good a shot as ever."

"The target's only twenty feet away," commented Sallycat.

"Hey. Oh, you've got to be kidding me," said Dave, who had just come out of the bar's back door. "Lika? What's with the baby? Molly? What exactly do you think you're doing?"

“Hi Dave,” said Lika. “My baby’s name is Flikka. Flikka is hanging out with us while we shoot.”

“That’s insane,” said Dave. “Just nuts. What if someone gets hurt?”

“No one will get hurt, Dave,” said Lika. “We are taking turns in a very orderly way, and we’re not even drunk.”

“Well, I’m drunk and I think it’s a bad idea,” said Dave. “Shooting isn’t for babies. That’s like, the first rule of shooting.”

“We aren’t letting Flikka shoot,” said Lika. “He’s too young to get a turn.”

“Not the point,” said Dave. “Sorry, but this is where I put my foot down. You’ve got to stop or I’m telling the bouncer.”

“Come on Dave, don’t be like that,” said Molly. “Just let us have our fun.”

“Nope,” said Dave, opening the door to return to the inside of the bar. “You’ve got two minutes to knock it off before I tell.”

“God, I still can’t believe you had a threesome with that guy,” said Sallycat. “Guess we’d better go before we get in trouble.”

“Okay,” said Lika, putting away her pistol. “Where should we go now?”

Chapter 42

Lika? This is Hequa,” said Hequa into the phone. “I’m in your neighborhood. Can I stop by?”

“Yes. I’m at home,” said Lika. “Teddy is here with Flikka. Should I tell him to go?”

“No need,” said Hequa. “I’m walking up to your door now.”

Hequa entered without knocking, and found Teddy sitting on the living room floor playing with the baby while Lika sat at the kitchen table surfing the web.

“Hello Flikka,” said Hequa, producing a small hand carved wooden pig. “I carved you a pig. Here, Teddy, show Flikka the pig.”

“Look at the little piggy,” said Teddy, wiggling the toy in front of the baby’s face. “Look at the little piggy from uncle Hequa.”

“Hequa?” said Lika. “Can you come over here and tell me what I’m looking at?”

“Okay,” said Hequa, walking over to stand behind Lika and look at her screen. “What is is?”

“Look here,” said Lika. “After talking with Sallycat the other night, I decided to buy some cryptocurrency. But now I’ve been sucked into a game of buying and selling cryptocurrencies. The prices always move, and the game is to try to get more than you started with.”

“Well, are you winning or losing?” asked Hequa, studying the numbers on Lika’s screen.

“Losing,” said Lika. “But I won so much yesterday that losing today is okay. What was it you wanted to talk to me about?”

“The most important thing was the new animal carving I made for Flikka,” said Hequa.

“Thank you,” said Lika. “Your carvings are much better than the toys I see in stores.”

“Good,” said Hequa. “But there is something else. I’ve been talking with your friend Greg from Colorado. After we got back from our trip, I sent him some seeds from zanzi and other plants from Jhanya, and we have talked about many things since. I’ve also been talking with Gerald and Sue from Through the Stars about what their next steps might be.”

“Okay,” said Lika. “It sounds like you have something to say, so just say it.”

"I'm going to help Through the Stars open a retreat center, where people can go to learn about life on Jhanya, the trances, our medicines, and things like that."

"Sounds like a good plan," said Lika. "What is my part of it?"

"Greg has agreed to help design the place, so the buildings and gardens work together in harmony with nature," said Hequa. "Through the Stars will design the educational programming and promote the place. I will pay for most of it to start, and Through the Stars will pay me back over time. But we need someone to run the place, and I think that should be you."

"You want me to run a retreat center?" asked Lika. "You know I have a baby, right?"

"You have done well managing that building for me," said Hequa. "I think you would do even better managing the retreat center. And it would be very helpful to have someone from Jhanya in charge there. What do you think?"

"What about you?" asked Lika. "Why don't you want to do it?"

"Before I got my loft, I had a storefront embassy for Jhanya," said Hequa. "I tried to teach people about our home planet there, but mostly people didn't care. From that experience, I learned that I am not a very good ambassador. I think you could be a better ambassador than me. Plus, I have many other big projects that demand my attention."

"Hold on," said Lika, clicking on the screen. "Just had to sell

before I lost too much,” she explained. “Okay, let’s say I’m considering this. Where is your retreat center going to be?”

“Right now, we are thinking on Greg’s property,” said Hequa. “There are many things that will have to be redone, but his garden is a good start for a much larger garden, and he has agreed to accept payment for the property in Ethereum. He will keep his house and shop, but the rest of the property will be ours.”

“I don’t know,” said Lika. “I get along with Greg, and you, and Gerald and Thomas from Through the Stars. But what about Sue? Her and I don’t get along very well at all. And if Through the Stars is in charge of the property, that would mean Sue would be remote-controlling it. I don’t like the idea of Sue being my remote-controller.”

“Sue doesn’t like it much either,” said Hequa. “But since my money would be funding the project, I would be in charge to start. Not Sue.”

“How long do I have to decide?” asked Lika.

“You have to decide soon,” said Hequa. “Some work would begin right away. But you wouldn’t have to go there until next spring.”

“What about my house? And my garden?” asked Lika. “And Teddy being able to come over and play with Flikka?”

“The house is yours,” said Hequa. “Maybe you could have someone come by to tend your garden while you’re away.”

“Okay, I’ll think about it,” said Lika. “But why do I get the feeling there’s something you’re not telling me?”

“You are very perceptive,” said Hequa. “What I haven’t said is that this retreat center is just one small part of a much larger plan I have.”

“What plan?” asked Lika.

“I want to create a special network of buildings and properties in different parts of this country,” said Hequa. “Places where people can live and work more harmoniously with nature. Where government identity and government money can be made less and less important, and where things are more relaxed, like they were on Jhanya.”

“That’s a big plan,” said Lika. “You really think Through the Stars is the right partner for it?”

“Why not?” said Hequa. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned about the people of Earth who chase UFOs, it’s that such people know that there are always bigger, more important truths out there. I say who better to help me realize a grand vision than them?”

“So your plan came from a vision?” asked Lika.

“In a way,” said Hequa. “The idea for it came after several cups of coffee, while I was climbing around the fassa in my loft.”

“Well, I had a coffee vision the other day of a magical portal opening up in the back of my refrigerator,” said Lika. “Does

that mean I should cut a hole in the fridge to find out what's behind it?"

"No," said Hequa. "But the vision I'm talking about was about the way strands of ffassa form a large, strong network. And the idea was to connect places into that kind of network, so each place could be anchored by all of the others into something very robust."

"I understand," said Lika. "I think I will help you with this, assuming all of the details can be worked out."

Chapter 43

The property Lika arrived to with toddler in tow was hardly recognizable as Greg's place. His small house and large pole shed shop remained unchanged, as did the large garden behind the shop. But all of the other ramshackle structures on the property had been razed. In their place was a large communal fire pit surrounded by canvas yurts, a dining hall, a building containing bathrooms and showers, another building housing a 'learning center', and many stone-lined walkways labeled with cute little signs.

"Looking good, huh?" said Sallycat as she got out of the driver's seat. "Your apartment is in that building there, above the learning center."

"See? It's our new house," said Lika to her child.

"New house," said Flikka. "New house. New house."

"Thanks Sallycat," said Lika. "You mind helping with our bags?"

"Why would I mind?" asked Sallycat. "It's not like I've got a supercomputer a thousand miles away to manage or anything."

“Thanks,” said Lika, grabbing a duffel bag with the hand that wasn’t holding Flikka and starting off towards the learning center.

“Hello, Lika,” said Greg as he approached from the garden. “How was the drive?”

“Fine,” said Lika. “It looks like you’ve been very busy around here.”

“You got that right,” said Greg. “I stocked your place with some groceries, but I didn’t really know what you wanted. We do town runs at ten every morning, so if there’s something you want, get it on the shopping list before then.”

“Okay,” said Lika. “Are people already here visiting?”

“Nope,” said Greg. “But there are still workers finishing up this and that. A few are crashing in the yurts. For now, I do the town runs myself. Next week, when the first batch of folks come for retreat, I’ll hand that job over to the program coordinator, a guy from Through the Stars named Thomas. You know him?”

“I know Thomas,” said Lika. “But what I don’t know is what exactly I’m supposed to be doing here.”

“Way I was told, you’re in charge of the whole thing,” said Greg. “I’m the grounds keeper, so just find me if there’s an issue with a building or some other part of the property. Thomas will handle the guests, so just go to him if there’s an issue with one of them. If you want to work, there’s plenty to be done,

especially in the garden. But how you spend your day-to-day? That's pretty much up to you."

"That's great, Greg," said Lika. "Thank you. I'd better get my things put away."

"Yeah, settle in. Take your time," said Greg.

After unpacking and carefully inspecting her new apartment with Flikka, Lika looked over the learning center. It consisted of a single large room with shelves of three ring binders along one wall. At the front of the room was a large projection screen, and there were tables and chairs set set up throughout. Lika pulled a binder at random and found it filled with heavily redacted government files about an Air Force pilot who had seen unusual objects in the sky in 1956. She was just placing this back on the shelf when she heard a noise at the door.

"Thomas?" said Lika as Thomas walked in. "Thomas, I'd like you to meet my son, Flikka."

"Thomas," said Flikka.

"That's right. I'm Thomas," said Thomas to the baby. "Hi Lika. I just arrived. Thought I'd come check out my classroom."

"It all looks very organized," said Lika. "The people will stay in the yurts, and learn about the alien plants in the garden, and come here to study your UFO archives."

"So far so good, right?" said Thomas. "Hequa has also donated

a few alien technologies to the shop here, so visitors can see your tech in action.”

“Good,” said Lika. “All of this looks very good. But I’m still not exactly sure what my role is. Do you know what I’m supposed to be doing here every day?”

“Well, the way I understand it, your job is to manage the whole operation,” said Thomas. “Like, I’m the program coordinator, which means I’ll be handling the guests, and teaching them about what we’ve learned so far about UFOs and aliens. That’s my job, but most of what I’ll actually be doing is taking pictures and video of what goes on around here.”

“Okay,” said Lika. “So if my job is managing things, what does that mean I’ll mostly be doing?”

“Up to you,” said Thomas. “You and the little one are basically the main exhibit, since you’re an actual alien from another planet. I’m sure whatever you want to do would be fine. But I do have some thoughts, if you’re open to them.”

“Yes,” said Lika. “Tell me what you think.”

“Well, what if you ate and dressed and behaved exactly like you would on your home planet?” asked Thomas.

“I am already dressed in the robes I brought from Jhanya,” said Lika. “But eating the foods would be impossible. I am now very used to Earth foods. Still, I guess I can talk to Greg and see if setting up baths and a shooting range would be possible.

The baths would have to be part of the garden's water system because of how dry it is here, but the shooting range should be easy to set up."

"Sounds like a good start," said Thomas. "The day before the guests arrive, we should probably all sit down to have a meeting."

"Pools of standing water?" asked Greg when Lika brought up the idea of installing some baths on the property. "Do you know how much would get lost to evaporation?"

"I've been thinking about that," said Lika. "What if we put a covering over an area where a few baths are made, right next to the garden, and make the baths part of the garden's water system?"

"Hmm," said Greg. "Only way I see that working is if we dig a big pit, so the pools are way down below ground level, otherwise the place would get way too hot. And maybe make just one pool, big enough for a few people."

"So this is possible?" asked Lika.

"I don't see why not," said Greg. "The pit will have to be about seven feet deep, and we'll have to get some pipe underneath the bottom of it. There's plenty of rock to line it with, and plenty of sheet metal to cover it with, but I'll have to sit down and work out all the specifics before I can say for sure that we've got everything we'll need. And the digging alone will be a whole lot of work. Are you thinking the guests will help you build it

when they get here?”

“Maybe,” said Lika. “But I can start the digging myself, today. I’ve got nothing better to do, and the work will be good for me.”

“Really? Well okay,” said Greg. “Anywhere on the north edge of the garden is fine. But try to find a place where there aren’t any yucca growing. We’re basically creating a cistern that people can play in, and every yucca plant is its own tiny cistern, so there’s no need to disrupt what’s already working.”

Chapter 44

For the next few days, Lika dug while Flikka played nearby. Moving shovelful after shovelful of desert sand, she thought about her old life on Jhanya, and about her new life on Earth. Gradually, Lika created an oval-shaped hole in the ground roughly fifteen feet on its long side. The work was hard, and it seemed endless, but after two days Lika had created a hole in the ground that seemed suitable for the pool.

By the time the first group of guests arrived for their retreat, the pool had been plumbed and the concrete which lined it was setting. Having decided against using old sheet metal to cover the pool in favor of heavy plastic over a pvc frame, Lika was in the process of marking out places where supports would go when Thomas brought these guests over to meet her.

“Everyone,” announced Thomas. “Everyone, this is Lika, from the planet Jhanya.”

“Hello,” said Lika. “It is very good to meet you all. My child Flikka and I are making a meditation pool here. Do you know about meditation pools?”

“I do,” said a bespectacled man wearing blue suspenders. “They were used on your home planet by Lowlanders to enter into special meditative states, right?”

“That’s right,” said Lika. “The trances were outlawed in the part of Jhanya I was from. But I became friends with a Lowlander here on Earth, and he taught me the value of the trances.”

“You mean Hequa?” asked a woman in a straw hat. “Is Hequa the father of your child?”

“Yes, I mean Hequa,” said Lika, laughing lightly. “Hequa is not Flikka’s father, but he is very good with the child.”

“So someone from Earth fathered the child? Amazing,” said the woman in the straw hat.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I’m sure Lika has work to get back to,” said Thomas. “If you’ll follow me, I’ll show you the learning center, which contains millions of pages of documents on every aspect of the UFO phenomenon.”

“Does it contain government reports on Jhanya?” asked the man in blue suspenders.

“As far as we’re aware, there are no government reports on Jhanya,” said Thomas. “Though there may be some classified data somewhere on some of Jhanya’s technologies.”

“Look at these,” said Lika, pointing at some nearby plants. “These are zanzi plants, one of Jhanya’s most important

medicines. The seeds for these plants were brought here from my home world.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, please,” said Thomas. “There will be plenty of time for you to ask Lika your questions over dinner, or at the evening fire.”

During dinner, Lika fielded a long series of questions about herself, Flikka, and Jhanya. By the time the after dinner fire had been lit, she was tired of answering questions, but the guests were not tired of asking them. After dinner, sitting by the fire, holding her sleeping child, Lika felt herself growing irritable. Looking around at the small group of guests who hadn't yet called it a night, she began to wonder if this whole retreat center thing was nothing more than a giant mistake.

“You,” said Lika to the man in blue suspenders. “Harley, yes? At dinner, you asked me many questions about my ship. It seemed like there was something specific you want to know, but did not ask about. What was that?”

“Well, since you're asking, there is something,” said Harley. “You said you were in stasis for three hundred years, to come here. I'm wondering if you know enough about that stasis technology to help me replicate it.”

“No,” said Lika. “Hequa might, but I don't. Why does this interest you?”

“What interests me is getting off this rock and going to some other world,” said Harley. “See, I've never really felt at home

here, but if you came all this way, I'm thinking maybe you could help me find a way to go somewhere else."

"Amen to that," grumbled a man whose name Lika didn't know.

"Yeah, count me in," said the woman in the straw hat.

"Is this the thing?" asked Lika, looking to Thomas for a guidance that was not forthcoming. "Do you all just want to leave Earth? Why? Your planet is a very good place."

"Earth is all screwed up," said Harley. "It's all screwed up, and there's nothing I can do to change it. The people in power are evil, pure and simple, and I for one want out."

"I'll second that," said the grumbler.

"Me too," said the woman in the straw hat. "I don't know what's out there in the universe, but it has to be better than this place."

"I see," said Lika. "Well, I'm going to bed. But if I dream of a way to help you leave this planet, I will let you know tomorrow."

