

An abstract painting with a vibrant palette of blues and greens. The composition is dominated by thick, expressive brushstrokes that create a sense of movement and depth. A central vertical element, possibly a piece of wood or a textured brushstroke, stands out against the surrounding colors. The overall effect is one of dynamic energy and organic form.

Blue Dragon Mississippi

Mark Bailey

MARK BAILEY

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Chapter 1

So there was this dragon. A blue dragon named Pikwik, who lived in a cave accessible only from the deepest murky depths of the Mississippi River. As a blue dragon, Pikwik could hear everything that happened within a hundred miles. She could also hear the thoughts of people, because blue dragons are very psychic.

Although Pikwik had many pastimes, one of her favorites involved psychically connecting with a person and then pretending to be an all-knowing spirit. Although most people simply ignored her during this game and some went to great lengths to quiet the psychic intrusions, every now and again she found someone who was receptive to her extrasensory overtures. One such person was a man named the Great Bamzini.

The Great Bamzini had been a practicing stage magician from a young age. When he was fourteen, his interest in stage magic grew to include an interest in the occult, and he began attempting to summon ancient magical spirits using instructions found on the internet. As time went on, the Great Bamzini became convinced that his failure to effectively

summon these spirits stemmed from minor errors in his summoning technique. By age twenty-three, the Great Bamzini had refined his technique greatly, and knelt in his bedroom before an altar filled with arcane symbols while incense burned on a nightly basis in an ongoing attempt to secure real magical powers from mystical spirits.

One night when the Great Bamzini was attempting to summon a demon named Azazoth, Pikwik answered. "Hello, Great Bamzini," she said. "It is I, Pikwik, the greatest spirit of all."

"Holy shit!" said the Great Bamzini.

"You have summoned me from my eternal slumber," said Pikwik. "Puny mortal, what do you have to offer me?"

"This sweet smelling incense," said the Great Bamzini. "And myself as your loyal servant."

"You would be my servant?" asked Pikwik. "And what would you expect in return?"

"Nothing," said the Great Bamzini. "Or maybe knowledge. Like, knowledge of what's to come."

"I can share with you knowledge of what was, and is," said Pikwik. "But the incense you are burning is wrong for me. I prefer fish entrails, burned feathers, and tobacco, in that order."

"I don't have any of that stuff here," said the Great Bamzini.

“Do you have an erection?” asked Pikwik. “An erection will suffice today, in the absence of fish entrails, burned feathers, or tobacco.”

“Hold on,” said the Great Bamzini. “Okay, I’m ready. Great spirit Pikwik, tell me how to become the greatest magician in the world.”

“You once had a dog named Spot,” said Pikwik. “You must get this dog back at any cost.”

“Okay, but how will that make me a great magician?” asked the Great Bamzini.

“This is just the first step on your new path,” said Pikwik. “To become a great magician, you must first find all that you’ve lost and recover it. When you lost your dog, a part of you was lost as well. This is what you need to get back.”

“You are very wise, great spirit,” said the Great Bamzini.

The next day, the Great Bamzini used all of his savings to pay a couple of guys he’d met at an acting class to go and retrieve his dog from the woman he knew had stolen it. The day after that, the Great Bamzini knelt before his altar, achieved an erection, and lit a goose feather on fire while quietly intoning, “Great spirit Pikwik, it is I, your humble servant. Come to me.”

Pikwik waited until a second feather had been burned before answering the call. “Great Bamzini,” she said psychically. “I am here. Since you have retrieved your dog, you are ready for your

next task.”

“My next task?” said the Great Bamzini. “When do I become a great magician?”

“Do you doubt my wisdom, puny human?” asked Pikwik.

“No. It’s just that I don’t understand how this is supposed to work,” said the Great Bamzini.

“Should I seek my champion elsewhere?” asked Pikwik. “There is a man named Hequa who came here from another world. Maybe he would make a better great magician than you?”

“No,” said the Great Bamzini quickly. “It should be me. Or anyone but him. I can do it, I promise.”

“Very well,” said Pikwik. “There are several kinds of great magicians. What kind are you hoping to be?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” said the Great Bamzini.

“I mean, what power do you seek?” asked Pikwik. “Some seek power over crops, or over the opposite sex. Some seek perfect memory or great longevity. Some wish to talk to the dead, or collect great treasure, or discern truth from falsehood in any circumstance.”

“All those sound pretty good,” said the Great Bamzini. “But what I really want is to be a great performer. A great magician.”

“Even if that means you would come to hate performing?” asked Pikwik.

“Why would I ever hate performing?” asked the Great Bamzini. “I mean, I kind of hate it now. It pays next to nothing and people are always making fun of me. But I thought that stuff would get better if I got better.”

“Why would you think that?” asked Pikwik. “In my great wisdom, I can see that your hatred of performing magic can only grow with the importance of the performance. Is that really what you want for your life?”

“I don’t know,” admitted the Great Bamzini. “What if I want something different? Magic is really all I know how to do. But what if I just want to become a great and powerful man? Can you do that?”

“All I can offer is instructions, for spirits can not change the material world,” said Pikwik. “But if you want to become a great and powerful man, you will first need a new name.”

“What’s wrong with the Great Bamzini?” asked the Great Bamzini. “I changed my name to it when I was eighteen, and now it’s, like, an important part of who I am.”

“You must change your name to Silky, or Vance, or Hope,” said Pikwik. “You must pick one of these names for yourself before you can take the next step.”

“Seriously?” said the Great Bamzini.

“Indeed,” said Pikwik. “And remember, I can hear every conversation you have with other people, so I will know if you’re asking them to call you by your new name.”

“Fine,” said the Great Bamzini after giving it some thought. “Since I’m not going to be Vance or Hope, I guess I’ll go with Silky. God, it sounds like the name of some bad guy in a lame TV show.”

“Excellent,” said Pikwik. “Contact me again after you’ve made the change.”

Chapter 2

Iridescent, undulating scales reflected the minor light of Pikwik's glowing eyes. Deep in her lair, beginning to digest the many fish she'd just feasted upon, Pikwik listened closely to the human world. As the young magician formerly known as the Great Bamzini seemed to be following instructions, Pikwik allowed her awareness to sift through millions of other voices, looking for another deserving mind to connect with. Being attracted to drama, her awareness came to rest on a fight between a man named Bryce and a woman named Matilda.

"I cannot believe I am so stupid as to be with someone who would rather watch pornos than be with me," shouted Matilda.

"It was just one stupid video, and you said you were going to bed," said Bryce.

"You said the same thing last week," said Matilda. "And I can see it is the same video. The one where he pees on her. I don't want you to pee on me! Who would clean it up? You never clean anything! Do you even know how to clean?"

"Matilda," interrupted Pikwik psychically. "It is I, the great spirit

Pikwik. Tell him you're leaving, then go out into the yard so we can talk."

"What the fuck?" said Matilda. "Okay, listen Bryce, I can not even look at you right now. I am going outside to clear my head."

"Fine," said Bryce.

"Spirit?" said Matilda once she was standing in the back yard.

"I am here, child," said Pikwik. "Here to help you with your problem."

"My relationship is fine," said Matilda stubbornly. "Bryce is just an idiot."

"He is an idiot," said Pikwik. "But that's not the problem I am talking about. Remember, I am a great spirit. I know what your true problems are."

"You are not like the other spirits I have met," said Matilda. "How do I know you are not just trying to trick me into doing something terrible?"

"Why talk to me at all if that's what you think?" asked Pikwik.

"You talked to me first," said Matilda.

"Child, I know you feel trapped in your life," said Pikwik. "It is this that I can help with."

Pacing the back yard in the darkness, a thought occurred to Matilda. "Spirit," she said. "I think you are just me. A part of me that broke away because of the pressure I am under with Bryce and school and Edwina and everything."

"My name is Pikwik," said Pikwik. "And I am no more a part of you than you are a part of the clouds. But if you do not want my help, I will leave you to your life."

"No, wait," said Matilda. "What do you know about my problem?"

"I know that you came here from far away, and brought your problem with you," said Pikwik. "That you go out late at night and find men to have angry anonymous sex with. That afterwards you sometimes swim out into the cold river just so you can scream underwater and have no one hear you."

"So what?" asked Matilda. "So what if you know that? How can you help me with it?"

"When you screamed underwater, I heard you," said Pikwik. "The first part of my help is just to tell you that you are heard."

Matilda sat down in the grass and started to cry. "Why am I so mean to Bryce?" she demanded. "Why am I keeping secrets from Edwina? Spirit! What is my problem?"

"You have lived too many lives inside of this life," said Pikwik. "Your problem is that you're trying to connect all of these lives into a single thing, but you don't know how."

Suddenly the back door of the house opened and Edwina stuck her head out. "Matilda? I heard you and Bryce fighting. Are you talking to yourself back here?" she asked softly.

"I'm fine, Edwina," said Matilda. "Just talking to a spirit back here. Spirit, say something to Edwina so she knows I am fine."

"Well, do not sit in the yard all night," said Edwina. "You want me to talk to Bryce? I will talk to Bryce about his pornos."

"Edwina, just let me deal with it," said Matilda. "Good night."

"Goodnight," said Edwina as she closed the door.

"Spirit? Why didn't you say something to her?" asked Matilda.

"If you had called me Pikwik instead of just 'spirit' I might have granted your request and spoke to her," said Pikwik.

"What? Really?" asked Matilda.

"I might have, yes," said Pikwik. "But it is you that I've come to help, not her."

"If you are really here to help, tell me what I should do," said Matilda.

"Your choices are your own, young Matilda," said Pikwik. "But if you go out into the river, to the place where you usually scream, and call for me there, I will show you something that will change your life."

Chapter 3

During his first show with the new name, Silky the Magnificent performed flawlessly. His grand finale, a trick where he made a bouquet of flowers disappear into a large ball of fire, even caused the small crowd gathered around the street performer to applaud. Counting his earnings after the show was complete, Silky was thrilled to discover over a hundred dollars in the hat he'd passed around. This was far more than his street performances usually made, and he wondered if the new name had something to do with it.

Back at home, Silky excitedly prepared to contact his magical spirit. When he was ready, he burned a goose feather and said, "Great spirit Pikwik, it is I, your humble servant Silky."

"I am here," said Pikwik. "Have you made your name change complete, so that you no longer think of yourself as the Great Bamzini?"

"I think so," said Silky. "It'll take a long time for the legal name change, but I'm Silky the Magnificent on my website now. So what's the next step?"

“The next part will be a great challenge,” said Pikwik. “The first step is for you to clean out your car and keep it clean. Then, you must find a person who has wronged you greatly and forgive them.”

“Okay,” said Silky. “I mean, I can clean out my car. But people have been making fun of me my whole life. I wouldn’t even know where to start with finding someone to forgive. And the actual forgiveness — I’m not sure I know how to do that. Great spirit Pikwik, can you help me out on how to do that?”

“You already know who to forgive,” said Pikwik. “His face flashed in your mind as soon as you thought about it. As to how to forgive this man, I leave that up to you.”

“I mean, should I write a letter?” asked Silky. “Should I go find him and tell him he’s forgiven? Can I do it by email? How exactly is this supposed to work?”

“Calm your mind, little one,” said Pikwik. “As I’ve said, the manner of forgiveness is up to you. The thing that is important is that this forgiveness becomes complete within you. Understand?”

“I think so,” said Silky.

“Good,” said Pikwik. “Do this, and contact me again when you’re done.”

It took Silky the rest of the day to get his car clean. While he dug around between seats and under mats for bits of trash that had

accumulated in the vehicle, Silky considered his nemesis, the infamous Hequa, and tried to figure out the best way to forgive the man. For a time, Hequa and Silky had performed magic together. But then they'd gone their separate ways, and Hequa had played a series of increasingly elaborate, mean pranks on Silky afterwards.

After some consideration, Silky realized that he did not want to forgive Hequa. Rather, he feared Hequa deeply, and wanted to stay far away from him. But Pikwik said he had to forgive him, so Silky decided he would at least try. The first thing he did after cleaning his car was to remove an old video of Hequa performing with the Great Bamzini from his website. Then he drove to Hequa's building and sat in his car, trying to produce the courage necessary to face his old enemy.

After a few minutes, Silky saw Hequa exit the building. He got out of his car and approached. "Hequa," he said. "Hequa, there's something I need to talk to you about."

"Great Bamzini!" said Hequa. "I just saw that you finally removed my video from your website. Thank you."

"Yeah, um, my name's Silky now," said Silky. "I changed it from the Great Bamzini."

"Silky is a better name," said Hequa thoughtfully. "What was it you wanted to talk to me about? I'm just on my way to meet a potential sex partner, and I don't want to get to the restaurant late."

“I just want to say, I forgive you,” said Silky.

“Forgive me? For what?” asked Hequa.

“For heckling me at all those shows,” said Silky. “And for showing the deepfake video of me mishandling a dolphin to a crowd full of people. And for stealing my dog and giving it to your friend. All of it. I forgive you for all of it.”

Hequa laughed. “I made other deepfake videos of you doing worse things,” he said. “Do you forgive me for those, too? What about the one I’m working on now, which shows you locking a baby in a car on a hot summer day?”

“I don’t care,” said Silky, surprised to discover that he really didn’t. “I forgive you for all of it. I’m moving on with my life, and there’s no room where I’m going for our old petty feud.”

“But who will be my enemy now, if not you?” asked Hequa. “I worked very hard at being your enemy. What am I supposed to do?”

“Do whatever, but I’m done,” said Silky. “And I forgive you for everything.”

“You keep saying you forgive me, but what of the problems you made for me?” asked Hequa. “What about keeping too much of the money we made together, and having me on your website for so long after I asked you not to? What about when you brought an assassin to my very doorstep? You can forgive me, but I don’t forgive you for these things.”

“You know that so-called assassin was just another one of your friends,” said Silky. “And I don’t care if you forgive me or not. The old me might have cared, but not me now. Not Silky.”

“Okay,” said Hequa. “I guess I will stop being your enemy if you’re going to take the fun out of it. But I will still make the deepfake videos of you. They are very fun to make.”

“Fine,” said Silky. “Good luck with all that.”

“And good luck to you, Silky,” said Hequa. “Just know that the next time your henchmen terrorize Gotham, Batman will find you.”

Chapter 4

Shortly after sunset, Matilda swam out into the Mississippi and called for Pikwik. Feeling foolish, she treaded water in the cold, lazy current for a minute, and was just about to swim back to shore when she heard the spirit.

“Matilda,” said Pikwik. “Are you ready for a great adventure?”

“I don’t know,” said Matilda. “I don’t even know what I’m doing out here.”

“You are here to learn the truth about me,” said Pikwik. “Of all people, I have chosen you to learn the truth. Are you ready?”

“I think so,” said Matilda. “But why do I have to be in the river to learn the truth?”

“Because I am a dragon,” said Pikwik. “I am a blue dragon, and I would like to invite you to my lair.”

Matilda giggled at the absurdity of this. “Okay,” she said. “How do I get to your lair?”

“I will rise up below you,” said Pikwik. “You can ride me to my lair, but you must hold on very tight. And when I tell you to hold your breath, you must do it, for the entrance to my lair is deep under the water.”

Matilda was just beginning to process this information when she felt a massive form rising up below her. Soon, she was straddling a massive, spiny creature whose scales danced with reflected light. When the creature began to move, Matilda leaned forward, grabbing the creature’s spines tightly to maintain balance. Just above the water’s black surface, Matilda rode the dragon as it picked up speed.

After more than twenty minutes of this, Pikwik told Matilda to hold her breath, then dove deep into the river. Matilda felt her lungs about to burst before finally sensing dry air and not water around her again. Opening her eyes, Matilda could tell she was in a cave, and that the cave contained many things. But what captured her full attention was the bright glow of the dragon’s eyes peering at her from a few feet away.

“Pikwik, you are a dragon!” exclaimed Matilda. “I thought dragons were only in fairy tales.”

“Hello, Matilda,” said Pikwik. “It is very good to meet you in my true form.”

“But why ... pretend to be just a spirit, instead of telling people what you really are?” asked Matilda.

“More people believe in spirits than in dragons,” said Pikwik.

“And I like to keep myself secret in almost every case.”

“Okay, but why tell me your secret?” asked Matilda.

“A very good question,” said Pikwik. “Are you warm enough? You’re shivering a little.”

“I am good,” said Matilda as she adjusted her breathing to bring warmth to her body.

“One of my treasures is a blanket from Hudson Bay,” said Pikwik. “Here, I want you to be comfortable.”

From above, a heavy wool blanket fell over Matilda. “Hey,” she said, surprised. “How did you? Okay, thanks.”

“I have many treasures in my hoard,” said Pikwik. “But I have never shown them to anyone, until now.”

“All I see are glowing eyes and dark shapes,” said Matilda. “Have you brought me here just to add me to your hoard?”

“What a strange question,” said Pikwik. “I brought you here to show you wonders. I can return you to the place in the river where I picked you up at any time. Do you wish to go back already?”

“No,” said Matilda. “But I don’t know what you want me to do here.”

“You can do anything you want,” said Pikwik. “I know you like

to dance. I have a phonograph and some good records. Should I put on music?"

Matilda laughed. "Music?" she asked.

"Yes," said Pikwik. "I also have canned fish if you are hungry. And bottles of wine and liquor if you're thirsty."

"Ha!" said Matilda. "I will try your dragon wine."

Shadows moved, and Matilda heard a cork leave a bottle. She smelled the wine that the dragon held before her, and reached out to take it. "This is good," she said. "I did not know dragons lived in such style."

"What other way is there to live?" asked Pikwik. "How does it feel to be the only human ever to be served wine by a blue dragon?"

"It feels like I am in a dream," said Matilda. "And like I should be asking you for something important. But I don't really know what to ask for."

"That's okay," said Pikwik. "When I'm pretending to be a spirit, people ask me for all sorts of things, most of them impossible. It's a nice change to have someone who is just content to be."

Matilda fidgeted under her blanket, looking to the shadows where the dragon's body met the cave's darkness. "This looks like a big cave," she said. "How long have you lived here?"

“Something less than three thousand years,” said Pikwik. “As far as I know, I am the last blue dragon on this continent.”

“That’s cool,” said Matilda.

“I spend much of my time listening to the thoughts and conversations of the human world,” said Pikwik. “This is how I found you.”

“And what is so special about me?” asked Matilda.

“I think you know,” said Pikwik. “I see into minds, child. Right into them as if they were houses I can enter and examine. You might not know it, but there are many kinds of minds, and yours is one of the most unusual I have ever seen. It is as if your childhood mind is completely different from your mind as one of Edwina’s people, and that mind is likewise different from the new mind you have been developing as a student these last two years. One has not grown into the other as is the normal way. Instead, your minds have all remained separate and distinct, yet somehow you’ve managed to just keep living your life with these different minds all pulling you in different directions.”

“Lots of people have minds that pull them in different directions,” said Matilda. “I still don’t see what is different about me.”

“Perhaps you will in time,” said Pikwik. “For now, just consider how you feel when you dance, for the only time I have seen your minds come together as a whole and complete thing is when you are dancing. Are you sure I can’t put on some music?”

Something you could dance to?”

“Wait,” said Matilda. “Did you bring me here just to dance for you?”

“In part,” said Pikwik. “If I can get a closer look at how dancing stitches together these different parts of your consciousness, maybe I can learn something.”

“Okay,” said Matilda after a moment of thought. “I can dance for you. But I don’t need phonograph music or anything. My heartbeat is all the music I need.”

“Delightful,” said Pikwik as Matilda began stretching and moving her body.

For the next hour, Matilda danced for Pikwik in the cave. As she danced, she felt her body merge with the darkness, and the dust that rose when her bare feet fell, and the glowing dragon’s eyes politely studying her. Matilda felt these things, but did not focus on them, nor did she focus on the pictures from her inner world that came and went as if they were shapes in clouds. Instead, she focused only on her breath, the beating of her heart, and Traha, the group that had accepted her as one of their own and taught her the dance.

When Matilda was done dancing, she wrapped herself in the blanket and laid down on the cave’s soft floor. Pikwik watched as dreams replaced Matilda’s conscious thoughts, and let her sleep for two hours. When she woke, Matilda slowly sat up and met Pikwik’s glowing eyes with her own. “I think I am ready to

go back now," she said.

"Of course," said Pikwik. "And thank you. Your dance was most enlightening. But aren't you going to ask me for anything? Most people would want treasure from the hoard, or the answer to some great question."

"I do have a question, but I do not know if it is one that you can answer," said Matilda. "If I told the complete truth to Bryce and Edwina and everyone around, what would happen to me?"

"Good question," said Pikwik. "I can't see the future. But knowing you, if you did this, it would change some things. For better? For worse? I can't say. But the truth is easier to live with than lies, no matter how pretty the lies."

Chapter 5

“Great spirit Pikwik,” said Silky as he knelt before his altar and burned a feather. “It is I, Silky. I have done what you asked. I have cleaned out my car and forgiven Hequa.”

“Silky,” answered Pikwik psychically. “Why do you not put fish entrails on your altar? I told you fish entrails were my favorite, and burned feathers my second favorite. Why do you insist on summoning me with my second favorite thing?”

“I, uh, don’t even know where to get fish entrails,” said Silky.

“Well, do you even have an erection?” asked Pikwik.

“Just a sec,” said Silky. “Okay, now I do. And I have done what you asked. What’s next?”

“Next you must make a sacrifice to me,” said Pikwik. “You must get the finest bottle of wine you can find, bring this to the high bridge in St. Paul, and throw it into the river.”

“Seriously?” said Silky. “Is that all. I mean, oh great spirit, what should I do after sacrificing the wine to you?”

“Just make the sacrifice,” said Pikwik.

After spending all his money on a bottle of red wine whose name he couldn't pronounce, Silky sacrificed the wine as instructed, by flinging it into the river from the bridge. Shortly after the wine hit the water, Silky was walking back to his car when Pikwik again made contact.

“Silky, this looks like an excellent vintage,” said Pikwik psychically.

“It was the most expensive bottle I could afford,” said Silky.

“It is a good sacrifice,” said Pikwik. “I am very pleased. But are you sure you're ready for your next task already?”

“I'm ready,” said Silky. “With you here to guide me, I'm ready for anything.”

“Good,” said Pikwik. “The next thing you must do is learn to keep your silence. For the next three days, you must say nothing. If you break your silence before this time has passed, you must start over. Contact me again when this silence has been kept. And next time, use fish entrails on your alter.”

For the next three days, Silky holed himself up in his room, playing video games and wondering where to get fish entrails. When it came time to contact the spirit again, he went to the supermarket and bought a tilapia. Placing this whole on his alter, he achieved an erection and called out to Pikwik.

“Hello, young Silky,” answered Pikwik psychically. “Did you place a fish with no entrails on your altar? Are you making fun of me?”

“What? No. Come on, where am I supposed to find fish entrails anyway?” asked Silky.

“If I wanted tilapia, I would have gone to a restaurant that greatly overcharges for the mediocre food it serves,” said Pikwik.

“Spirits go to restaurants?” asked Silky.

“Only in the minds of people,” replied Pikwik. “Your failure to follow instructions makes me wonder whether you are as committed to your transformation as you need to be.”

“I’m committed,” said Silky. “Totally committed. Come on, what’s next?”

“Well, you did do well keeping silent,” said Pikwik. “You made it three days on your first try. So I guess I can overlook the tilapia issue.”

“Yes. Overlook it,” said Silky. “Tell me how to become a great and powerful man.”

“You must become ready to hear truths that you don’t want to hear,” said Pikwik.

“Okay, what does that mean?” asked Silky.

“It means truths as other people understand them,” said Pikwik. “During your next magic show, I will tell you what is in the minds of your audience. If you can incorporate this information into your performance, all who see it will know your power. But I warn you, knowing what is in the minds of people can be a challenging thing.”

“Okay,” said Silky. “So you want me to do, like, a mentalist thing?”

“Just do your act, and I will make contact when the time is right,” said Pikwik.

It was with some trepidation that Silky prepared for his next street performance. Arriving to the pedestrian mall where he usually performed, he set down the small bench he used as a stage, stood atop it, and started the juggling bit that he used to begin gathering a crowd. Soon enough, a dozen people had gathered before him, and Silky announced himself. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he said. “It is I, Silky the Magnificent, here to amaze you with a performance of incredible magic!”

“The man with the blue shirt just lost his job,” said Pikwik psychically. “He is considering suicide. The man next to him can not stop having sexual fantasies about a coworker named Val. The woman in green is trying in vain to remember what she did last night while blackout drunk. The couple with the kid has been stealing clothes from department stores so their kid has something new to wear to school.”

Silky balked at the barrage of information. But what could he

do but press on? “For my first trick, I need a volunteer,” he said. “You there. Come over and hold these three bits of rope. And try to stop fantasizing about Val while you do it.”

The man’s face turned red, and he looked around as if looking around would save him some embarrassment. “Alright,” he said, accepting the rope.

Once Silky had transformed the three bits of rope into a single piece of rope to the crowd’s very mild amazement, he got an idea. “You there, with the child,” he said. “My magical powers tell me that you’re having a hard time buying school clothes. Ladies and gentlemen, all of the tips I receive from today’s performance will be given directly to this lovely couple.”

The crowd looked to the couple. “Thank you,” said the woman. “But how did you know we needed help?”

“Magical powers,” said Silky the Magnificent. “But you are not the only people here who need help. Someone in this crowd has a drinking problem that has become dangerous. Someone else is thinking of doing something terrible following the loss of a job. Ladies and gentlemen, I may be nothing more than a humble street performer, but if there’s anything I can do to help, please see me after the show.”

“Very good,” said Pikwik once Silky had completed his act with the flower bouquet vanishing into a fireball. “That you are giving away your earnings to the couple in need shows great progress.”

After passing the hat and collecting about sixty dollars, Silky gave the money to the couple and packed up his things. "So great spirit, what's next now that I'm broke?" he asked while walking back to his car.

"Are you ready for the next step so soon?" asked Pikwik. "It will be much more challenging than what you have just done."

"I'm ready," said Silky. "I've done everything that you asked. Come on."

"We will see," said Pikwik.

Chapter 6

“I can see that something big has changed in you, but I do not know what it is,” said Edwina.

“Something has changed,” agreed Matilda as she popped another grape into her mouth. “But what has changed is hard for me to describe.”

“Why did you come home all wet the other night?” asked Bryce as he leaned on the table at which Edwina and Matilda were sitting. “Why won’t you just talk to me?”

“Either sit down to join the conversation or leave,” replied Matilda. “I do not like you standing there talking down at me.”

“Fine,” said Bryce, sitting down. “Sorry. I just want to know what’s going on.”

“Whatever it is, we can help you with it,” said Edwina.

“I do not need help with it,” said Matilda.

“It is not like you to keep secrets like this,” said Edwina. “Have you been drinking too much again?”

“No, it is nothing like that,” said Matilda. “I just made a new friend. And not a new boyfriend, Bryce. Just a new friend. Her name is Pikwik. We went swimming in the river the other night.”

“Pikwik? That is not a normal person’s name. How did you meet this Pikwik?” asked Edwina.

“I met her ... at the river,” said Matilda. “Is there a problem with me having a new friend?”

“Did you tell her about us? About Traha?” asked Edwina. “You did not tell her how many bitcoins we have, did you? No one can know how many bitcoins we have. It is not safe.”

“No, Edwina, I did not tell her about the bitcoins,” said Matilda.

“Did you tell her about me?” asked Bryce.

“I told her I have a boyfriend that I am going to break up with,” said Matilda. “Because all he does is watch pornos and give me trouble about who I might be meeting.”

“You told her that?” asked Bryce. “Is it true? Do you want to break up?”

“Okay, so I did not tell her that,” admitted Matilda. “But I am telling you now that we cannot be together if you keep acting

this way.”

“Acting what way?” asked Bryce.

“Like you can do whatever you want while I have to answer your questions about every little thing,” said Matilda.

“Matilda,” said Edwina. “I can tell there is something about this Pikwik that you wish to keep secret. I am sure it is nothing bad. But will you just tell us? If I was in your position, I would say what it is.”

“Fine,” said Matilda. “My new friend is not a person. She is a dragon that lives in the river.”

“What?” said Bryce.

“Interesting,” said Edwina. “Now I understand why you wish this to be a secret.”

“A secret?” asked Bryce. “More like a fantasy.”

“Bryce, if you will not believe me about this, we are over,” said Matilda.

“Sorry, but I don’t believe in dragons,” said Bryce, getting up. “Maybe we should talk again later after you’ve had some time to think about this.”

“If you have really met a dragon, that is very lucky,” said Edwina once Bryce had left the kitchen.

“Edwina, I met the dragon and she took me to her cave and I danced for her,” said Matilda. “I have been waiting for the right time to tell you, about this and other things. I guess that time is now.”

“You can see into my mind as well as I can see into yours,” said Edwina. “Tell me, what more do you need to tell me, that I do not already know?”

“Too much, Edwina,” said Matilda. “When I was with the dragon, I saw that I have been keeping too much from you.”

“I am listening,” said Edwina. “Whatever it is, you can tell me now, and we can work it out.”

Tears formed in Matilda’s eyes and began making their way down her face. “When I was little, and held captive, and afterwards, when Traha rescued me, and when I came to this country, I used to fantasize about being normal,” she said. “About having a normal life. Then, when I came to live with you here in this house, and Bryce became my boyfriend, and I started going to school, I thought my life had become normal. Or as normal as it ever would. But it is like I am haunted, Edwina. Haunted. Not by ghosts, or even by my past, but haunted by some deep part of me that I do not even know.”

“But the dance?” said Edwina gently. “You have danced the dance, alone and with me and with all of Traha. Has this not shown you what haunts you? And shown you how to lay it to rest?”

“The dance has shown me all it can,” said Matilda. “There are times when I feel hypnotized, like I am just watching myself do what I am doing. The dance showed me that it is a part of me hypnotizing me, but it has not shown me how to fix it.”

“Is this what you do when you go out late at night?” asked Edwina. “Do you feel hypnotized into it?”

“Sort of,” admitted Matilda. “Since meeting the dragon, I understand it a little better. But it is still hard to explain.”

“I do not understand,” said Edwina. “I want to help, but can not see how to.”

“Edwina, you know the things I have seen,” said Matilda. “The things I have lived. My life now is good, but having a good life does not make these things go away. The dance can lay them to rest, but they are all still there. All still joining together to make me the person that I am. And somewhere in these things, not in any specific event but in all of them together, are parts of myself that I do not understand. Parts that scare me, and make me do things that scare me more. I am sorry I did not tell you sooner, but I still do not even know how to talk about it.”

“This is a good start,” said Edwina. “And now I have at least some sense of what we are dealing with.”

“I am serious about breaking up with Bryce,” said Matilda. “I just do not see it working to be with him with all of this going on.”

“Alright,” said Edwina. “But that is your conversation to have with him. I am more interested in what I can do to help.”

“What if I move into the house you just bought for Traha?” asked Matilda. “The one right down the street? I could help the others who are moving in there, and break up with Bryce without either of us having to find a new place of our own.”

“That could work,” said Edwina. “But I would rather have you stay here and Bryce move down the street,” said Edwina. “Especially after what you have just told me, I want to keep you close.”

Chapter 7

“How am I supposed to become great and powerful if I’m broke?” complained Silky aloud as he parked his car. “Great spirit Pikwik, I don’t understand this at all.”

As Pikwik remained silent, Silky went into his house, made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, then proceeded to his room. He sat down in front of his computer, checked his website, discovered that no one wanted to book a show, and started playing video games. Growing bored with the game after twenty minutes, Silky went over to his closet and pulled the altar out. He was just about to light a feather on fire to summon Pikwik when he heard the spirit call out.

“Silky, your sister has been complaining to your mother about the smell of burnt feathers,” said Pikwik. “I know you were about to summon me. What do you want?”

“Oh great spirit Pikwik, I am ready for the next phase of your plan to make me great and powerful,” said Silky.

“You say you are ready,” said Pikwik. “But did you even achieve an erection before beginning your latest attempt to summon

me?”

“Um. Hold on,” said Silky.

“Oh, don’t bother,” said Pikwik. “I am prepared to tell you what the next step is, but you may not like it.”

“What? Okay,” said Silky. “Okay, what’s the next step?”

“The enemy you forgave,” said Pikwik. “The one called Hequa. His mind is closed to me, and I wish to know it. You must convince Hequa to open his mind to me.”

“Uhh, how am I supposed to do that?” asked Silky.

“You must get him to consume a great deal of coffee,” replied Pikwik. “When Hequa becomes intoxicated by coffee, it is easier for me to see his thoughts.”

“Fine. I’ll try,” said Silky.

“You must also begin washing your own laundry, for your mother has grown tired of doing your laundry,” said Pikwik.

“Seriously?” asked Silky. “Well, okay.”

After putting a load of clothes in the wash, Silky called Hequa. “Hello, Hequa?” he said when his old nemesis picked up. “This is Silky. I am wondering if you want to drink a bunch of coffee and talk about stuff.”

“Silky? Do you need a place to lay low because Batman is on your trail?” asked Hequa.

“You made a comment about Batman the last time we met, too,” said Silky. “What’s with that?”

“Silky sounds like the name of a Batman villain,” said Hequa. “I’m just having fun.”

“Okay,” said Silky. “So do you want to get together for coffee?”

“Yes,” said Hequa. “If you come to my building. I just finished a new video that I want to show you. Come to my building and go to the fifth floor. I’ll be waiting.”

“That’s great,” said Silky. “See you soon.”

Arriving to Hequa’s building with a bag of coffee grounds, Silky pressed the button for floor five and was buzzed in. Hequa was waiting for him, holding a carafe of coffee and two cups. “Let’s go to the roof,” said Hequa. “Just follow me up the stairs.”

Silky followed Hequa to a rooftop patio. “Hey, this place is awesome,” he said as they sat down. “Kind of cold, this time of year, but awesome.”

“It is awesome,” said Hequa. “But first things first. Once you’re comfortable, I have a new video to show you.”

Unsure of what to expect, Silky accepted Hequa’s phone and pressed the play button. The video that played showed him

sneaking into an archaeological site and spray painting a phallus over an ancient cave painting. “What the hell?” he said. “Man, that really does look like me.”

“Very good deepfake, yes?” said Hequa. “I had to make three videos into one to get the right effect.”

“Pretty cool,” said Silky, returning the phone. “Way more realistic than the one of me with that dolphin that you used to embarrass me at that party.”

“The light on the dolphin one was hard to get right,” said Hequa, taking a sip of coffee. “I’m happier with this one.”

“Cool,” said Silky. “Good coffee by the way.”

“Yes,” said Hequa. “Silky, you know I am from the planet Jhanya and not from Earth. And you know coffee has a much more intoxicating effect on me than it does on Earth people. Is there a reason you wish to sit with me while I become intoxicated?”

“Umm, sort of,” said Silky. “But I’m not sure if I’m allowed to talk about it.”

“Here, smoke this blunt and then decide,” said Hequa, handing Silky a joint.

“Sounds good,” said Silky.

“Are you still doing magic?” asked Hequa. “How is the act?”

“Basically fine,” said Silky. “I’ve got a new finale, where I make flowers disappear into a ball of fire.”

“That sounds better than the old finale,” said Hequa. “Are you using flash cotton with a palm igniter for the fire?”

“Ring igniter,” said Silky. “With a special reel to pull the flowers under my cape at the right time.”

“How do your audiences like it?” asked Hequa.

“Better than my old routine,” said Silky.

For the next forty minutes, they talked about magic and deepfake videos while consuming coffee and weed. Silky lazily watched Hequa’s coffee intoxication develop and wondered if the weed would make it harder to communicate with the spirit Pikwik. When Hequa began slowly waving his hands in front of his face so as to see trails, Silky knew Hequa’s coffee intoxication was complete. “Hequa, I have a confession,” he said finally. “There is a great spirit that I know, who wishes to see into your mind.”

“He knows I’m looking into his mind,” said Pikwik psychically to Silky.

“I can sense this spirit,” said Hequa. “Spirit! Why are you friends with a person like Silky?”

“He asked for my help, so I am helping,” said Pikwik to Hequa.

“Aha! Silky, I always knew you were tricky,” said Hequa. “But finding a spirit ally is very tricky, even for you. How did you manage it?”

“The procedure for conjuring is very complex, and took me a long time to master,” said Silky.

“Wait a minute,” said Hequa. “Spirit, are you the same spirit I met while floating in the river a couple of years ago? You seem like the same one.”

“Yes,” said Pikwik to both of them. “It is I, Pikwik, and my servant Silky has just delivered to me the secret thoughts of Hequa.”

In the long silence that followed, Silky looked at his phone three times while Hequa poured another coffee. “So that’s it, then?” said Hequa finally. “You wanted to meet so your mysterious spirit could meet me?”

“I guess,” said Silky. “Something about you being from another world made the spirit curious, I figure.”

“Does the spirit have a name?” asked Hequa. “I have read about some of the spirits of this world, but until now I thought they were simply metaphors.”

“Well this one seems pretty real,” said Silky. “Its name is Pikwik, and it’s helping me to become a great and powerful man.”

“Are you sure that’s what it’s doing?” asked Hequa. “Are you

sure it's even a spirit? What if it's not a spirit, but some new technology being used by the government to get close to my secrets?"

"Remember when we used to perform together, and you had too much coffee and started talking like that?" asked Silky. "Talking about secret government plots and whatever?"

"I remember," said Hequa. "But I'm finding it easier to believe in a government plot putting thoughts into my head than in a mystical spirit being allied with my old partner."

"Pretty crazy, right?" said Silky. "But just think about all the people who refuse to believe you're an alien from another planet. I mean, if you're possible, why not a mystical spirit?"

"Pikwik," said Hequa loudly. "I can still feel you in my mind. What is your game, here?"

"Just curious about the man from Jhanya," said Pikwik to both of them. "Hequa, you have traveled farther than anyone I've ever met. Your mind is a rare thing. Please pardon my curiosity."

"Fine," said Hequa, lighting another joint. "I will sit here and smoke blunt until my mind moves too slowly for you to see. Silky! Are you with me?"

"Okay," said Silky, worrying that Hequa had messed up things with Pikwik.

"This is perfect," Pikwik assured Silky. "You have served me

well today.”

Chapter 8

Matilda tried to break up with Bryce gently, but he still took it hard, spending three days sulkily collecting his meager belongings before he was finally ready to leave. Though he was just moving down the street to another of Edwina's houses, Bryce dragged out his goodbyes. Once he had left and Matilda's room was hers and hers alone, she felt neither joy nor sadness about the breakup. Rather, she felt like a new chapter of life had begun, and she had no way of knowing what was in store for her.

"Dragon," said Matilda aloud while sitting on the bed in her mostly-empty bedroom. "Dragon Pikwik, it is me. Are you there?"

"Hello child," said Pikwik psychically. "What can I do for you today?"

"Nothing," said Matilda. "I just miss you, and wanted to say hi."

"Don't you have an important calculus test today?" asked Pikwik. "Shouldn't you be studying for that, and leaving to catch the bus very soon?"

“Yes, I should be leaving,” said Matilda. “Will you stay with me while I go to class?”

“As you wish,” said Pikwik. “But do not blame me if your test doesn’t go well.”

Matilda talked aloud to Pikwik while she was waiting for the bus, and while she was on the bus, and throughout the walk to class. She went into great detail on the subject of why she had broken up with Bryce, which seemed to bother some of her fellow bus riders. Just before sitting down to the computer on which her calculus test would be taken, Matilda told Pikwik about Traha’s bitcoins despite her promise to Edwina to keep the bitcoins a secret. And, when her test was completed, she resumed the mostly one way conversation while aimlessly wandering around campus until her next class.

“I am most curious about these bitcoins,” said Pikwik during a lull in Matilda’s monologue. “As you know, I am a collector of great treasures. I have gold and liquor and tapestries of great value. I have the finest weapons carried by people going back hundreds of years. I have baskets and pottery and religious artifacts. But I do not have any bitcoins. Tell me child, how can I add bitcoins to my hoard?”

“Pikwik, do you even know what bitcoin is?” asked Matilda.

“It is like gold that lives on computers, is it not?” asked the dragon.

“Sort of, but not really,” said Matilda. “It is like a computer

program that many people run, that makes new bitcoin and keeps track of where the existing bitcoin goes. Bitcoin itself is just code, which can be stored on a computer or even written down on paper.”

“Fascinating,” said Pikwik. “That explains what I have seen when I have looked into the minds of people for answers about this precious thing.”

“If Edwina knew I was telling you this, she would flip,” said Matilda. “But we have more bitcoin than we know what to do with. If you really want some, and remember it is just a code written on paper, I could ask Edwina about maybe trading for something else in your hoard.”

“Most intriguing,” said Pikwik.

“There was a time when we had opals,” said Matilda. “Tens of thousands of them. We used them to play a sort of game that everyone liked. Tell me, do you have gemstones in your hoard?”

“I have a collection of seashells from around the world,” said Pikwik. “They are very beautiful.”

“Nah, Edwina would never go for that,” said Matilda. “It would have to be something like gold or gems.”

“What about whiskey?” asked Pikwik. “A hundred years ago, some people hid six cases of it in a cave, and I took it from their cave and put it in my hoard. Could you trade me bitcoins for this hundred-year-old whiskey?”

“Let me think about it,” said Matilda. “I will let you know after class.”

A couple of hours later, Matilda was walking to the bus stop when Pikwik broke into her thoughts.

“Have you thought about the whiskey?” asked Pikwik.

“Yeah, I have,” said Matilda. “And the truth is I just do not know. I want to help you, but I feel Edwina would be mad if I traded away any of our bitcoin. I have three bitcoins myself. Maybe I could trade you one bitcoin for one case of the whiskey and as much gold as I could carry.”

“Will you come to the river tonight to make the trade?” asked Pikwik. “I get very excited about expanding my hoard.”

“I could maybe do that,” said Matilda. “But I would need a ride. I am not about to ask Bryce for help while he is still upset from our breakup.”

“Would you trust me to find you the ride?” asked Pikwik. “How does midnight for a meeting time sound?”

“You know what? That sounds good,” said Matilda.

“Then your ride will arrive at midnight, to take you to the shores of the river,” said Pikwik. “But you must not tell the driver about our deal, or even that I am a dragon. Just tell him you are doing a favor for a spirit named Pikwik.”

“Are all dragons as strange as you?” asked Matilda.

“Dragons are strange,” said Pikwik. “Now, please excuse me. It will take me some time to go through my hoard to find your treasures.”

“Okay,” said Matilda. “Guess I will just be waiting outside my house at midnight.”

Back at home, Matilda napped briefly, then transferred exactly one bitcoin to a new paper wallet she made for the purpose. Although there was a part of her that feared it was unwise to do a bitcoin trade with a dragon, another part of her found the prospect thrilling. And if she could somehow get more gold than the bitcoin was worth, all the better.

“Edwina, I’m going out tonight and I do not want you to worry,” said Matilda to Edwina over dinner.

“Is it a date? So soon after Bryce?” inquired Edwina.

“Not a date,” said Matilda. “I am going to meet with the dragon Pikwik at the river.”

“This ... I do not know what to think of this,” said Edwina.

“Think nothing,” said Matilda. “Pikwik is just helping me, like a friend.”

“This feels wrong,” said Edwina. “Something about it feels wrong. What are you not telling me?”

“Well, Pikwik promised to give me presents,” said Matilda. “Bottles of whiskey that are a hundred years old.”

“You drink too much sometimes already,” said Edwina. “I do not think it is a good idea.”

“I am going,” said Matilda. “But if it makes you feel better, I will promise not to drink any of the whiskey tonight.”

“Good,” said Edwina. “And be very careful. I am suspicious of this dragon.”

“You are suspicious of everyone,” said Matilda.

Chapter 9

“Remember, do not ask this woman any questions,” said Pikwik psychically to Silky as he pulled up in front of the house at midnight. “And do not reveal that you are my chosen servant. You are just to drive her to the river, then wait in your car for thirty minutes, then drive her back to this house with the package she will be picking up.”

“I don’t really get it, but okay,” said Silky.

“Her name is Matilda,” said Pikwik. “She is waiting for you now. Honk, so she knows you are here.”

Silky honked, and saw a young woman approach the car. He rolled down the window and said, “Over here.”

Matilda eyed the old, dented sedan warily before getting in on the passenger side. “You are sent by the spirit Pikwik?” she asked as she buckled her seatbelt. “I am Matilda. Who are you?”

“I’m Silky,” said Silky. “Good to meet you. Guess I’m driving you to the river.”

“Good,” said Matilda. “Do you do many errands for this spirit?”

“None like this,” said Silky as he put the car into gear. “I’m not supposed to ask you any questions. But I have to know. How did this spirit first come to you?”

“That is my secret,” said Matilda. “Will you tell me how you came to know Pikwik?”

“Um, I used an ancient summoning spell,” said Silky.

“A spell? Like a magic spell?” asked Matilda, stifling a laugh. “Did you have to sacrifice a virgin or something?”

“No virgin,” said Silky. “But for some reason this spirit is obsessed with fish entrails and burned feathers.”

“Strange. I did not know,” said Matilda.

“You must stop talking about me,” said Pikwik directly to both of their minds. Silky went pale. Matilda laughed. They drove in silence the rest of the way. When they arrived at the river, Silky parked and Matilda got out of the car without a word. “Pikwik?” she said as she approached the riverbank. “Pikwik, I can’t see anything down here. Am I getting close?”

A shadowy mass moved on the water. Soon, Matilda could make out the outline of the dragon’s head against the violet sky. “Pikwik!” she said, delighted. “Do you have my treasures?”

“They are here,” said Pikwik, tapping a blob of shadow in the

darkness. “Do you have my bitcoin?”

“I wrote it down on paper and sealed it in a plastic bag,” said Matilda.

“Please place this gently in my mouth,” said Pikwik, moving uncomfortably close to Matilda. “I promise not to bite.”

Matilda did as she was asked and set the bagged slip of paper on Pikwik’s tongue. “Your teeth are amazing,” she said, backing away.

The dragon’s head moved delicately in silence for a moment. “There,” said Pikwik. “The bitcoin will be safe until I reach my lair.”

“Good,” said Matilda, making her way to the treasure that the dragon had promised her. Finding a box containing twelve bottles and a heavy, grapefruit-sized leather purse filled with coins, Matilda squealed in delight.

“You are satisfied with our trade?” asked Pikwik.

“It is awesome,” said Matilda. “Thank you, Pikwik.”

“Thank you, young Matilda,” said Pikwik. “I will return to my lair now. I am very excited to find the right place in my hoard for this new piece of treasure.”

As Pikwik returned fully to the river, Matilda set the gold purse on the case of whiskey and lifted the case. The cumbersome

weight of this combined with the darkness and uneven terrain to make returning to the car difficult. It took her twenty minutes to make it back to where the enigmatic Silky was waiting. When she finally arrived, she opened the back door and placed her treasures there before hopping in up front.

“You good?” asked Silky.

“Yeah,” said Matilda. “Sorry it took so long.”

“No problem,” said Silky, pulling out of his parking space. “You know, I’ve been thinking. And it occurs to me that you must be some kind of master magician.”

“Why on Earth would you think that?” asked Matilda.

“I mean, why else would you be running errands for this powerful spirit?” asked Silky.

“But if I was a master magician, would not the spirit be running errands for me?” asked Matilda.

“I suppose,” said Silky. “But how do I know that isn’t what’s going on?”

“Some things are not for you to know,” said Matilda. “But you have been very helpful to me tonight. I will not forget it.”

The drove the rest of the way without speaking. Once they’d parked in front of Matilda’s house, she got out and retrieved her treasures from the back seat. Fishing a gold coin out of the

purse, Matilda handed this to Silky. “For your trouble,” she said, collecting her things and turning to leave without waiting for a response.

“Thanks. Guess I’ll see you around,” said Silky as the car door closed.

Driving home, Silky put on Scandinavian folk music at top volume and inspected his new coin with his fingers. Judging by its weight, it was gold for sure, and big enough to be worth at least a few hundred bucks. Back in his room, Silky consulted the internet and discovered the coin to be a gold 1857 Liberty Head, worth over two thousand dollars. “Not bad,” he said aloud. “Spirit, definitely let me know if you need me to run any more errands.”

Chapter 10

Edwina was waiting in the living room when Matilda walked in the door.

“Is that your whiskey?” asked Edwina, pointing to the box encumbering Matilda.

“Yes. You want to try some?” asked Matilda, setting down her load. “I think we should try some, to make sure it is still good.”

“Maybe a tiny sip,” said Edwina. “Tell me, how did your dragon deliver this to you?”

“Just put it on the shore of the river for me, along with a purse of gold coins,” said Matilda.

“Gold coins?” asked Edwina. “What did you do for this dragon, to be given gold coins?”

Clearly reluctant to tell Edwina the whole truth, Matilda busied herself by pulling a bottle of whiskey from the case and opening it. “This is great,” she said after taking a small sip. “It is just the right combination of smooth and biting.”

“Let me try,” said Edwina, taking the bottle. “That is good. But I still want to know what you gave to this dragon.”

“What makes you think I gave Pikwik anything?” asked Matilda.

“Did you not?” asked Edwina.

“Okay, fine,” said Matilda. “For the whiskey and gold coins, I gave the dragon one of my bitcoins.”

“Your bitcoins!” exclaimed Edwina. “Those are only for emergencies!”

“Well now I have emergency gold and whiskey,” said Matilda. “And, judging by the weight of the gold, I got a much better deal than the dragon.”

“But what could a dragon do with a bitcoin?” asked Edwina. “Does it have a computer?”

“Pikwik just likes treasure,” said Matilda. “I think she will put the bitcoin with the rest of her treasure, to look at.”

“Let me see the gold,” said Edwina.

“Here,” said Matilda, handing over the purse with both hands.

“All of this?” said Edwina in wonder, inspecting the coins. “You got all of this for one bitcoin?”

“Yes,” said Matilda. “I think I got a good deal because me and

Pikwik are such good friends.”

“And the car you arrived in?” asked Edwina. “Who was in that car? Another of your dragon’s friends?”

“I guess so,” said Matilda. “The driver told me his name was Silky. All he did was drive and sit in the car when I went to the river.”

“I do not understand this, but it seems good for you,” said Edwina. “I am going to bed. Do not drink more whiskey tonight.”

“Okay,” said Matilda. “I will go to bed after I count these coins.”

While Edwina disappeared into her room upstairs, Matilda poured the gold coins from the purse onto the dining room table. As she did so, she found a small, colorful medallion made of birch bark and dyed porcupine quills in the bottom of the purse. Setting this aside, Matilda counted out forty nine gold coins, then heard Pikwik’s voice intrude upon her thoughts. “I heard you taste the whiskey,” said the Dragon. “I took it from smugglers over a hundred years ago. Did it age well?”

“It is delicious,” said Matilda quietly. “It is so good that I might end up in trouble with Edwina for drinking too much of it. And the coins! The medallion! Pikwik, this stuff is amazing!”

“I’m glad you are happy with our trade,” said Pikwik. “I found the perfect place for the bitcoin in my hoard. It is in the small basket where I keep my polished silver mirror.”

“Does the medallion you put in with the coins have any special meaning?” asked Matilda.

“Perhaps,” replied Pikwik. “It was a German immigrant’s secret project over two hundred years ago. She copied a native design, and hid the project from her husband. I waited until she was finished making the medallion, then snatched it from her when she was washing by the river. She was very frightened, but I gave her a very large fish, and she soon forgot all about it.”

“Thanks but ... why give it to me?” asked Matilda.

“Don’t you like it?” asked Pikwik.

“I love it,” said Matilda quickly. “Maybe it is just that I do not understand dragons. But such treasures, all for a bitcoin? I fear there is some part of this deal that I am not yet seeing.”

“What you are not seeing is trust,” said Pikwik. “I trusted you enough to invite you to my lair. You trusted me to take you there. I trusted you to write down the bitcoin code correctly. You trusted me to give you a fair trade for that code. It pleases me to be friends with such an unusual young woman, and pleases you to be friends with a dragon. What is there to fear?”

“Nothing, really,” said Matilda. “I guess I do trust you. And my life has always been strange. Maybe it is not any stranger for having a dragon in it.”

Chapter 11

“Silky? This is Hequa,” said Hequa when Silky picked up. “Can we meet for coffee and blunt? I have some questions for your spirit.”

“Hequa? It’s two in the morning,” said Silky. “Can it wait until tomorrow?”

“Now would be better,” said Hequa. “I have just come out of a most instructive learning trance. While this trance is fresh in my mind, I want to meet your spirit again.”

“Her name is Pikwik,” grumbled Silky. “Yeah, I guess I can come over and try to summon Pikwik. I’m having a hard time sleeping anyway, because of the news. See you in fifteen minutes?”

“See you then,” said Hequa.

Twenty minutes later, Silky arrived to Hequa’s building and found the older man waiting for him outside. “I’ve already started consuming coffee,” said Hequa as they went inside and got into the elevator. “Are you in contact with your spirit?”

"I'll try to summon her once we're sitting down," said Silky.

"Good," said Hequa. "And thank you for agreeing to come so late in the night."

"Whatever," said Silky as they left the elevator and started up the stairs to the roof. "It's not like I had anything better to do. I was just playing video games when you called."

"Okay," said Hequa once they were seated on his rooftop patio. "Here is the coffee, and I will start a blunt. Are you ready for the summoning?"

"I guess," said Silky, producing a goose feather from an inside pocket of his light jacket. "I'll burn this feather and call out to Pikwik. Then we'll just see what happens."

"I'm ready," said Hequa.

"Great spirit Pikwik," said Silky dramatically, lighting the feather on fire. "It is I, your humble servant. Come to me now, to answer Hequa's questions."

"Silky," answered Pikwik psychically. "You have again burned a feather instead of presenting me with fish entrails. And you have not achieved an erection. This does not please me, but I will answer Hequa's questions. Tell him to drink more coffee."

"Um, the great spirit Pikwik says you must drink more coffee," said Silky. "She is not pleased with me for summoning her in this way."

“Fine,” said Hequa, gulping more coffee down. “How much is enough? I have already drank so much that my senses are distorted. Why does your spirit need me to be so intoxicated?”

“Something about your alien mind not being open enough,” said Silky. “Maybe if you tell me what your questions are, I could try asking them.”

“My first question is about this new virus,” said Hequa. “Does your spirit know if it will affect people from the planet Jhanya like me?”

“Maybe a little, but the zanzi leaf Hequa chews should protect against it,” said Pikwik psychically.

“Pikwik says you will be fine as long as you give me a supply of your zanzi leaf to chew,” said Silky.

“I can do that,” said Hequa. “Next, ask your spirit if the collapsing economy will lead to a revolution. I’ve lived through one revolution, on Jhanya, and I fear there will now be a revolution here, too.”

“There will probably be a revolution, but it will not look like you think it will,” said Pikwik to Silky.

Silky repeated the answer verbatim to Hequa.

“Well, how will it look then?” asked Hequa.

“Tell Hequa I will show you both, once Hequa finishes another

cup of coffee,” said Pikwik to Silky.

“Umm, drink that coffee down,” said Silky. “Pikwik says she’ll show us the revolution.”

“Good,” said Hequa. “Now, help me with this blunt. I can barely move as it is.”

“Okay,” said Silky, accepting the blunt. “You know, I never would have thought a virus could cause a revolution.”

“Hequa, can you hear me clearly now?” asked Pikwik psychically.

“You are in my thoughts, spirit,” said Hequa.

“Good. Now both of you listen well, for I do not wish to repeat myself,” said Pikwik.

“Okay,” said Silky.

“Very good,” said Hequa.

“As a spirit, I am bound to this geography for reasons you could not comprehend,” said Pikwik. “Even so, I am in communication with other spirits in other parts of the world. All of us together have been watching people closely these last few years for signs that the world’s next great change had begun. And now, this virus is being used to initiate that great change.”

“What does that mean?” asked Hequa.

“There is a global order of fascists beginning to seize power,” said Pikwik psychically to both of them. “In Europe, they are already taking control. In Singapore, their control is already complete. Here in the United States, they will first be regarded as the underdog against political leaders. Initially, they will cast themselves as champions of the working class. Medical fascists will campaign heavily against tobacco, and against the use of cash. They’ll get the large technology companies on board with their agenda, and label anyone who stands in their way backwards or crazy. Finally, they’ll use digital means to take control of the population by taking control of the movements and contents of human bodies. Many people will fight this, but those people will almost certainly lose.”

“So fascists will use the pandemic to gain power? How strange,” said Hequa.

“Is that why half the world is getting shut down over a virus that is less deadly than medical errors?” asked Silky.

“What do you mean less deadly than medical errors?” asked Hequa.

“I read that medical errors kill almost half a million people in this country every year if you count prescription overdoses,” replied Silky. “This virus is less deadly than that, but people are shutting down the country over it. They say it’s to help prevent hospitals from being overloaded. But something about it seems fishy. Here in Minnesota, the hospitals are not over capacity. There are plenty of ICU beds available. I guess medical fascists makes as much sense as anything else.”

“Great spirit Pikwik,” said Hequa. “Is there anything I can do to make any of this better?”

“You can give Silky a job,” said Pikwik. “Right now, he can’t perform any magic, and government benefit programs are not designed for people like him.”

“Really?” asked Hequa. “Silky, if I give you a job, will you continue to give me access to this spirit of yours?”

“Umm,” said Silky, surprised at the turn things had taken. “Yeah, I guess so.”

Chapter 12

“I hate this,” said Matilda. “I hate going to class in my bedroom instead of on campus. Edwina! I’m so bored with being at home!”

“What is wrong with our home?” asked Edwina. “I know you love going to school, but home is a good place, too.”

“I know,” said Matilda. “It is just that I need to go out and see people, and now I can’t because of this stupid virus. I am actually thinking about getting back together with Bryce out of boredom. Edwina! Do not let me do that!”

“Do not worry,” said Edwina. “Why not take a walk to ease your boredom?”

“I have already taken three walks today,” lamented Matilda. “I am about to go to the river to ask Pikwik the dragon to play with me.”

“That might be a good idea,” said Edwina.

“You are just saying that because you are as tired of me as I am

of you," said Matilda.

"Well, you are being annoying right now," said Edwina. "And why should I not get a break sometimes?"

They both laughed. "Fine," said Matilda. "I will go to the river. I can stop by the store on the way back. Is there anything we need?"

"Try to get flour," said Edwina. "They were sold out when I last went shopping."

"Okay," said Matilda, moving towards the door and putting on a light jacket.

Approaching the river's edge as the overcast day faded into night, Matilda called out to her friend. "Pikwik," she said. "Pikwik? Can you come and talk to me? I am so bored."

"I'm here, child," said Pikwik psychically. "Forgive me for not coming to you in person, but I am busy arranging my hoard."

"Pikwik! Good to hear from you!" said Matilda. "Everyone in the world seems to have lost their minds. I have to go to school online instead of in person. People are wearing masks in the grocery store. Even Edwina seems on edge, and she is normally the sanest person there is. What is happening, Pikwik? Do you have any idea?"

"I have been in contact with other dragons around the world," said Pikwik. "Among us, there is agreement that this is the

beginning of the biggest change humankind has seen since Europeans began colonizing the Americas.”

“What do you mean?” asked Matilda. “Isn’t this just a virus that will come and go?”

“The virus isn’t the change,” said Pikwik. “It’s the trigger event that has started the change.”

“Umm, so what is the change?” asked Matilda.

“The reshaping of human society into a place that is tightly controlled by technology and ruled by a new class of fascist alongside more traditionally powerful groups of people,” said Pikwik. “The medical fascists are one of the most frightening types of these rulers.”

“What is a medical fascist?” asked Matilda.

“A medical fascist is like a regular fascist who uses medical justifications to exercise power,” replied Pikwik.

“That sounds bad,” said Matilda. “Is it as bad as it sounds?”

“Good and bad are relative,” said Pikwik. “We dragons think it will make people a tiny bit more physically healthy and a great deal less free.”

“So ... bad,” said Matilda. “Is there anything I can do about it? I hate it already. What can I do?”

“The new order’s path to power is unstoppable,” said Pikwik. “But with your bitcoins and the gold I gave you, you will be freer than most, at least initially. You could use that freedom to cultivate a resistance movement.”

“A resistance movement?” asked Matilda.

“Yes. There are several that I remember fondly,” said Pikwik. “The network of people who got draft dodgers to Canada during the Vietnam Conflict. Those who kept their neighborhoods in good cheer during prohibition. The underground railroad that helped slaves find their way to freedom. Like that.”

“I am an undocumented immigrant and a student,” said Matilda. “I already work with Edwina to find new places for people who have been enslaved. But I would not even know where to begin with resisting medical fascists.”

“Don’t worry, you’ve got time to think it over,” said Pikwik. “Several months at least.”

“Okay,” said Matilda. “Wait. Months? I will give it some thought. But I am curious. Why would you care? I mean no offense, but do all dragons encourage rebellion like this?”

“As you know, we dragons love treasure,” said Pikwik. “Some of our most prized possessions are works of art. When tyrants oppress people, their art suffers for it. The last thing I want is a robotically-controlled and overly-medicated population which produces only mediocre art. That would make for a dull century indeed. But resistance movements can produce

incredible treasures, so I intend to encourage resistance in any way I can.”

“I see,” said Matilda. “Sort of. I mean, what exactly do you think I can do, if there is some new order coming to power?”

“This is not yet clear to me,” said Pikwik. “The people here, in our small corner of the world, do not yet even see the shape of the problems they’ll soon face. Once they do, many will welcome the new fascism, as powerful forces will conspire to convince them of its necessity. I’ve seen in your mind that you have some experience escaping powerful tyrants. Perhaps now would be a good time to begin considering how to escape tyrants who exercise their control through digital technologies and information control.”

“Pikwik! That sounds impossible,” said Matilda. “In fact, this whole thing sounds impossible. I am not even sure I believe you about any of it.”

“But you have seen my true form, and my cave,” said Pikwik. “I would never lie to anyone who has seen these things. In fact, I regard you as family.”

“Really?” asked Matilda. “Can I call you auntie dragon?”

“If you must,” said Pikwik.

“Okay, auntie dragon,” said Matilda. “If you really want me to start a resistance movement, I will try. But I will need your help. Lots of help. I do not even know where to begin.”

Chapter 13

“Silky! Did you read Sallycat’s new report?” asked Hequa as Silky entered the loft.

“Umm, I skimmed it,” said Silky. “She just sent it to me yesterday, and it’s like three hundred pages.”

“Well, have you seen today’s news?” asked Hequa. “The chain reactions Sallycat wrote about are already starting in the food system and the economy. We must do something! I didn’t escape The Order on the planet Jhanya just to be subjected to an Earth version of the same thing. We must stop the new fascists!”

“Yeah, okay,” said Silky. “I’ll do whatever as long as you keep paying me. But what are we supposed to do? This supposed new order of fascists isn’t even in control yet. And Pikwik says there isn’t anything we can do to stop them from coming to power. There’s an old saying from Star Trek, that resistance is futile. I feel like this might be one of those times when Star Trek is right.”

“Don’t quote Star Trek to me, Silky,” said Hequa. “When

the Borg said 'resistance is futile', Picard led the Enterprise to victory against the Borg. Now tell me, did you read the recommendations at the end Sallycat's report?"

"I, uh, haven't got to them yet," said Silky.

"If you had read these recommendations, you would know that there is much we can begin doing to resist the fascist order even now, before it comes to power here in this country," said Hequa.

"Like ...?" asked Silky.

"Like resource mapping," said Hequa. "And information warfare. And threat assessments."

"Okay, but I don't know how to do any of that stuff," said Silky.

"Maybe your spirit knows," said Hequa. "Have you asked your spirit for help with this?"

"Honestly, Pikwik has been silent the last couple of days," said Silky. "But I'll for sure ask about it the next time we talk."

"Good," said Hequa. "There is also an organization called Through the Stars Academy that I will confer with, to see if they might be able to help."

"Wait. The UFO group?" asked Silky.

"Yes," said Hequa. "They have good resources, and my friend Lika is working closely with them in Colorado. I will send them

a letter. Prepare to take dictation.”

“You know there’s such thing as text to speech programs, right?” said Silky.

“You can type on my laptop, here,” said Hequa.

“Fine,” said Silky, moving to stand in front of the computer Hequa had sitting on a counter top.

“Let us begin,” said Hequa. “Through the Stars Academy, I am writing you today to warn you of the looming threat of medical fascism. After being notified of this threat by a powerful spirit, I had Sallycat investigate. Sallycat’s investigation confirmed much of what the spirit warned me about. Her report is attached to this email. Please read this report at your earliest convenience, and reply with an inventory of what resources you are able to direct towards defeating this threat. Sincerely, Hequa.”

“Got it, I guess,” said Silky.

“You sound like you don’t approve,” said Hequa. “Is there more I should say?”

“I don’t know,” said Silky. “It’s just — how well do you know these guys? Because if I got a letter like that, I’d probably think it was some kind of joke.”

“Good thinking, Silky,” said Hequa. “Add ‘this is not a joke’ at the end. Anything else?”

“Kinda,” said Silky. “I mean, what’s a UFO group going to do about medical fascism, which has nothing to do with UFOs?”

“Don’t worry about that,” said Hequa. “I have done this group many favors. I am hoping these favors will buy me their consideration, at least.”

“Really?” asked Silky. “What kind of favors?”

“Many favors,” said Hequa. “Lika and I did a whole campaign to educate them about technologies from our home planet.”

“Would any of those technologies be useful against medical fascists?” asked Silky.

“Maybe. What did Sallycat’s report say?” asked Hequa.

“Hey, someone’s here,” said Silky.

“Robert!” said Hequa warmly, seeing the man entering the loft.

“Hi Hequa. Silky. What’re you two up to?” asked Robert.

“I have just dictated a letter to be sent to Through the Stars,” said Hequa. “I’m asking for their help in defeating the looming threat of medical fascism.”

“Very good,” said Robert. “I read Sallycat’s report. I think she might be onto something. But you’ve got more immediate problems. About twenty percent of your tenants have failed to pay April’s rent on time.”

“So many?” asked Hequa. “Is this because of the virus? Robert, how could you let this happen?”

“What could I have done about it?” asked Robert. “I can’t wave a magic wand and make the pandemic disappear. The question now is what do you want to do about it?”

“Have the ones who cannot pay been in contact with you?” asked Hequa.

“Most have,” said Robert. “If you’re looking for recommendations, I recommend sending a letter to all of your tenants saying you’ll wave all late fees for this month and next because you understand their pain.”

“Silky! Prepare to take dictation,” said Hequa.

“This again? Fine, I’m ready,” said Silky.

“Good,” said Hequa. “Dear tenant of Jhanya Properties, we understand that your financial situation may have been negatively impacted by the global pandemic. We are therefore waiving all fees associated with late payment of rent for the months of April and May. If you are unable to pay rent for one or both of these months, please contact us immediately so that we can work with you on establishing a payment plan. Sincerely, Jhanya Properties.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Robert.

“That’s settled, then,” said Hequa. “Silky, print sixty copies of

that letter and deliver one to each tenant.”

“Uhh, you want me to go door to door during a pandemic?” asked Silky.

“Just chew some zanzi leaf and you’ll be fine,” said Hequa. “I want those letters delivered by the end of the day.”

“But what about ... ? Oh, whatever,” said Silky. “I’ll figure it out.”

As Silky left the loft with sixty envelopes, Robert and Hequa turned their attention to Hequa’s bong. “Fucking seriously!” said Silky under his breath while getting into the elevator.

Delivering the letters took Silky two hours and required him to visit three buildings. After sending Hequa a text confirming that the letters had all been delivered, Silky returned home and sat down to read the rest of Sallycat’s report.

“Hi. How was work? Any better than yesterday?” asked Silky’s mom, who had peeked her head into his room.

“Work was fine,” said Silky. “My boss is still crazy. He’s started making me type up letters he dictates, like he’s some kind of executive from 1950. But whatever. It was fine. How was your shift last night?”

“Well, the hospital laid a bunch of people off, saying they couldn’t afford to keep them with all elective surgeries being canceled,” said Silky’s mom. “And of course everyone’s still on

edge, and thanking our lucky stars we're not in New York. But I did finally get my test results back and I'm not infected. So that made my shift a little better."

"That's good," said Silky. "Hey, something kind of weird is going on with my job. My boss has become convinced that the pandemic is going to be used by medical fascists to take control of the planet. He's got this, like, supercomputer being run by a woman named Sallycat, and Sallycat just wrote a big report about it. You work in healthcare. What do you think about the idea of medical fascists taking over?"

Silky's mom laughed. "I think medical fascists would probably do a better job running things than the bozos we've got in office right now," she said. "But isn't your boss in commercial real estate? Why would he care who is running things, so long as he gets his rent?"

"I don't know," said Silky. "Like I've said, he's a weirdo. He actually had me type up a letter to a UFO group about the looming threat of medical fascism today. Seriously. A UFO group."

"He sounds like a loon," said Silky's mom. "But I wouldn't worry too much about it, as long as he's paying you. Anyway, dinner will be ready in fifteen minutes, if you're hungry."

"Thanks, mom," said Silky as his mom returned to the kitchen.

Chapter 14

“I am not sure I see what the problem is,” admitted Edwina while sitting at the kitchen table. “Or what it has to do with us. Traha has never cared what governments do. We are Traha. Why should we care?”

“Pikwik says they’ll want to track everyone to make sure they’re complying with medical rules,” said Matilda. “You know my identity is not secure, here in this country. And the same is true of many in Traha. If they start tracking everyone, they will find us, and ICE may capture us. Edwina, this is not a problem that we can just ignore. Do you want ICE to find me and put me in a concentration camp?”

“Of course not,” said Edwina. “But I am not about to bring the issue to the rest of Traha based only on what some dragon said.”

“But she knows,” said Matilda. “She knows. Pikwik! Are you there? Can you not tell her?”

“Is your dragon talking to you right now?” asked Edwina.

“No,” said Matilda. “She is saying nothing.”

A car horn honking outside interrupted the exchange. Matilda rose to look out the window, and saw that the honking car was a familiar dented sedan. “Edwina?” said Matilda. “I think that car might be here for me. It is the same car that took me to the river to meet the dragon.”

“Go then,” said Edwina. “I can call Luke and ask if he knows anything about medical fascists. But be careful. I still don’t trust this dragon, or her friends.”

“Okay,” said Matilda as she put on her shoes and coat. “See you soon.”

The car stopped honking when Matilda emerged from the house. The passenger side window rolled down as she approached. “Hey, uh, Matilda,” said Silky from the driver’s seat. “The spirit Pikwik told me to deliver this report about the threat of medical fascism to you.”

Matilda looked at the three ring binder in Silky’s hand. “Fine. But let’s go somewhere,” said Matilda. “I am super bored of my house right now.”

“Okay,” said Silky. “Hop in, I guess.”

“Good,” said Matilda, getting in the car and accepting the binder from Silky. “Where should we go? Is anywhere even open?”

“Well, my mom’s not allowing any guests, so my place is out,” said Silky. “How have you been, by the way?”

"I am bored," said Matilda. "And wondering why Pikwik would send you here instead of just answering me when I called."

"Maybe I'm the answer you are waiting for," said Silky. "Maybe that report on your lap holds your answer."

"Maybe you should just shut up and bring me somewhere nice," said Matilda.

"Nice, huh?" said Silky as he pulled the car out. "I guess we could try my boss' rooftop patio. It's pretty nice, and I doubt he'd care if I brought someone up."

"Good," said Matilda. "And what is this, then?" she asked, hefting the binder.

"It's a report that my boss had one of his people put together," said Silky. "It talks about the looming threat of medical fascism and how we might begin to defeat this threat."

"Pikwik has been telling me that I need to start a resistance movement, to resist the new fascists," said Matilda. "But I do not know how to even start doing that. I guess I will read the report, but I still do not think there is anything I can do."

"A resistance movement?" asked Silky. "Why would a spirit want you to start a resistance movement?"

"Something about the quality of art," said Matilda. "I guess resistance movements create good art, while tyranny makes art less good."

“Huh,” said Silky. “Are you some kind of artist, then?”

“I dance,” said Matilda. “I am part of a big group called Traha who are all dancers. What about you?”

“I do magic tricks, which is sort of like performance art,” said Silky. “Does your group ever perform at any of the big venues?”

“It is not that kind of group,” said Matilda. “We dance for ourselves and each other, not for audiences, though sometimes people do watch. For us, the dance is a living language that tells the story of who we are and what has happened in the world. It is more than that, too. Like the dance is as much a part of us as our arms or legs. I do not really know how to explain it.”

“That’s cool,” said Silky. “Doing magic has always been my passion. But lately, with everything going on, I haven’t been able to perform for anyone at all. And now that I’ve got this new job, I’m starting to wonder about the possibility of a future where my whole life doesn’t revolve around magic. Like, maybe I’m supposed to be something other than a magician, but I’ve just never given anything else a chance.”

“Do you like music?” asked Matilda. “Can you put some on?”

“How’s that?” asked Silky after turning on the radio.

“It could be better,” said Matilda. “How about something less slow and sad?”

Chapter 15

“Silky! Who is this young woman that you’ve brought to my patio?” demanded Hequa. “I never said that you could have dates here.”

“Hequa, this is Matilda,” said Silky.

“Wait. Matilda? You’re one of Edwina’s people, aren’t you,” said Hequa. “Why would you date someone like Silky?”

“It is not a date,” said Matilda, glancing at the binder which rested in her lap. “I am supposed to start a resistance movement against the medical fascists, and Silky let me see a copy of the report you had made about the threat.”

“Silky, is this true?” asked Hequa.

“Basically, yeah,” said Silky. “I’m just doing what the spirit Pikwik told me to do.”

“Okay,” said Hequa, sitting down. “Tell me about your resistance movement while I smoke this blunt. How many people do you have so far? One million? Five million? We will need many

people to defeat the new fascists.”

“I only just started today,” said Matilda. “And I do not know what exactly I am supposed to be doing.”

“Sallycat recommended starting with threat assessments, information warfare, and resource mapping,” said Hequa. “If you are with Edwina, then you have a great deal of cryptocurrency. Me and my people have sizable wealth as well. And we have the supercomputer that Sallycat works on. Hopefully, we will also soon have an ally in the UFO group Through the Stars Academy. This should be enough for you to start mapping the resources of your resistance movement.”

“Um, Edwina isn’t really convinced that there is a problem yet,” said Matilda. “So the resources of her and Traha cannot be counted. I have some gold and bitcoin, but not enough to make a difference in anything big.”

“So it’s up to me, then,” said Hequa. “My renters can’t all pay and my ethereum has fallen in price because of the pandemic. But I will still be the first funding of this resistance movement. The last thing I want is for tyrants to succeed in taking over this society. If they do succeed, there would be no point at all in having money.”

Exhaling his hit of the joint Hequa had passed him, Silky frowned. “Umm, should we really be passing this in a pandemic?” he asked.

“Is anyone sick?” asked Hequa. “Well, if you start feeling sick,

just chew some zanzi leaf — that plant right there — and you'll be fine. Now Silky, pass that blunt to Matilda before it burns out."

"So we have some resources to start," said Matilda while holding in smoke. "How are we supposed to use those for assessing threats or making an information war?"

"What even is an information war," wondered Silky aloud. "Is that like memes or something?"

"What does Sallycat's report say about it?" asked Hequa.

"Umm, I haven't got to that part yet," said Silky.

"Silky, can you go down to four and get Sallycat for this conversation?" asked Hequa.

"Fine," said Silky, rising to leave.

"Hey I know who you are now," said Matilda to Hequa once Silky was gone. "You are the one who wanted millions in cryptocurrency with nobody knowing about it."

"Yes," said Hequa. "If I had known that this virus would crash the prices, I would not have bought so much."

"Many things suck right now," said Matilda.

"Indeed," said Hequa. "Listen, while it is just the two of us, will you tell me why the spirit chose you to lead our resistance

movement?”

“Honestly, I do not know,” said Matilda. “I am very independent, but I have always been more of a follower than a leader. How am I supposed to know what is in the mind of Pikwik?”

“She is a very strange spirit, is she not?” asked Hequa. “You know, I can only hear her when I am very intoxicated. I guess since I am from the planet Jhanya, my mind is not like the mind of someone from Earth, and the spirit can only touch my mind when it is disorganized.”

“That’s cool,” said Matilda. “So, if you are not from Earth, how did you get here?”

“In a spaceship that I stole to escape The Order on my home planet,” said Hequa. “There was a revolution, and my people were killed. I traveled a great distance to escape bad rulers, only to find that this planet also has bad rulers — rulers who seem ready to become much worse.”

“Hey,” said Sallycat as she came into view. “I’m Sallycat,” she said to Matilda. “Silky tells me you’re spearheading the resistance movement against the new fascists.”

“I am supposed to,” said Matilda. “But the truth is that I do not even know where to start. How can we make a movement to oppose a group that has not even come to power yet? And from what I understand, it is not even a new group that we oppose, but a new way of thinking that people will adopt. I wish it were just a group of people, because people can be killed when all

else fails. But this new fascist thinking — how can we even fight that?”

“As I wrote in my report, we assess the threat posed by this new thinking in various contexts, carefully disempower those who pose the greatest threat, and use information warfare to slow the spread of the new fascism while assessing the new threats which come to light,” said Sallycat.

“How do we do the careful disempowering?” asked Matilda. “Do we call them names on twitter? Run ads against them?”

“It depends,” said Sallycat. “Depending on who they are and the threat they pose, the remedy could range from ads, like you said, to traditional protests to doxing to something as severe as assassination.”

“Hold on,” said Silky, who had retaken his seat. “I know we’re talking about fascists, here. But assassination? Are you serious?”

“The fascists are making war,” said Matilda mildly. “Sometimes war means killing them before they kill you. From what little I know, their plan involves making us slaves with technology. Sometimes a slave must kill to get free.”

Sallycat burst into laughter. “No shit you’re spearheading the movement,” she said.

Hequa chuckled as well. “Silky,” he said. “You were right to bring this Matilda here. Matilda, you are welcome to come

over anytime.”

Chapter 16

Edwina and her friend Luke were sitting at the kitchen table when Matilda got home.

“Matilda, how was your drive with your dragon stranger?” asked Edwina. “Where did you go? And did you smoke pot? I feel you smoked pot.”

“The stranger’s name is Silky,” said Matilda. “We went to his boss Hequa’s place. And yes I smoked pot.”

“Hequa? The one we sold cryptocurrency to?” asked Edwina.

“Yes,” said Matilda. “He is going to fund the resistance movement I am starting.”

“Did he give you a book?” asked Edwina, with an eye on the three ring binder Matilda held.

“It is a report about the medical fascists and how to defeat them,” said Matilda.

“Medical fascists? I like it,” said Luke. “The term that is. Not the

fascists. Fuck them, obviously. So how do you plan to defeat them?"

"Any way we can, including killing, if necessary," said Matilda. "But I am bored with talking about it. Can we talk about something else? Like Luke, what have you been up to?"

"Me? Just sitting at home. Working mostly," said Luke. "My big crypto project failed, but I've got a few other things going on. And obviously I've been reading too much news."

"Matilda, tell him more about your dragon," said Edwina. "He is too polite to ask, but I know he wants to know."

"What is there to tell?" asked Matilda. "There is a blue dragon that lives in the river and talks to me in my mind. Her name is Pikwik, and we are friends. She is the one who told me to start a resistance movement against the medical fascists. I wish she would tell me how to make this movement, but she has been very quiet lately."

"Have you actually seen this dragon?" asked Luke.

"Yes," said Matilda. "I have seen her twice. She is very beautiful, and her head is as big as my whole body."

"And you say she lives in the river?" asked Luke.

"Yes," said Matilda. "In a hidden cave. She has been there for hundreds of years. Maybe thousands."

“That’s pretty amazing,” said Luke. “But now I’ve got to ask. Why would a dragon care about medical fascists?”

“She loves art,” said Matilda. “And fascism does not produce good art, but resistance movements do produce good art, so she wants me to start such a movement.”

“Well, I love art and hate fascists, so count me in,” said Luke.

Glancing from Luke to Matilda and back again, Edwina shrugged. “Yes, I guess we will help you since I cannot talk you out of this,” she said. “What can we do to help?”

Matilda placed the heavy binder on the table and sat down. “This report describes the rise of the new fascism and how we can fight against it,” she said. “I have not even had a chance to read it yet. But I know information warfare is a big part of it. Luke, you seem like you would know something about that.”

“Some,” said Luke reflectively. “But I’m not sure I know exactly what we’re talking about here. Like, you can say medical fascism, but I’m not really clear on what that means.”

“I think it means many things,” said Matilda. “It means the kind of thinking that uses medical reasons to justify unfair uses of power. It means medical industry people having huge new political influence. It means new technologies being used to track, monitor, and report on people. Many things, none of them good.”

“I see,” said Luke. “I mean, that stuff is definitely happening.

And it's definitely going to get worse. But will it really get that bad?"

"Pikwik says it will be the biggest change since the Europeans started coming to this country," said Matilda.

"Well, if a dragon said it, then it must be true," said Luke.

"Do not joke on me," said Matilda. "I think Pikwik is right. And there is nothing funny about this war."

"Is being high on pot part of your war?" asked Edwina, giggling.

"Shut up!" said Matilda, joining in the laughter. "You just want me to leave so you two can go back to pretending to be boyfriend and girlfriend even though you are not boyfriend and girlfriend!"

"She's got us there," said Luke. "But seriously though, can you get me a copy of that report? I'd like to look it over."

"Give me your email and I will try," said Matilda. "Right now, though, I am going to stay in this kitchen and make some food. So if you want to be alone, it is you who will have to leave. Are you hungry?"

"Yes, make enough for everyone," said Edwina. "Luke and I will go to the living room to give you your space."

While Matilda chopped vegetables, a familiar presence entered her thoughts. "Pikwik!" she said aloud. "Why have you been so

quiet lately?”

“Hello, child,” said Pikwik psychically. “I have been occupied with other matters. Have you started the resistance movement yet?”

“I am trying,” said Matilda. “That guy Silky you sent me connected me with his boss Hequa, who seems ready to help with all of his resources. But I still do not know what to do, really.”

“Be like the girl who became the face of the fight against climate change,” said Pikwik. “She is friends with a dragon just like you are.”

“I can try, but I only have like twenty followers on insta,” said Matilda. “I am not good at giving speeches, and I can not be very public because ICE might take me and put me in a concentration camp.”

“Then be like Emma Goldman,” said Pikwik. “She was willing to prostitute herself to fund the assassination of a corrupt factory head.”

“I am not prostituting for the resistance,” said Matilda. “I mean, I would if it would help. But it would not help.”

“Very good,” said Pikwik. “So just do it your way and things will doubtless work out.”

“But Pikwik! I need help!” said Matilda.

“I’ve already connected you with Silky,” said Pikwik. “What more do you expect me to do? By the way, what do you think of Silky? He is a fine young man, is he not?”

“Umm, he’s okay, I guess,” said Matilda.

“Did you notice that he keeps his car very clean?” asked Pikwik. “That’s always a good sign, is it not?”

“He also listens to sad music,” said Matilda. “Anyway, why should you care?”

“Don’t you think he’s the sort of young man you would like to get to know better?” asked Pikwik.

“Pikwik! Are you trying to set us up?” demanded Matilda.

“I just think there would be something romantic about a dancer and a magician teaming up to lead the resistance movement,” said Pikwik.

“Uhh, he is not the leader of anything,” said Matilda. “He can barely lead his car to the place he is driving.”

“Don’t judge so hastily,” said Pikwik. “Would it help if he got you flowers? I know your old boyfriend never got you flowers?”

“And how do you know that?” asked Matilda.

“I see into minds, dear, remember?” said Pikwik. “Which is how I know you should at least give Silky some consideration.”

Chapter 17

“I don’t get it,” said Silky, trying to keep his voice low so as not to disturb the other people at the grocery store. “Why exactly am I buying these flowers for Matilda? And what exactly do you mean by saying the medical fascists won’t make their next big move until the virus mutates?”

“Get the twenty dollar bouquet, not the ten dollar one,” said Pikwik psychically. “And the virus that is currently causing so much fear is only starting out in the human population. It will probably mutate, and become much more frightening. That’s when the fascists will make their next big move.”

“My mom says that medical fascists would probably do a better job of running things than the current leadership,” said Silky. “What do you think about that?”

“Can your mom peer into the minds of millions of people?” asked Pikwik. “Has she seen countless tyrannies rise and fall?”

“I guess not,” said Silky. “But shouldn’t we be more afraid of the virus than of people?”

“Viruses are a part of people,” said Pikwik. “But people can twist viruses and anything else into tools of power. And the people who plan on using this virus and the next one as stepping stones to power are the worst kind of evil. If it were up to them, they would turn the whole world into a giant machine regulating every aspect of human life. Silky, you cannot allow this to happen.”

“Fine,” said Silky while the masked store clerk rang up the flowers and groceries. “I guess I don’t want medical fascists ruling the world, even if my mom says they’d do alright. But what am I supposed to do, just keep being Hequa’s errand boy?”

“Yes,” said Pikwik. “But first, bring the flowers to Matilda. You don’t want them to wilt.”

Pikwik was silent on the drive over to Matilda’s. Walking up to the door, Silky felt foolish, but rang the bell anyway.

“Who are you?” asked the woman who answered the door. “What do you want? Don’t you know to keep your distance?”

“I brought flowers for Matilda,” replied Silky sheepishly. “Is she here?”

The woman’s demeanor changed, becoming more friendly. She smiled broadly. “Matilda,” she called over her shoulder. “There is a young man here with flowers for you.”

Matilda appeared at the door a moment later. “Thanks, Edwina. I will take it from here,” she said.

“Hi Matilda,” said Silky, holding out the flowers. “Um, these are for you.”

“Did you get these on your own, or did the spirit Pikwik make you do it?” asked Matilda.

“Honestly? A little of both,” said Silky, flushing. “If you don’t want them, I can go.”

“No no,” said Matilda. “I like them. If you wait here, I can put them in water and then come back to the porch to talk.”

“Okay,” said Silky, feeling immensely relieved that the flowers had been accepted.

When Matilda returned to the porch, she found Silky idly toying with the gold coin she’d given him. “I thought you would have sold that,” she said.

“I was going to, but it’s too cool,” said Silky. “Maybe I’ll sell it someday, but for now I just like playing with it.”

“That’s cool,” said Matilda. “How is it going working for Hequa?”

“It’s like working for someone from another planet,” said Silky. “He dictates emails to me like I’m some kind of fifties secretary, he’s always trying to get me stoned, and he paid me twice last week — I think because he forgot about paying me the first time.”

“At least you have something that gets you out of the house,”

said Matilda. "All my classes are online now, and I have walked around this stupid block a hundred times already just for something to do."

Just then, Edwina poked her head out the front door with a snack plate in her hand. "I cut some fruit for you," she said. "Bring the plate in when you are finished."

"Thanks, Edwina," said Matilda, stifling a laugh. When the door closed, the laugh escaped. "You believe her?" she said. "I know she means well, but she could not give us even five minutes alone!"

"Next time, let's meet at my house, and you'll see how much worse my mom is," said Silky.

"Edwina is not my mother," said Matilda. "More like an adopted big sister."

"Still, it was nice of her to bring us a snack," said Silky.

"So, are we just going to not talk about the fact that a spirit is trying to set us up?" asked Matilda.

"I'm kind of afraid to talk about it," said Silky. "She even told me which flowers to buy."

Matilda laughed.

"What's so funny about that?" asked Silky.

“The funny part is the whole thing,” said Matilda. “Pikwik gave me gold, made me the leader of some new resistance movement, and now helped you pick out flowers for me. So now, what? We are just supposed to fall in love and save the world from fascists?”

“That’s exactly right,” said Pikwik psychically to both of them.

“Pikwik!” said Matilda.

“Have you been listening the whole time?” asked Silky.

“I am usually listening,” said Pikwik. “Now, are you two going to kiss, or what?”

“If we do, will you give us some privacy?” asked Matilda.

“As you wish,” said Pikwik.

Chapter 18

“Silky, put that coin away and prepare coffee and a blunt for me at once,” said Hequa.

“You got it,” said Silky, closing the laptop he’d been using. “I need a break from those pedophile conspiracy documentaries anyway. Seriously, how many more are you going to make me watch?”

“Do you understand the scope of the problem?” asked Hequa.

“Uhh, the whole thing creeps me out, but I think so,” said Silky.

“Good,” said Hequa. “Even though our resistance movement is against the medical fascists, I think we should do something about the pedophile networks, too. What are your ideas?”

“I don’t know,” said Silky, handing Hequa a small cup of coffee and a poorly rolled joint. “I mean, people like that Epstone guy basically live in their own world where normal rules don’t apply, right? I wouldn’t even know where to begin with that.”

“But you agree it is a major problem?” asked Hequa.

"I guess so, after watching those videos," said Silky.

"Hello!" called Matilda from the loft's door. "Hequa?"

"We're over here," said Hequa. "I have just lit the very sad looking blunt that Silky rolled. Do you want some?"

"Not today," said Matilda upon approaching the pair in Hequa's kitchen alcove. "Hi Silky."

"Hey, Matilda," said Silky.

"What's with you two?" asked Hequa. "Silky, are you having a romance with the leader of our resistance movement?"

"That is none of your business!" said Matilda.

"You say that like the answer is yes," said Hequa, grinning broadly. "Very good."

"I did not come to talk about romance," said Matilda. "I came because I have read Sallycat's report carefully, and there are some things we need to discuss."

"Excellent," said Hequa. "Silky, open the computer back up and prepare to take notes."

"Fine," said Silky. "Ready when you are."

"The first thing, maybe the most important thing, is that Sallycat's report is preliminary," said Matilda. "We do not know

what is going to happen. All we have is one report and warnings from the spirit Pikwik.”

“Yes,” said Hequa. “That is why threat assessment was one of Sallycat’s strongest recommendations. Silky and I have just been assessing the threat of powerful pedophile networks. Even though they aren’t medical fascists, Silky and I both agree that they are a serious threat. Do you have any idea about what could be done about them?”

“Kill them, obviously,” said Matilda. “If you can find them, and evidence of what they are doing, I can get Traha to end their lives. This is very easy. But there are more important things to focus on right now.”

“You are leading the resistance,” said Hequa. “What do you think is the most important thing right now?”

“Right now? We are just resisting a bunch of maybes,” said Matilda. “No one is yet being forcibly vaccinated. We are not all being tracked by a vast machine anymore than we usually are. In most parts of this country, the stay-at-home orders are not very strict. There are a few people protesting these orders, and they look like idiots. What I am not seeing is how we get from here to the medical fascism Pikwik describes.”

“On my home planet Jhanya, the revolution that led to my village being massacred happened very quickly,” said Hequa. “Right up until they were killed, the elders of my village tried to use words to reason with The Order that came to power. Here, if a different kind of revolution put medical fascists in power, I fear

that waiting for the revolution to begin might mean waiting too long.”

“I get that,” said Matilda. “But here, the way Pikwik puts it, it is already too late to stop the revolution in thinking that leads to medical fascism. It is too late to stop it, and it has not even happened yet. I guess, without understanding how we will get from here to there, I am not really clear on what we should be doing.”

“What about getting people?” asked Hequa. “Our movement will need many supporters. Should we get them with social media? I have a computer that has over three million twitter followers. Should I make it tweet about our resistance movement?”

“Pikwik says we need a good base to start,” said Matilda. “She suggested an underground bar or an artists’ collective. She said we need a violin player and a stand up bass player. But I do not know any musicians like that, and am not sure anyone will come to our base while the stay-at-home order is happening.”

“Pikwik said we need a stand up bass player?” asked Silky. “How would that help our movement?”

“Pikwik says that musicians and artists must form the soul of our movement,” said Matilda. “She says making art is one of the purest forms of resisting tyranny.”

“A wise spirit,” said Hequa. “But you are right, Matilda. We can’t make a real base yet because of the pandemic. My loft here can

serve as a temporary base. As long as we all chew the zanzi leaf, we won't be getting sick. Maybe I can even find some musicians to play here, while we do our meetings, and we could livestream the meetings on social media?"

"Maybe," said Matilda. "But first things first. What do your UFO people say about helping us?"

"So far, they are no help," said Hequa. "Because some of them worked a long time in government, I am suspicious that they might welcome a new world order. But even if they wouldn't, I think the idea of joining a resistance movement just — what is the phrase? — rubs them the wrong way."

"Guys," said Silky. "I'm not trying to rock the boat or anything, but can we go back to Matilda's concern about what exactly we're even supposed to be resisting?"

"Based on Sallycat's research, medical fascism has already taken root in parts of Europe and Asia," said Hequa. "Imperial College London put out the paper that greatly exaggerated the virus' potential harms, and this paper was used to form policy all over the world, including here. Bill Goats is now proposing universal tracking of all people to track the virus, and the WHO is financially beholden to Goats."

"But it is much more complicated than that," said Matilda. "According to Pikwik, what is happening is that the medical establishment suddenly has much more political power than it ever has before. Never mind that medical error is the third leading cause of death in this country. Never mind that sexual

abuse of hospital patients by doctors is its own epidemic. Never mind that many hospitals value profits over patient care, or all of the other problems with industrial medicine. The doctors have great power now, and they are going to start using it.”

“Right, but I’m still not seeing why that’s so bad,” said Silky.

“By itself, it might not be,” said Matilda. “The problem starts when politicians start using doctors to justify insane new programs.”

“Okay,” said Silky. “Like what?”

“Forced medical treatments, tracking, movement restrictions,” said Hequa.

“Pikwik has not been very specific with me,” said Matilda. “What she has shown me is picture after picture of doctor after doctor gleefully performing unnecessary operations on people and animals. She has shown me pictures from the past of doctors telling patients to drink mercury. She has shown me doctors doing awful experiments on people for the CIA. Whenever I ask ‘would it be so bad?’ she shows me more horrible pictures. It seems like what she’s trying to say with all of them is that medicine has a barbaric side that people quickly overlook when they are afraid of something like this new virus.”

“Interesting,” said Hequa. “Silky, have you seen these pictures?”

“Not exactly,” said Silky. “But I guess I can ask about them the next time Pikwik talks to me.”

“Do that,” said Hequa. “And get better at rolling blunts, too. This one has fallen apart in my hands.”

“Uh, sure thing boss,” said Silky.

Chapter 19

“This whole thing is crazy,” said Silky. “I feel like everyone around me has lost their minds. My mom makes me decontaminate for half an hour whenever I walk in the door. My boss just smokes weed all day and thinks chewing his awful zanzi leaf will magically protect him from the virus.”

“And me?” asked Matilda, casually throwing her arm around Silky.

“You? I almost forgot,” said Silky. “My girlfriend is the great leader of the resistance, but we’re not even sure what we’re supposed to be resisting.”

“And you?” asked Matilda. “Are you just bouncing around between forces you cannot control?”

“Feels like it, sometimes,” said Silky. “But I like that you’re leading the resistance. That’s just one of many things I like about you.”

“Hey you two,” said Edwina from the front door. “Come inside and eat.”

“Am I allowed?” asked Silky. “But what about the virus?”

“I live here, and we have been kissing,” said Matilda. “Thanks, Edwina. We will be right in.”

“This looks good,” said Silky, once seated at the kitchen table. “What is it?”

“Seaweed and boiled grains,” said Edwina. “How is your revolution coming?”

“It is not a revolution,” said Matilda. “It is a resistance movement. If there was a revolution, we would resist it.”

“Interesting,” said Luke. “Has your dragon been helping you to expand your ranks?”

“Your dragon?” asked Silky.

Matilda glared briefly at Luke. “Pikwik,” she said. “Pikwik is a dragon, not just a spirit.”

“Seriously?” said Silky. “Pikwik! Is this true?”

“It is true,” said Matilda. “But you must not tell Hequa, or anyone else. Pikwik wants her dragon identity to remain a secret.”

“But, uhh. I mean, how do you know she’s a dragon?” asked Silky. “Have you seen her up close?”

“Yes,” said Matilda. “She is very beautiful.”

“Okay,” said Silky. “I guess a dragon makes about as much sense as a mystical spirit. It’s actually kind of cool, when you think about it.”

“Luke, have you read Sallycat’s report?” asked Matilda. “What did you think about it?”

“Honestly?” said Luke. “I thought it made a good case for the dangers of medical fascism and related threats to our persons and freedoms. But its recommendations for how to defeat these threats assumed a level of technical sophistication and dedication to the cause on the part of the resistance that may not exist. What I mean is, most people have too few resources as it is, so mapping the resources of the resistance might be a non-starter. And conducting formal threat assessments or information warfare? Almost no one knows how to do that stuff properly, and those who do are more likely to be against us than for us.”

“Edwina?” asked Matilda.

“Maybe the report was a place to start,” said Edwina. “But it is long and boring, so most people will not read it no matter how important it may be.”

“So what should we do?” asked Matilda. “The fascist revolution has already started and I feel like there is nothing we can do about it.”

“We could make memes,” said Silky.

After a pause, everybody laughed.

“Seriously, though,” said Silky. “From what Pikwik says, both sides of the political machine are the bad guys. They use memes to fight with each other, so why shouldn’t we use memes to resist them?”

“Because they already have dominance of social media,” said Luke. “A dominance unlikely to be challenged by anything we do.”

“Make memes if you want,” said Matilda, squeezing Silky’s hand. “But our resistance movement needs a real strategy. Edwina? Have you asked those in Traha what they think?”

“Traha wants to stay out of it, and avoid conflict wherever possible,” said Edwina.

“I still can’t believe Pikwik is a dragon,” said Silky.

“I wish she was a more helpful dragon,” said Matilda. “I think if she had her way, all people would do is dance around writing poems or whatever.”

“There are worse things than that,” said Luke. “If you ask me, that dragon has her priorities straight.”

“So you think we should just dance around writing poems?” asked Matilda.

“Why not?” said Luke. “The world is filled with doom and

gloom. Why not just do whatever makes you happy?"

"What would make me happy is killing all the fascists and their supporters," said Matilda.

"But there are so many of them," joked Edwina. "Killing them all would take a very long time."

"Not if we find them, and dox them, and let other cells in our movement do away with them," said Matilda. "With Hequa's resources, I think we could do that."

"That's dangerous territory," said Luke. "If you do go that route, promise me you'll be careful."

"I am always careful," said Matilda. "But Silky, what do you think of the idea?"

"Honestly, it scares me," said Silky. "I mean, I know the fascists are bad. But are they bad enough to kill?"

"They would kill us or worse, just for opposing them," said Matilda. "All they want is to have people locked in cages. Cages made of iron, cages made of social 'new normals', cages made of digital technology. It is all the same. They would make all of our lives into cages that only they hold the keys to. That is a war. We are already in a war. The only question is if we will lose, or fight and maybe win."

Chapter 20

“Silky! Is that you?” asked Hequa from a prone position on his rooftop patio. “Did you bring Matilda? There is much to discuss!”

“Yeah, we’re both here,” said Silky, sitting down next to Hequa. “Are you going to grab a chair so we can talk, or just lay there like a confused stoner?”

“I will keep laying down,” said Hequa. “Tell me of your progress. Then I will tell you of my new ideas.”

“I had an idea,” said Matilda. “My idea is to kill the fascists.”

“Very good,” said Hequa. “I have technologies from my home world that might help us accomplish that. What about you, Silky?”

“I think we should make memes,” said Silky. “Like, anti-fascist memes.”

“Silky, did you know there is an anti-fascist group called Antifa that makes memes?” asked Hequa. “They say they are against

fascism, but when I contacted one of their members about joining our resistance movement, the response I got was very unhelpful. I think they accomplish very little. Do you want to accomplish little, Silky?"

"Umm, I guess not," said Silky. "Are you saying that we should just use their memes?"

"I'm saying that memes won't do anything," said Hequa. "Now, do you have any ideas that might be helpful?"

"I had another idea, but you'll probably just think it's stupid, too," said Silky, sulkily.

"Maybe, but let's hear it anyway," said Hequa.

"Just say it," said Matilda.

"Fine," said Silky. "My idea is to use magic — illusions — in big public ways to get people to question their realities. Like, the way I see it, we're in a race with the fascists over whose reality will become the reality after the dust of this current crisis settles. But that's not quite right, because the dust may never settle. Anyway, you know what I mean."

"This could be good," said Hequa. "But can you say more about it. I'm not sure I completely get it."

"Well," said Silky. "Right now, all sorts of things are in flux, changing faster than people can keep up with. People are questioning everything, and will keep questioning everything

as long as the chaos continues. But the chaos we're seeing now is itself tightly controlled. It's like a society-wide controlled psychotic break, which can only be corrected by remedies the new fascists provide. You follow?"

"I think so," said Hequa.

"Okay, so what if this controlled chaos became uncontrolled, so that the fascist remedies no longer had their intended impact?" asked Silky. "What if we could somehow make this already weird situation much weirder, along lines the fascists haven't planned for? Hequa, between your alien tech and my mastery of stagecraft, I think we could move things in that direction."

Matilda laughed. "Your mastery of stagecraft? Like when you burned your fingers showing me that fire trick earlier?" she said.

"So call it a working knowledge of stagecraft," said Silky, embarrassed. "Call it what you want. The idea's the same. What do you think?"

"Silky, it's brilliant," said Hequa. "Remind me to pay you double this week."

Having already been paid double for the week, Silky kept quiet.

"I don't know," said Matilda. "We could do all we want here, in this city, but no one cares about what happens here. Are you saying we should try things in places like New York and LA? How would that even work?"

“I have an idea for that,” said Hequa. “I have a small flying saucer that can get anywhere in the country very quickly. If we design tricks that could be done with this, from the sky, maybe Silky’s plan could work.”

“You want to do magic tricks from a flying saucer?” asked Matilda. “That sounds like something Pikwik would just love.”

“What kind of tricks would be the best?” asked Hequa. “I have read that in wars, armies sometimes drop leaflets. What about dropping leaflets?”

“You mean littering?” asked Matilda. “Maybe we shouldn’t do that.”

“I’ve seen paper with plant seeds embedded in it,” said Silky. “The seeds sprout and flowers grow if you throw it on the ground. Maybe we could use that?”

“What if I make paper with zanzi seeds in it?” asked Hequa. “If more people chewed zanzi leaf, there never would have been a pandemic.”

“Hey guys,” said Sallycat, who had just come out onto the rooftop patio. “I’ve got an update for you about the virus. They’ve just started publishing antibody testing results in a few major cities. Looks like the virus is much more widespread than originally thought, which means it is way, way less deadly than the public was initially told. At this point, it looks like it’s just a tiny bit deadlier than the flu.”

“What does this mean for our resistance movement?” asked Hequa.

“It means the lockdowns all over the world probably weren’t warranted,” said Sallycat. “It means some very important people either had their facts all wrong, or wanted to do a test on our population to see how we would respond to having our freedom dramatically restricted.”

“Would the fascists really do such a big thing just to test us?” wondered Hequa.

“If they did, all the more reason to find them and kill them,” said Matilda. “Hequa, would you be willing to use your flying saucer for assassinations?”

“Hequa, I thought we agreed on no assassinations,” said Sallycat.

“But Matilda thinks they are a good idea, and she is the leader of our movement,” said Hequa.

“They are a good idea,” said Matilda. “But I respect Sallycat’s opinion, too. Sallycat, if you say no assassinations, then we will not do them.”

“Okay,” said Hequa. “I still have other ideas for what we can do. But Sallycat, do you really think the leaders knew the virus wasn’t that bad? Or do you think they just made a mistake in thinking it was worse than it is turning out to be?”

“I think they knew,” said Sallycat. “I think the World Health

Organization initially got it right, and was pressured by Bill Goats to change their tune and incite panic. I think governments all over the world were more or less forced to accept Imperial College London's epidemiological model, even though this model was based on absolute bullshit. I even think the president was right to dismiss the virus as just another flu which would pass away relatively quickly if left unchecked. So yeah, I think the whole ordeal of sheltering in place or whatever is a giant farce, forced on us by panicked officials being deliberately fed bad information, for reasons I can only guess at."

"Huh," said Hequa, sitting up. "So why do you think they would do this, if you had to guess?"

"If I had to guess, I'd say technocrats want data to run simulations of the systems of control they plan to introduce in the near future," said Sallycat. "Either that or there's some major change coming up that they know about but can't tell the general population about, and they want to see how society copes with an abrupt transition."

"Well, which do you think it is?" asked Hequa.

"Fascist technocrats," said Sallycat.

"That sounds good," said Matilda. "I mean, it sounds bad, but good thinking. The part I do not understand is why you think the virus is not that bad. Is everyone who says it is bad lying? And I read that it can mutate and reinfect people who have already had it. Isn't that bad, too?"

“No one’s saying it’s not bad,” said Sallycat. “It’s just not nearly as bad as we were told it was. It isn’t that bad, but it’s definitely not good, and it could get worse in the future.”

“Hold on,” said Hequa. “Someone is coming, but I don’t know who it is since we are all here.”

A lanky man carrying an old-fashioned washboard came into view, followed by two others holding equally old-fashioned objects.

“Hi there,” said washboard guy. “It this the meeting of the resistance? We’re here to make music for you all.”

“This is my building,” said Hequa. “How did you get in?”

“A, uhh, spirit named Pikwik came to each of us in our dreams last night,” said washboard guy. “We’re Keep on Juggin’. Haven’t you heard of us?”

“Even if I had heard of you, that doesn’t explain how you got in here,” said Hequa.

“The spirit gave us the door codes, and told us you’d be needing some music right about now,” said washboard guy. “Hit it, boys.”

As rhythm slapped from a rope bound to an upside down galvanized wash basin began filling the rooftop patio, Matilda sprung to her feet. “Come on,” she said, grabbing Silky’s hand. “Get up. Dance with me.”

Hequa and Sallycat exchanged glances. When the jug player got going, Hequa burst into laughter. "Sallycat," he said. "I feel like our meeting might be getting away from us."

Chapter 21

“How was your meeting of the resistance?” asked Pikwik psychically.

“You know how it was,” said Matilda with mock indignation. “I cannot believe you made a jug band come and play for us.”

“I can’t believe I didn’t think of it sooner,” said Pikwik. “They were good, yes? It is surprisingly hard to find a good jug band on short notice.”

“They were fun, okay,” said Matilda. “But they interrupted our meeting, turning it from a serious thing into a silly thing.”

“A resistance movement without silliness is nothing but trouble,” said Pikwik. “Plus, think of the courage it must have taken for that band to follow their dreams and just show up to play music on a stranger’s rooftop during a pandemic. Only their fiddler stayed home.”

“They would have been better with a fiddler,” said Matilda.

“You and Silky managed to dance without one,” said Pikwik.

“We could have danced without music,” said Matilda. “Anyways, we decided on no assassinations for now. And Sallycat called our enemy ‘fascist technocrats’. I think I like this better than calling them ‘medical fascists.’”

“As you wish, child,” said Pikwik.

“I mean, it is better, right?” asked Matilda. “Especially for attracting new people to the movement? Because everyone thinks the medical people are heroes now?”

“The fascist technocrats are your enemies,” admitted Pikwik. “Perhaps it is better to consider medical fascists just a sub-category of fascist technocrats.”

“Good,” said Matilda. “But we still do not have a real plan to defeat them. Without assassinations, we have even less of a plan. Are you ever going to help me with that?”

“What about Silky’s plan to use magic tricks?” asked Pikwik.

“Pikwik! Again, if you were listening to us, why ask me how it went?” asked Matilda.

“Because I care more about what you think than about what I heard,” said Pikwik. “This is, after all, your movement.”

“Whatever,” said Matilda. “I must go inside now and tell Edwina how it went.”

“As you wish, child,” said Pikwik.

“Edwina,” called Matilda as she entered the house.

“Hi Matilda,” said Luke, who was lounging in a beanbag in the living room. “Edwina’s out shopping. She should be back in twenty minutes or so.”

“Okay,” said Matilda, collapsing into another beanbag.

“Something on your mind?” asked Luke.

“Too much,” said Matilda. “I am supposed to be leading this resistance movement, but there are only a few of us in the movement, and I do not know how to lead.”

“What does your dragon say?” asked Luke.

“She says we are not romantic enough,” said Matilda. “Today, she made a jug band show up at our meeting to play old-fashioned music.”

“I... see,” said Luke. “Well, I guess that’s one way to resist the fascist revolution.”

“Do you have a better way?” asked Matilda.

“I’ve been thinking about that,” said Luke. “And it seems to me you’ve got at least two problems. You’ve got the old school oppressors in business and government doing stuff like shoveling public funds into the private sector, rigging elections, and arming local police forces with military equipment. Then you’ve got the tech moguls and their pet politicians moving

us towards a high tech dystopia. Now, my impression is that you're focused on the latter, but shouldn't your focus really be on both?"

"Today we decided that our enemies are the fascist technocrats," said Matilda.

"But they're all fascist technocrats, Matilda," said Luke. "No matter their superficial party affiliation, the people in power now are all part of the problem. The problem is the total system itself, and everyone using it to maintain the status quo."

"But what about the revolution?" asked Matilda. "Pikwik says a fascist revolution is coming, and that this is what we have to resist."

"Far be it from me to argue with a dragon," said Luke. "But I'm still not convinced a revolution would be the worst thing in the world."

"Pikwik says that the things that are bad now will only get worse by revolution," said Matilda. "She says that the fascist revolution will make everything that has happened up until now seem like a child's game."

"Like I said, I'm not arguing," said Luke. "But when does she see this revolution happening?"

"Soon," said Matilda. "She says it has already happened in some other countries. But here it will happen differently. There will be government action that many oppose. The fascist

technocrats will use popular objections to this government action to rally people in support of their agenda. Within a few years, there will be revolution. It is this revolution that our movement must oppose.”

“Sounds like you’re trying to build a movement on a bunch of maybes,” said Luke.

“On a bunch of maybes and on the word of a dragon,” said Matilda. “If you were me, what would you do?”

“Honestly?” said Luke. “I’d find a way to clarify the message, then get this clear message to as many people as possible.”

“So you would warn people about the fascists?” asked Matilda.

“Not exactly,” said Luke. “Instead, I’d try to come up with a positive message that the fascists would never abide, and spread this message far and wide.”

“Positive message? Like what?” asked Matilda.

“Like freedom,” said Luke. “And connectedness. And, if it were me, I’d probably include something about how we’re all made of information.”

“I do not quite get you there,” said Matilda.

“Okay,” said Luke. “In my mind, there are three things that everyone has in common. We are all free, naturally, unless someone violates our rights to limit this freedom. We are all

connected, to each other and to the world at large. And we are all made of the same stuff, and that stuff — whether physical, psychological, or whatever — is information.“

“That sounds good,” said Matilda. “But I do not see how it would help with my movement.”

“Well, if you lay out basic ideas like those, you don’t have to say what you’re fighting,” said Luke. “Instead, you can name your enemies as anyone who violates your freedom, compromises your connectedness, or interferes with your information, whether bodily or in the digital world.”

“I will have to think about that,” said Matilda.

Chapter 22

“Great Bamzini, I made you a sandwich,” said Silky’s mom.

“Mom, I told you, my name is Silky now,” said Silky. “I’ll be out in a bit.”

A few minutes later, Silky and his mom sat at the table, starting their meal. “Hey, I thought you’d be working now,” said Silky. “You feeling okay?”

“I got furloughed,” said Silky’s mom. “A nurse furloughed in a pandemic. How do you like that?”

“That ... makes no sense,” said Silky.

“Tell me about it,” said Silky’s mom. “How about you? Did you go to work today?”

“Day off,” said Silky. “Working from home, technically. And a good thing, too. My boss is driving me batty.”

“What’d he do this time?” asked Silky’s mom. “Still making you take dictation?”

“Yeah, but I’m getting used to that,” said Silky. “Yesterday, he made me deliver all of his tenants a weird pledge that they could sign to get out of paying this month’s rent. Like, it’s a pandemic and I have to go door to door to deliver his weird message.”

“A pledge?” asked Silky’s mom. “What kind of a pledge?”

“I don’t remember the exact wording,” said Silky. “Something about freedom, and, I don’t know, it was just weird.”

“Well, did you at least wear a mask when you made the deliveries?” asked Silky’s mom.

“Yes, I wore a mask,” said Silky. “And I washed it right away when I got home.”

“Good,” said Silky’s mom. “Well, if you’re working from home today, what does your boss have you doing?”

“Sending emails to a long list of people my boss is trying to get interested in one of his projects,” said Silky. “It’s super boring, but I guess it has to be done.”

“Got time to help me make a fun quarantine video?” asked Silky’s mom.

“Oh god. Fine,” said Silky. “Just, nothing about toilet paper. All those jokes were stale before the pandemic.”

“I was thinking I would just talk about being furloughed, and you could stand out of the frame, and throw our cats at me, one

at a time, until I'm finished talking," said Silky's mom.

"Yeah, I can do that," said Silky.

His arm sore from a cat scratch, Silky sent the last of the day's emails, and was about to take a nap when Pikwik intruded upon his thoughts.

"Silky!" said Pikwik. "Why have you not called Matilda yet today?"

"Why?" asked Silky. "Was I supposed to?"

"She just walked all the way to Hequa's place, hoping you would be there," said Pikwik.

"Why didn't she just call me?" asked Silky.

"Don't ask stupid questions," said Pikwik. "Call her now and remind her she's special."

"Whatever, dragon queen," said Silky, fetching his phone and dialing Matilda.

"Hi Silky," said Matilda after two rings. "I am in a fight with Sallycat. Can I call you later?"

"Sure, but why are you fighting with Sallycat?" asked Silky.

"It's a long story," said Matilda. "She says the military industrial complex won 9/11, and the banking cartels won the 2008

financial crisis, and the medical fascists will win the pandemic, no matter what we do about it. She says I am wasting my time with this resistance movement.”

“What if I come and get you?” asked Silky.

“Yes. Okay,” said Matilda.

Matilda was waiting outside Hequa’s building when Silky arrived. “Let’s go to the river,” she said as she got into the car. “I am tired of my house.”

“Okay,” said Silky. “Umm, have you been drinking?”

“I have been drinking dragon whiskey,” said Matilda. “I am avoiding my house until it wears off.”

“Is that why you were fighting with Sallycat?” asked Silky.

“I was fighting with Sallycat because she thinks she knows everything, but really she only knows what her precious computers tell her,” said Matilda.

“Was she seriously saying that our resistance movement is a waste of time?” asked Silky. “Does Hequa know she thinks that?”

“Maybe,” said Matilda. “Maybe she thinks that, or maybe she has a more complicated argument that I was too drunk to hear. To be honest, I do not know which it is.”

Parking near the river, the pair got out of the car and walked silently down to the water. Standing there, under a sunset-pink sky, Silky put his arm around Matilda, who sighed. “Do you think our resistance movement is a waste?” she asked.

“I think that, whatever it is, it is just starting,” said Silky.

Chapter 23

“Silky, is that you?” asked Hequa, who was curled up in a ball on the floor of his loft. “Silky, you must help me.”

“Uhh, okay,” said Silky. “I mean, are you okay? Did you hurt yourself?”

“Come and help me up,” said Hequa. “I need some water.”

“Sure thing,” said Silky, approaching his boss with an outstretched hand.

“Thank you,” said Hequa, getting up. “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about Matilda’s new message. About how we’re all made of information.”

“And you do your best thinking curled up in a ball on the floor?” asked Silky. “I don’t get it.”

“I don’t get it either, Silky,” said Hequa, sipping a glass of water. “Just think about it. Information. I’m made of it. You’re made of it. This world is made of it. So is my home planet. The stars, the universe, everything. It’s like everything is all the same thing,

but it's all different at the same time. I just can't stop thinking about it."

"Whatever. Maybe you just drank too much coffee again," said Silky. "Isn't there some work I'm supposed to be doing or something?"

"Yes, yes. Always more work," said Hequa. "Any news from Matilda? Our movement needs its leader at this crucial time."

"I think she's doing school today," said Silky. "I can text her if you want."

"Oh, don't bother," said Hequa. "I think we can do without her today. We can send out an email blast. How big is our list? Ten thousand? Twenty?"

"Umm, our list is only a hundred and twelve addresses," said Silky. "Not sure we can call it a blast with a hundred and twelve addresses."

"Fine then, we will let the list grow," said Hequa. "Have you found out why youtube took down my video?"

"Because you said that zanzi leaf can cure the virus," said Silky. "You can't say stuff like that on youtube."

"I never said cure," argued Hequa. "I said prevent. What if I make another video, but don't mention the zanzi leaf?"

"Best not to mention the virus, either," said Silky. "Right

now, there are all kinds of videos being taken down just for mentioning the virus by name.”

“Okay,” said Hequa. “Let’s use this time to make a script for the next video. I’ll just talk and you type, and let me know if I say something that needs to be changed.”

“Ready,” said Silky, moving to stand in front of Hequa’s open laptop.

“Ladies, gentleman, and everyone else,” said Hequa. “My name is Hequa. I came to Earth from a distant star system. I have made your planet my home. Today, I fear this home is in danger. Read that back to me, Silky.”

Silky did so. “Good,” said Hequa. “What do you think?”

“It seems okay,” said Silky. “But it kind of sounds like you’re about to announce an alien invasion.”

“Okay,” said Hequa. “I will clarify that now. Ready?”

“Ready,” said Silky.

“The Earth is not being invaded by aliens,” said Hequa. “Indeed, the threat we face is much more subtle than that. In this video, I will tell you of this threat, and of what we can do to overcome it. Okay, read that back to me.”

Silky obliged. “Seems like a pretty good intro,” he said. “What are you thinking for the camera shot? Just you against a neutral

background, like the last one? Or were you thinking something different?"

"Just type for now, and we can worry about the shot later," said Hequa.

"Okay, ready," said Silky.

"To understand this threat, we must first understand what is being threatened," said Hequa. "Our freedom is being threatened. Our connections with everything around us are being threatened. And our control over our own information is being threatened. If these things are being threatened, what is the threat? Fascists are the threat."

"Since I came here only recently from another planet," continued Hequa. "I do not understand the nuances of your politics. But I don't have to understand such nuances to see the threat of fascist technocrats looming very large. Silky, is that grammar acceptable?"

"Sounds fine," said Silky.

"When I first became aware of this threat, I had one of my best people investigate," said Hequa. "This investigation found that fascist technocrats are already gaining power in many parts of the world. If we do nothing, they will almost certainly fatally compromise our freedom, our connections with each other, and our personal information."

"Umm, do you really want to say 'fatally compromise'?" asked

Silky. “Couldn’t you just say ‘compromise?’”

“It must be fatally,” said Hequa. “I want people to know how serious this is.”

“Fatally it is,” said Silky. “Okay, ready.”

“Before I tell you who these fascists are, I invite you to consider the following,” said Hequa. “In response to fears of a virus that appears to be a little worse than seasonal flu, over half of Earth’s population was immobilized. We were told we needed to quarantine the healthy to protect the vulnerable. But millions of the truly vulnerable now face starvation and death due to the economic devastation produced by these measures. We were told we needed to slow the spread of the virus to keep hospitals from being overrun, but many hospitals were not overrun. In this country, we were told the government would help the people through this difficult time, but what the government actually did was give trillions of dollars to the ultra wealthy. Now, we are being told to accept restrictions on our freedom for an indefinite period of time. And who benefits from all of this? Fascist technocrats.”

“Got it,” said Silky. “Go on.”

“With small businesses crumbling and millions of contract workers overlooked by government stimulus measures, formerly tight labor markets have greatly loosened up, cheapening the value of human energies, and fascist technocrats love cheap humans,” said Hequa. “With endless media campaigns instilling fear of the virus throughout our population, otherwise

rational people have become mouthpieces for the fascist agenda, amplifying messages that liken the virus to a wartime enemy. As you're probably aware, fascist technocrats love frightened, militant humans. And with authorities in many locations encouraging people to report each other for violating new and changing rules about how to behave in public, a new network of lifestyle informants is being created. And fascist technocrats love informant networks."

"Geez," said Silky. "I mean, aren't you being a little negative?"

"I feel very negative about the fascists," said Hequa. "Just keep typing."

"Okay," said Silky.

"Now, you might ask, who are these fascists?" said Hequa. "Some are billionaires like Bill Goats. Many are lesser known figures in politics, technology, and medicine. But many more are everyday people who are, even now, being seduced by the idea of a much more tightly controlled society. These are people who think they are doing the right thing by trying to control others due to their own fear of the virus. They think they are helping, but what they are actually doing is starting a war."

"One of my companies, Jhanya Properties, has already forgiven rent for all of its tenants through the pandemic," continued Hequa. "Another of my companies, Jhanya Research, has turned its full attention to understanding the fascist threat and how to resist it. But I didn't make this video to tell you about my businesses. I made it to warn you about the fascist technocrats,

and to invite you to join me and many others in resisting the new fascism.”

“Is that it?” asked Silky. “What about the call to action?”

“Oh yes,” said Hequa. “If you would like to work with me and many others to resist the fascist revolution now underway, send an email introducing yourself to accessiblefuture@gmail.com, and we will add you to our email list.”

Chapter 24

“It seems like Hequa wants to be the leader,” said Matilda. “I thought I was the leader of this resistance movement, but then Hequa made this video, and you helped him.”

“You are the leader,” said Silky. “And Hequa is my boss. I had to help him. And anyways, I thought you had to be a secret leader, because of your immigration status. So why shouldn’t Hequa make a video?”

“I just wish you would have brought me in to help,” said Matilda. “I would never have said that the virus is just a little worse than seasonal flu. It might be twice as bad, or worse. Obviously, it is not as bad as the fascists. But still.”

“Sorry,” said Silky, unsure of what else to say.

“And he did not even mention me,” said Matilda. “Did not even mention that there was a leader. Why did you not make him mention that?”

“Umm, I forgot,” said Silky.

“Can you bring me to Hequa’s place so I can ask him these questions?” asked Matilda.

“Right now?” asked Silky. “I mean, isn’t it a little late?”

“It is not even ten,” said Matilda. “Now, put your clothes on and bring me to Hequa’s.”

After a few minutes of silent driving, a familiar voice intruded on the couple’s thoughts. “Hello young heroes of the resistance,” said Pikwik psychically. “I am pleased to see you engaged in your movement’s first power struggle.”

“Pikwik!” said Matilda. “There is nothing pleasing about having to check Hequa’s ego.”

“Of course there is, child,” said Pikwik. “Every serious movement struggles with issues of interpersonal power. It pleases me greatly to see that you will not shy away from this task.”

“Good for you for being pleased,” said Matilda. “But what am I supposed to tell Hequa? He is like a child that cannot sit still. We need him, and his money. But I do not know how to make him listen to me.”

“Just be honest, and he should get it,” said Silky.

“More than honesty, Hequa needs things to do,” said Pikwik. “Give him jobs to do, and he will exceed your expectations.”

“Thanks, Pikwik,” said Matilda. “But can you let us drive in

silence so I can get my thoughts together?”

“As you wish, child,” said Pikwik.

Sallycat was just leaving as they approached the building. “Careful,” she warned them over her shoulder. “He’s in one of his moods.”

“One of his moods?” asked Matilda while they were in the elevator.

“That could mean anything. He’s always in a mood,” said Silky.

“Sallycat? Did you forget something?” called Hequa when the pair reached the loft.

“It’s me and Matilda,” replied Silky.

“Matilda! Perfect,” said Hequa as he came into view, wearing a bathrobe and carrying a comically large bong. “You’re just in time for bong rips.”

“No bong rips,” said Matilda. “I came to talk serious. About your new video.”

“Oh yes?” said Hequa. “What did you think? I think Silky could have used a better camera angle, but he’s still learning.”

“The angle was not the problem,” said Matilda. “You acting like the leader of the movement is the problem.”

“Is that how I acted?” asked Hequa. “How else am I supposed to share information about the movement?”

“You are supposed to call me before doing something big like posting that video,” said Matilda.

“When we made the video, I asked Silky where you were, and he said you were busy with school,” said Hequa. “Should we have waited until you were available? What about when our movement becomes large, and many people start making videos in support of it? Should they all call you for your approval?”

“No. Maybe,” said Matilda. “I just think that video could make trouble for us, because you talked about the virus like it is a small thing.”

“Everything I said was supported by Sallycat’s research,” said Hequa.

“The virus might evolve faster than her research,” said Matilda. “Pikwik tells me it may mutate and become much worse. If you base our movement on the virus being small, and the virus gets bigger, our movement will lose credibility. Is that what you want? For our movement to lose credibility?”

“I didn’t think about that,” said Hequa. “Now that you say it, I see that I should have. Is there a way to fix it?”

“I have an idea,” said Silky. “What if we make another video where we introduce Matilda as our leader, only she can be in disguise to hide her identity?”

“Would that really be better?” asked Matilda. “I can put on a mask and big sunglasses or something. But now that I think about it, I am wondering if we shouldn’t just let the public think Hequa’s the leader.”

“I’m happy to say you’re the leader,” said Hequa. “And if I made a mistake about calling the virus small in public, maybe we should do a new video together where you correct my mistake.”

“Fine,” said Matilda. “Let’s do it that way.”

“Good,” said Hequa. “I’ll go put on a shirt for the camera. Silky, go find Matilda a mask from my mask pile over there.”

“Mask pile?” said Matilda.

“Yeah, he’s got a pile for pretty much everything,” said Silky.

“I like this one,” said Matilda upon selecting a mask. “It reminds me of Eyes Wide Shut.”

“The movie?” asked Silky, blushing. “But that ... you saw that?”

“Of course,” said Matilda. “It is one of my favorites. We should watch it together sometime.”

“Uhh, okay,” said Silky.

“I am ready for the camera,” declared Hequa, who was now wearing a button down shirt and tiny underwear.

“Hequa!” said Silky.

“Just point the camera at my top half,” said Hequa. “Good mask, Matilda. That is exactly the right one to lead our movement in.”

Chapter 25

“Did you see?” asked Silky into the phone. “The new video has over thirty thousand views! In under a week! Man, things are getting real.”

“Of course I have seen,” said Matilda. “Never mind that. I am calling for a ride to Hequa’s. Can you pick me up?”

“I guess so,” said Silky. “But, like, it’s kind of my day off.”

“There are no days off in the resistance,” said Matilda. “I will be ready in twenty minutes.”

Hanging up, Silky got ready as quickly as he could. “Mom, I got called into work,” he said loudly over his shoulder while exiting the house. “Just text if you want me to pick anything up while I’m out.”

Arriving to Matilda’s, Silky was about to park when he saw his girlfriend coming. As she got in the car, he could tell something was wrong. “What’s going on?” he asked.

“Our movement has a big problem,” said Matilda. “I have been

watching the people protesting the virus. The more I watch them, the more I hate them. It is like, I agree with them that quarantining the healthy is a foolish strategy. But they have become the face of questioning this strategy. And they are a bunch of racist idiots.”

“That’s a polite way of putting it,” said Silky.

“What are we going to do?” asked Matilda. “What if the people watching and liking our video are these racist idiots? I do not want them in my movement.”

“What does Pikwik say?” asked Silky.

“Nothing useful,” said Matilda. “Just that the stupid protesters are tools of the new fascists, but do not even know it.”

“So what does that mean?” asked Silky.

“I do not fully know,” said Matilda. “That is why we must meet. To figure out how we can avoid being associated with these idiots.”

Hequa was on his rooftop patio sipping coffee with Sallycat when they arrived. “What’s up, guys?” said Sallycat.

“Hey,” said Silky.

“We need to talk about keeping our movement safe from idiots,” said Matilda. “Hequa. Sallycat. Have you seen the idiot racist protesters protesting the virus? I am worried that if we

make more videos and gain more followers, people will start associating our movement with these idiots.”

“Why should it matter?” asked Hequa. “Aren’t more followers good, no matter who they are?”

“Some of them are actual nazis,” said Matilda. “They’re total fascists, but because they also question the official story we are being told, people might group them with us in their thinking.”

“That’s a tricky one,” said Sallycat. “I mean, the way this virus has been politicized puts us at odds with both the left and the right. But didn’t we know, going into this, that that was how it was going to be? Isn’t our job to resist all of them and their terrible ideas?”

“Yes,” said Matilda. “But now I am seeing how hard that might be. It is like I have to avoid saying what I really think to almost everyone. Even Edwina. I cannot tell her that I think the protesters are basically right about opening the country back up. And I tell her everything!”

“Locking things down was done to slow the virus, not stop it,” said Sallycat. “All it could ever do was put off sickness and death for a few weeks or months. We were told that putting off these deaths would buy our hospitals time to get ready. But, having bought that time, it seems like those in power are, at best, guessing at what the next steps should be.”

“I know that,” said Matilda. “But what does it mean for our movement?”

“What do you think it should mean?” asked Hequa.

“I think we should make a new video, where we say clearly that we are the enemies of everyone in power,” said Matilda. “The governments, the companies, everyone. They are all working together, whether they know it or not, for the fascist technocrats.”

“Don’t forget the media,” said Hequa. “They are the ones selling the new fascism to the public.”

“Good point,” said Matilda. “But I have also been thinking, if we are against all of these things, is there a way for us to focus as strongly on what we are for as on what we are against?”

“Freedom. Connectedness. Clear information,” said Hequa. “The protesters you’re so worried about may say they’re for freedom, but they definitely don’t value connectedness or clear information. Maybe if we start and end all of our videos with an affirmation of these values, the shape of our brand will become more clear.”

“Our brand?” asked Silky.

“Even resistance movements need good branding, these days,” said Sallycat with a shrug. “Speaking of that, we should probably have a logo. I can design it. Any ideas?”

“A blue dragon,” said Matilda.

“Aren’t dragon symbols associated with the kkk?” asked Silky.

“Why a dragon?” asked Hequa. “Why not something simpler? Like triangles. Or dots. Maybe just a wavy line. Shouldn’t logos be very simple things?”

“Maybe I can just work up a few designs and we can go from there,” said Sallycat.

“Do you know anyone who could put music in the videos?” asked Matilda. “Maybe just at the beginning and end. But I think music would help.”

“I might know someone,” said Hequa. “Do we also want a slogan? Like something simple that people will remember?”

“I think Sallycat already came up with the perfect slogan,” said Matilda. “Resist all of them and their terrible ideas.”

“That might be too long, but maybe it could work,” said Hequa. “As for the first problem you brought up, what if we made fun of the idiots in our next video? We could call them names, or make funny cartoons of them saying foolish things. If we applaud their enthusiasm but compare them with misguided children, I doubt any of them will want to join our movement.”

“Good,” said Matilda. “We will do that.”

Chapter 26

“Do not forget to wear a mask while you plot your revolution,” said Edwina as Matilda was putting her shoes on.

“It is not a revolution, Edwina,” said Matilda. “It is a resistance movement. We are resisting the revolution of fascist technocrats that has started.”

“Well, whatever you are doing, wear a mask while you do it,” said Edwina.

“Maybe I am just leaving to make out with Silky,” said Matilda. “Should we make out wearing masks?”

“Just do not go out and catch the virus,” said Edwina. “I know you are chewing Hequa’s zanzi leaf, but I do not believe this leaf has all of the powers Hequa says it does.”

“I will be careful,” said Matilda. “I promise.”

“She is just trying to help,” said Pikwik psychically as Matilda went out to the porch to wait for Silky.

“If she wanted to help, she would know that we are against revolution,” replied Matilda grumpily.

“Is it possible you’ve just been seeing so much of her that everything she says annoys you?” asked Pikwik.

“Maybe,” said Matilda. “But it is not just her. Almost everything these last few days has been annoying.”

“What about me?” asked Pikwik. “Am I annoying?”

“Okay, everything but you,” said Matilda. “How could you be annoying? You are my best friend.”

“If I tried, I assure you I could be quite annoying,” said Pikwik.

“I am sure,” said Matilda. “Any idea how long Silky will be?”

As she asked the question, Silky’s car pulled up. “Hey,” he said as she got in. “Any word from Pikwik on what we’re doing today?”

“Nothing relevant,” said Matilda. “Has Hequa told you what this is about?”

“He only said that we all need to meet,” said Silky. “That it’s important.”

Hequa and Sallycat were waiting in Hequa’s loft when they arrived. After the usual greetings, Hequa turned on a large monitor, which showed images of unidentified aerial vehicles. After studying the images for a minute, Hequa cleared his throat.

“The Pentagon has just released this footage of UFOs. I asked you here today to discuss the meaning of this.”

“So this isn’t you?” asked Silky, who had moved to stand in front of Hequa’s laptop to take notes. “I guess I saw the story and just assumed this was some of your alien technology.”

“It’s old footage. And the aircraft in the video are not from Jhanya,” said Hequa. “My planet’s technology is less advanced.”

“I have a question,” said Sallycat. “My question is why now? Like, in the middle of this big pandemic, why would they pick now to release this information?”

“A good question,” said Hequa. “Matilda? What are your thoughts?”

“The government released the footage?” said Matilda. “That is very weird. I guess I do not know what to think about it. Does this mean there are other alien races here on this planet, aside from yours, Hequa? Are the new UFOs maybe just some secret technology from Earth that no one knows about?”

“That footage is just the tip of the iceberg of a very large mystery,” said Sallycat. “Which, again, begs the question of why bring that mystery up in public at this time.”

“Maybe they did it just to scare people,” said Silky. “Or maybe the footage was already going to come out, so the military decided to just, like, get ahead of the story.”

“What I’m wondering is, will this impact our movement?” asked Hequa.

“This can only be good for us,” said Matilda. “If we are trying to get people to see things they may not have thought of yet, something like this might make people more open to new and strange ideas, like the ideas we are offering.”

“Totally,” said Silky.

“Interesting point,” said Sallycat. “Makes me wonder if they didn’t drop this bombshell just to add to the chaos in a moment where everything is starting to change.”

“What does this mean for our movement?” asked Hequa. “Should we say something about it?”

“Maybe not,” said Matilda. “Not unless we think fascist technocrats are somehow behind the release of UFO footage.”

“Good,” said Hequa. “The next thing I wanted to bring up is Sallycat’s latest report. It shows propaganda from just a few sources is responsible for the vast majority of the messaging fueling the idiot protests. Some of this propaganda is religious, but more is political, funded by the governments of Russia and China, and by people like Robert Merder. We’ve already made a video distancing ourselves from the protesters, but some of their ideas do overlap our position. Should we do another video denouncing Merder’s twitter bots and further clarifying our position?”

“We should not give them any more of our attention,” said Matilda. “We should just make our propaganda without mentioning theirs.”

“There is a painter at the door who is ready to help you make posters,” said Pikwik psychically to Matilda.

“We do need good posters,” said Matilda. “Pikwik tells me there is someone outside the door downstairs who can help us make them.”

Sallycat studied her phone, then pushed the button near the loft’s door to buzz the newcomer in. “This ought to be good,” she said.

They all looked at each other for a minute, waiting for their surprise guest. When she entered the loft, carrying a large portfolio and folding easel, Matilda was the first to speak. “Welcome to the resistance, stranger,” she said. “Thank you for coming to help us with our propaganda posters.”

“Hi. I’m Kay,” said Kay. “Wow, my muse wasn’t kidding around with sending me here. What exactly are we resisting?”

“The fascist revolution,” said Hequa. “I am Hequa, an alien from the planet Jhanya. This is my building. Here is Sallycat, Silky, and our leader Matilda.”

“Great to meet you all,” said Kay. “So, my muse didn’t say how much this gig pays. What are we looking at?”

“I will pay you one hundred dollars per poster design,” said Hequa. “Plus, I will give you zanzi leaf to chew so you don’t get the virus. And you are welcome to coffee, whiskey, or bong rips anytime.”

“Guess that works for me,” said Kay. “Where’s that coffee at?”

Within a couple of hours, Kay had five posters roughed out. The group was arguing about whether the final poster should say ‘resist medical fascists’ or ‘resist fascist technocrats’ when the door chime rang through the loft.

“Oh my god,” said Sallycat. “There’s a band waiting outside.”

“Pikwik!” said Matilda. “Did you send us more musicians?”

“Obviously,” replied Pikwik psychically. “Who doesn’t like a jazz quartet?”

“Fine,” said Matilda. “Hequa, Pikwik says she invited a jazz quartet to our meeting.”

“Sallycat, buzz them in,” said Hequa.

“You’ve got a band coming?” asked Kay. “I mean, I know you’re the resistance or whatever, but aren’t you even going to pretend to care about social distancing?”

“Why should we?” asked Hequa. “We’ve got zanzi leaf to chew. What’s the problem?”

“Okay, so what exactly is zanzi leaf?” asked Kay. “You mentioned it before, but I’ve never heard of it. What’s the deal?”

“The zanzi plant comes from my home planet Jhanya,” said Hequa. “It has very powerful healing properties. Among other things, it is an anti-microbial and anti-viral. I grow it here, and have enough to supply the entire resistance.”

“Bow ties and suspenders!” said Sallycat as the jazz quartet entered. “What the fuck is even happening right now?”

“Musicians!” exclaimed Hequa. “Thanks for coming. Please set up over there. And feel free to enjoy our coffee, whiskey, or bong rips at your convenience.”

“Dance with me,” said Matilda to Silky as the music started.

“Okay, but who will take notes while I’m dancing?” asked Silky.

“Who cares?” asked Matilda, who was clearly on her second glass of whiskey. “Hequa, can you and Sallycat manage without us while we dance?”

“We’ll manage,” said Hequa, grinning. “I don’t think we need notes of the argument about what the last poster should say.”

Chapter 27

“God, these people!” exclaimed Silky’s mom. “What is wrong with these people?”

“What is it this time?” asked Silky patiently. “Is Aunt Mary trying to find you a good Christian husband again?”

“I wish,” said Silky’s mom. “Every time I post some news about the virus, this guy I went to high school with laugh reacts and comments that the pandemic is a ‘plandemic.’”

“So unfriend him,” said Silky.

“Oh, I don’t really care about that,” said Silky’s mom. “But I just shared a video of another nurse in New York talking about how her hospital has gone nuts. They’re killing people who have the virus with medical malpractice, she’s freaking out, and nobody seems to be doing anything about it.”

“Okay,” said Silky.

“Well, I posted that and here’s Danny fucking Gibson again with the laugh react,” said Silky’s mom. “He started a big con-

versation in the comments about the virus being an engineered bioweapon, and like ten people agreed with him!”

“It’s your post. Just delete the comments,” said Silky.

“That’s not the point,” said Silky’s mom. “What’s got me upset is seeing how many people actually agree with Danny Gibson. Assholes. They’re all stupid assholes. I don’t know why I’m even friends with any of them.”

“Maybe they’re just suffering from cognitive infiltration,” said Silky.

“Cognitive infiltration?” asked Silky’s mom.

“Yeah, I read about it in one of the reports my boss commissioned,” said Silky. “Apparently, this guy Sunstone and another guy whose name I don’t remember wrote a paper a dozen years ago about conspiracy theories and how to mess them up. One thing they recommended was going into communities where conspiracy theories were being promoted and spreading disinformation. So, uh, maybe people like Danny are so screwed up because they’ve been fed so much disinformation that they can’t separate it from real information.”

“That’s a rather charitable viewpoint,” said Silky’s mom. “But, disinformation or not, anyone who laugh reacts to a nurse tearfully pouring her heart out is an asshole. People are responsible for what they say, even on facebook.”

“They should be responsible,” said Silky, swallowing the last of

his cereal. “But Sallycat says there’s so much disinformation floating around now that it’s impossible to know what’s real and what’s not.”

“Oh? Sallycat says?” teased Silky’s mom. “Didn’t you tell me that Sallycat thinks 9/11 was some big conspiracy?”

“It was a conspiracy, mom,” said Silky. “A conspiracy of religious extremists, a conspiracy of government incompetence, a conspiracy in the city of New York to hide the fact that explosive charges placed in the World Trade Center buildings for safety reasons were detonated when the planes hit to bring the towers down in a controlled manner.”

“Okay, okay,” said Silky’s mom. “Remind me never to question Sallycat again!”

“If you want, I can go on facebook and call Danny Gibson names,” said Silky.

“I won’t stop you,” said Silky’s mom, chuckling. “But it’s probably not worth your time. Hey, aren’t you going to be late for work?”

“I’ll be fifteen minutes late, and my boss won’t even notice,” said Silky. “Besides, it’s not like I’m doing anything important. My first task today is pouring a bunch of birdseed on Hequa’s rooftop, then sweeping this into the word ‘resist’, I guess so planes can see it.”

“That’s ... the weirdest thing you’ve told me about this job,”

said Silky's mom. "Hequa's not one of those back-to-work protesters, is he?"

"Hequa? No way," said Silky. "I think he just makes me do stuff like that because he thinks it's funny. But he pays me, so whatever."

Later, as Silky was finishing up the 't' in 'resist' with a big push broom, Pikwik spoke to him. "Silky, I am very pleased," she said. "You are very nearly ready for your next step on the path to greatness."

"Okay," said Silky. "Sounds good. What's my next step?"

"Not so fast," said Pikwik. "You are almost ready. I will let you know when it's time."

"Whatever," said Silky.

Just then, Hequa emerged onto the rooftop. "Very good," he said, admiring the piles of birdseed that Silky had made. "See how the pigeons are beginning to swarm? We should go now, so we aren't too much in the video I'm making of the birds carrying our resistance off into the air."

Silky followed Hequa inside and down to Hequa's loft. "So the birdseed thing is for a video?" he asked.

"Yes," said Hequa. "What, did you think I was just sending a message to planes?"

“Um, maybe,” said Silky.

“The only planes flying over us right now are surveillance planes,” said Hequa. “Why would they care about our movement?”

“Umm, I don’t know,” said Silky.

“That’s right,” said Hequa. “You don’t know. Now, please prepare coffee and a blunt for me while I get my thoughts together for some letters I must send.”

While Silky made coffee and rolled a joint, Hequa paced the loft, muttering to himself. By the time the coffee was ready, Silky stood in front of Hequa’s laptop, waiting for direction. “Okay,” he said. “Who is the first one going to?”

“Address the first one to Lika, in Colorado,” said Hequa. “Just type Lika, and her address should pop up.”

“Okay. Got it,” said Silky.

“Hi, Lika,” began Hequa. “I hope you and your baby are enjoying life in the desert. I will come to visit again when I have time. But I am not writing about personal matters. As you know from my previous message, I have committed myself to resisting the fascist technocrats who are gaining power in governments around the world. Read that back to me?”

Silky did so. “Ready for more when you are,” he said.

“Our resistance movement has decided not to employ assassinations at this time,” continued Hequa. “But our leader does seem open to doing assassinations at some point in the future. Because you are a trained assassin, I am hoping you could provide us with guidance on when and how to best employ assassinations for maximum effect.”

“Hequa, are you serious right now?” asked Silky.

“Just keep typing,” said Hequa. “I realize that you are not a great assassin, since your job was to assassinate me and you did not do that, but I feel your expertise in this area is nonetheless valuable. Please reply at your earliest convenience if you are willing to share this expertise with our resistance movement. Take care, Hequa. P.S. Are you accepting visitors?”

“All set,” said Silky. “Hey no offense, but do you seriously think we need an assassin?”

“I think we need Lika,” said Hequa. “And I think we need Through the Stars Academy, which she is working with.”

“Okay, so why not just tell her that?” asked Silky.

“I already have, on the phone, but she was being distracted by her small child,” said Hequa. “I’m hoping that complimenting her expertise will get her to pay more attention.”

“So ... why write that she’s ‘not a great assassin?’” asked Silky.

“Next letter,” said Hequa. “This one is going to Gerald at

Through the Stars Academy.”

“Got it,” said Silky.

“Dear Gerald, I am writing again to remind you that Sallycat has recently completed a report on a new threat that you and your organization should be made aware of. This is the threat of medical fascism, and more generally, the threat of fascist technocrats. The report in question is attached. You know what file to attach, Silky?”

“The pdf titled ‘fascistthreat?’” asked Silky.

“That’s it,” said Hequa. “Next paragraph. You might be wondering why an educational organization like Through the Stars Academy should be concerned by fascist technocrats. The truth is that I don’t have a good answer for you. I do know that the Pentagon just released new footage of UFOs, and found it odd that they would do so in the middle of a pandemic. Sallycat theorizes that this footage was released during the pandemic to associate unidentified aerial vehicles with fear of the virus in our collective mind. She believes forces within the military-industrial complex are plotting to make people afraid of extraterrestrials in support of a new war agenda. As an extraterrestrial myself, I find this highly offensive.”

“That said,” continued Hequa. “It is our belief that an important choice is set before all of us, you and Through the Stars Academy included. This is a threefold choice. First, there is the fascism of the right, the neoconservatives. Second, there is the fascism of the left, the neoliberals. And third, there is a rejection

of fascism. I hope you and your organization will join our resistance movement, and reject the new fascism with us. Take care, Hequa.”

“Done and sent,” said Silky.

“Next order of business,” said Hequa. “Have you talked to Matilda today? Is she coming here when she’s done with school?”

“Didn’t you hear?” asked Silky. “She’s off with Edwina and that Traha group of theirs. I guess they all get together once a year and do some big dance. I don’t really get it, but that’s where she is.”

“Okay,” said Hequa. “Sallycat is busy on the supercomputer with her pandas. Perhaps our work for the day is complete.”

“Pandas?” asked Silky.

“A computer program Sallycat uses to make those nice looking data visualizations,” said Hequa. “I know. Let’s check the footage from the roof.”

Chapter 28

Even though Matilda's ex Bryce was not a member of Traha, he was still in the employ of Edwina, and was Edwina's preferred driver, especially on long trips. This night, on the way back from Traha's big annual dance, Matilda sat in the back seat of Edwina's SUV while Edwina rode shotgun and Bryce drove. It was a long drive, and Matilda was tired. She dozed intermittently, wishing the drive would just be over.

When they got within a hundred miles of the city, Pikwik interrupted Matilda's fitful slumber. "Matilda," she said psychically. "You have returned! You must tell me all about your trip."

"Hi Pikwik," whispered Matilda. "I cannot really talk right now. Can it wait until we get home?"

"As you wish, child," said Pikwik. "Would you like to hear a dragon song, so your travel passes more quickly?"

"You have songs?" said Matilda. "Yes, sing for me please."

For the next ninety minutes, Pikwik sung her psychic song, a meandering ballad about a group of reed weavers who kept

an ancient dragon's lair secret from a nearby group of stone cutters. By the time the song was over, they were back in the city. Matilda jumped out of the vehicle as it pulled up to the house. "I call first shower," she called over her shoulder.

"Pikwik? Okay, I can talk now," said Matilda once she was in the shower.

"Very good," said Pikwik. "How was it spending so much time with Bryce after not seeing him for so long?"

"Pikwik!" said Matilda. "I went and did the sacred dance, and you want to know about my ex? It was okay seeing him, but I feel he is still a little sad about us. He might have been secretly hoping to reconnect, but he did not say anything about it."

"And how did you feel about that?" asked Pikwik.

"Okay, like I said," said Matilda. "Honestly, we were never really a good match. We just ended up spending so much time together that sleeping together just kind of happened."

"True, most of love is just people spending time together," said Pikwik. "You are wise beyond your years for noticing this. And what of the dance? How did it go?"

"The dance this year was a little weird," said Matilda. "It only lasted eight hours. Usually it lasts for a whole day or two. Sometimes longer. And the truths that people were saying with their dance were, I don't know. In some ways they were harder than usual, in other ways softer. Some of us died from

the virus in New York, and these deaths were treated a little differently from how we usually treat death. And there were many new faces, mostly thanks to Edwina's new safe houses. The new ones dance in a way that is sort of unrefined. Not raw, exactly, but not polished by years of experience."

"Fascinating," said Pikwik. "How many people danced in total?"

"Three hundred, at least," said Matilda.

"What a beautiful custom," said Pikwik. "Would you like me to tell you what your resistance movement has been doing in your absence?"

"Maybe just tell me what Silky's been doing," said Matilda.

"Ahhh," said Pikwik. "Of course. Silky has been doing an admirable job of hiding the fact that I'm a dragon from Hequa."

"Have you talked to him?" asked Matilda. "Did he ask about me? I left my phone here when I went to the dance. Was he worried?"

"He missed you, but was not worried," said Pikwik. "He continues to serve the resistance, with admirable patience, as Hequa's assistant."

"Okay, what have they been doing?" asked Matilda.

"Mostly sending emails and making videos," said Pikwik. "I suggested to Silky that he should use his mom's sewing machine

to make resistance costumes for everyone, but he thought I was joking, and I didn't press the issue."

"You think we should have costumes? Like clowns?" asked Matilda.

"More like uniforms than clown costumes," said Pikwik. "It was just an idea, though. No need to pursue it if it doesn't tickle your fancy."

"But shouldn't anyone be able to join the resistance, no matter how they dress?" asked Matilda.

"As I said, no need to pursue it," said Pikwik. "But, since we're on the subject, I do think it would be a good idea to have more consistency in the masks you wear in the videos you make."

"Like, we should all wear the same masks?" asked Matilda.

"Yes. If you all wore ones like the one you call your Eyes Wide Shut mask, viewers would get a more consistent message from the resistance," said Pikwik.

"Okay," said Matilda. "I will talk to everyone about that. But tomorrow. Right now, I need to get some sleep."

After waking, Matilda turned on her phone and called Silky. "I'm back, but I cannot see you for two weeks," she said once the greetings were over.

"No way? How come?" asked Silky.

“Dancing exposed me to hundreds of people I do not regularly see,” said Matilda. “I promised Edwina I would stay at home for two weeks, just in case I have the virus and do not know it.”

“But what about Hequa’s zanzi leaf?” asked Silky.

“The zanzi leaf might work, and it might not,” said Matilda. “I know for sure staying home will work to keep me from spreading this thing if I have it. So I am staying home.”

“But what about the resistance?” asked Silky. “What am I supposed to tell Hequa?”

“Tell him I can lead the resistance from home for now,” said Matilda. “If you want to help me with this, you can do my shopping for me for now. How does that sound?”

“I guess I can do that,” said Silky. “But I was really looking forward to seeing you.”

“You too,” said Matilda. “But it’s only for two weeks. Has anything new happened while I was away? Anything I should know?”

“Umm, Sallycat finished another report,” said Silky. “This one’s only sixty pages long.”

“Well, what does it say?” asked Matilda.

“It says hunger, pollution, and other stuff resulting from the pandemic response will probably kill far more people than the

virus,” said Silky.

“So, nothing really new?” asked Matilda.

“I don’t know,” said Silky. “She got really detailed with the pollution part, after seeing that the EPA was relaxing its rules, supposedly in response to the virus. You should have the report in your email.”

“Thanks. I’ll check it,” said Matilda. “Anything else?”

“Sort of, but I feel kinda weird talking about it on the phone,” said Silky.

“Oh whatever,” said Matilda. “No one is listening to our little resistance yet. What is it?”

“It’s hard to explain,” said Silky. “There’s this woman in Colorado named Lika that Hequa knows. She’s apparently some kind of trained assassin, from the same planet as Hequa. Anyway, Hequa sent her an email asking for her help. He said we might be doing assassinations in the future, and that her expertise could be of value to us.”

“That seems okay to me,” said Matilda. “Our movement needs to keep its options open.”

Chapter 29

“How can so many people be making so many nonsense videos that seem believable on the surface?” asked Hequa. “I keep finding them and sending them to Sallycat, and she keeps telling me they’re full of lies.”

“Okay,” said Silky.

“Well, I need ideas for making sure people don’t think our videos are full of lies,” said Hequa.

“True or not, people will just think whatever,” said Silky. “Our subscribers will probably believe anything we tell them, and the people who don’t like us will probably say we’re telling lies no matter what we actually say.”

“You Earth people are very strange about such things,” said Hequa. “Back on Jhanya, sharing information almost always meant sharing true information. Here, truth seems to be far less important than group affiliation.”

“You’re not wrong,” said Silky. “But I’m not sure what we could possibly do about that.”

“Maybe we could start our assassination program,” said Hequa. “Lika will be here soon, and she will be able to help with that.”

“How would assassinating anyone make people less tribal and more discerning when it comes to the truth?” asked Silky.

“I don’t know,” said Hequa. “But there must be people behind the mystery of why everyone is making nonsense videos.”

Silky laughed. “You think?” he said. “Because I think people are just stupid and gullible.”

“I will have Sallycat look into it and draw up a list of assassination targets,” said Hequa. “For now, we should go to the roof to greet Lika as she lands.”

Under a night sky obscured by light pollution, Silky watched as Hequa activated a ring of lights on an open area of the roof. Within minutes, a small, saucer-shaped aircraft landed in this ring, making a low humming sound. The cockpit opened, and a woman wearing a yellow flight suit climbed out. “I left Flikka with a sitter back in Colorado,” she said without preamble. “I’ll need to leave in a few hours to get back before morning.”

“Lika! Very good to see you,” said Hequa. “You remember the Great Bamzini? He is now named Silky and he is my assistant.”

“Good to see you Silky,” said Lika. “Lead us to the conference room.”

“Should I have Silky prepare some food?” asked Hequa. “Silky,

prepare us snacks and a blunt. And go get Sallycat. She should be here for this meeting.”

After rolling a joint and making twenty or so of the tiny sandwiches Hequa preferred, Silky went down to the fourth floor to fetch Sallycat. As usual, she was seated at her desk surrounded by computers.

“Umm, sorry to interrupt, but Lika’s here,” said Silky.

Sallycat swiveled her chair around. “Already? Shit. I was hoping to have a complete kill list ready by the time she got here. Guess I can just print the top one hundred. Should only take a minute.”

As he waited, Silky admired the many fish tanks stacked throughout the cavernous room. Each tank, he knew, contained a sea creature from Hequa’s home planet called a trital, which functioned as a biological computer. All of these tritals were networked together to form the supercomputer which Sallycat managed. Silky watched, fascinated, as the tritals used colored light to express their calculations.

“All set,” said Sallycat, ending Silky’s reverie.

Back in Hequa’s loft, the pair found Hequa and Lika eating tiny sandwiches at the conference table.

“Sallycat, good to see you again,” said Lika.

“You too,” said Sallycat. “How’s the little one?”

“Hopefully sleeping back in Colorado,” said Lika. “Hequa tells me you’ve started looking at assassination targets for your resistance movement? Is that them?”

Sallycat set the slim binder she carried on the table. “Yup. A preliminary kill list,” she said. “This is just the top one hundred.”

“Hmm,” said Lika, opening the binder. “I was just about to tell Hequa that assassinations might be the wrong strategy for a movement like yours.”

“Silky keeps saying that, too,” said Hequa. “But then what are we supposed to do about the fascist threat?”

“I outlined several options in my last report,” said Sallycat.

“Yes, but we need to do more,” said Hequa. “When our leader comes back, I want to be able to tell her that we’re making progress.”

“From what I understand, the enemies of your resistance mostly fall into two competing factions,” said Lika. “Is this right?”

“It’s a little more complicated. But basically, yeah,” said Sallycat.

“So that means if you target someone from one faction, it is a win for the competing faction,” said Lika. “So if you decided to do assassinations, you should probably do them two at a time or not at all, to prevent either faction from gaining too much power.”

“An interesting argument,” said Hequa. “Where does it go?”

“Well, if these factions are already competing, wouldn’t it be easier to get them to fight each other and do your work for you?” asked Lika.

“Maybe, but how would that work?” asked Hequa. “All of the leaders of both factions are rich and powerful. None of them do their fights themselves, and they don’t care what happens to their supporters. So even if we get the supporters fighting each other, the fascists will still win.”

“I didn’t say it would be easy,” said Lika. “I just said what if.”

“If we had more resources, we could dig up dirt on everyone on our list, and send the dirt to our targets’ enemies,” said Sallycat. “It’s not really ethical, but assassination wouldn’t be, either.”

“That’s a thought,” said Lika, flipping through Sallycat’s binder.

“Wait,” said Silky. “You’re not talking about blackmail here, right?”

“Not exactly,” said Sallycat. “We wouldn’t threaten to release info unless a target does x. We would just find the info and release it.”

“There’s something about this I don’t like,” said Hequa. “I think we should consult our leader before deciding about it.”

Chapter 30

“Silky told me about your plan to dig up dirt on our movement’s enemies,” said Matilda as she approached Hequa on his rooftop patio. “I do not like this plan. Please tell me you have not started yet.”

“Matilda! Glad you’re done quarantining,” said Hequa. “Did you see Silky on your way up? Did he offer you coffee and snacks?”

“I am fine,” said Matilda. “But this plan of yours is trouble. Too much of it would be out of our control. And I doubt if it would even work.”

“Oh?” asked Hequa. “Why do you say that?”

“Because the fascist factions hate each other, but their fighting with each other is all with lawsuits and political procedures and media,” said Matilda. “There is no dirt that we could find on any of them that would change this. We should not waste our time.”

“Take a seat?” said Hequa. “I agree that we shouldn’t waste our time. But doing nothing is also a waste of time. What do you

propose we should do?”

Matilda sat down, sighing. “I do not know,” she said. “The more I have thought about it, the more I think even assassinations would not work. It is like we are fighting a giant machine that lives in the minds of too many people. Assassinations would just make more fear, and that’s what fuels this machine.”

“That makes sense,” said Hequa. “You are our leader. What do you see as our way forward?”

Just then, Silky arrived, carrying a tray of sandwiches and juice. “Sorry it took me so long to squeeze the oranges,” he said. “I miss anything important?”

“Matilda was just about to tell us of our new direction,” said Hequa.

“Sort of,” said Matilda, accepting a glass of orange juice. “I was just about to say that what we really need is a new world. Like, what if we could just have our own places and people kept somehow separate from the world that the fascists are taking over?”

“My life is already a little like that,” said Hequa. “But I have plenty of money. What about everyone who doesn’t have money?”

“A separate world?” asked Silky. “What, like a cult?”

“Maybe like a cult,” said Matilda. “Traha, the group that I belong to, is sort of like a cult for survivors of slavery. We have our

own houses and businesses and our sacred dance to hold us together. Most of us do not have much money, but as a group we have enough to keep us all fed and secure and away from ICE. If the supporters of the resistance could band together, maybe something similar would be possible on a much larger scale.”

“Interesting,” said Hequa. “I worry about the cost, but even if we forget about that for the moment, is this something people would actually do?”

“You rang?” said Sallycat as she emerged onto the rooftop.

“Good thinking, Silky,” said Hequa as it dawned on him that Silky had texted Sallycat.

“I was just saying that the resistance should maybe create a separate world for itself, hidden in this world,” said Matilda.

“What, like a cult?” asked Sallycat.

“Maybe like a cult,” said Matilda. “But more like a network of people and places that we can protect from whatever the fascists try to do.”

“Well, that sounds better than assassinations,” said Sallycat. “I see one big problem with it right off the bat, though. Our resistance movement is still small, and it’s mostly made up of fiercely independent people. Right now, these people are basically taking it on faith that the fascist threat is real and imminent. The cost of buy-in is low, and they’ll simply abandon

the movement if things don't shake out the way we say they will. If you increase the cost of buy-in by requiring people to do something different in their lives — like helping to build some kind of separate, parallel society — we're going to lose people. Maybe most of them.”

“Ahh, but the ones who remain will be those most committed to the cause,” said Hequa. “Matilda, what are we really talking about here? Houses? Companies? Farms? Compounds like the one Lika lives on?”

“Smaller things than that, at first,” said Matilda. “Maybe we just start with a song that people can post themselves singing on social media. Then we can do meetups in places where our followers are clustered. Then we could start asking people about their problems, and find ways to solve those problems. That would be the point where things like houses and companies might start to make sense.”

“Interesting,” said Sallycat. “In change management, they say four things are needed for successful change. A purpose to believe in, behavioral reinforcement, teaching the skills required for change, and consistent role models. I could write something up about how these things might look in the context of our movement, if this is the direction we want to go.”

“Good,” said Hequa. “What do you think, Silky?”

“I like Matilda's idea of starting with a song,” said Silky. “Stuff like that seems way more realistic than most of what we've been talking about lately.”

“Are you all seriously going to make social media videos of you singing some song?” asked Sallycat.

“Yes, but we’ll have to write it first,” said Hequa. “Or should I try to hire someone to do that?”

“Why don’t we try to write it ourselves, and if that doesn’t work, we hire someone,” said Matilda.

“Very good,” said Hequa. “Silky, prepare a blunt for our songwriting.”

“Should we maybe all move inside?” asked Silky. “It’s starting to rain.”

Later, in Hequa’s loft, Silky stood before a white board with a marker, waiting for song title ideas.

“Free Republic of Matilda!” suggested Hequa.

“You said that one already,” said Sallycat. “What if we call it Fuck the Fascists?”

“Couldn’t that be misinterpreted, because fuck can mean have sex with?” asked Hequa.

“I am thinking something more like Inner Authority,” said Matilda. “Something like that, anyway. Something that focuses on what we are for, not against. Something that empowers people.”

“Does anything good rhyme with authority?” asked Hequa.

“Sorority,” said Silky. “And majority. Superiority. And conformity, kind of.”

“What kind of music will the song be?” asked Hequa. “Pop? Country? Rap? Trance?”

“Maybe a ballad,” said Matilda. “Like a pop ballad that could be sung in many ways.”

“Hey, I have an idea,” said Silky. “What if we just wrote one or two verses, and asked the rest of the resistance to make up their own verses?”

“I like that,” said Matilda. “But I just had an idea, too. One of Edwina’s friends writes poetry. His name is Luke. Hequa, can I invite him here to help us?”

“Can he be trusted?” asked Hequa.

“Of course,” said Matilda. “Silky has met him.”

“See if he will come,” said Hequa. “I think we are ready for an hour break. See if he can come in an hour.”

Chapter 31

An hour later, Luke arrived to the loft.

“Thanks for coming,” said Matilda in greeting.

“No problem,” said Luke. “Not like I was doing anything important today, anyway.”

“I remember you,” said Hequa. “How is your cryptocurrency doing?”

“It failed,” said Luke. “I mean, it still works and everything, but no one was into it, so the project is no longer maintained.”

“I’m Sallycat,” said Sallycat. “I don’t think we’ve ever officially met.”

“Good to meet you,” said Luke. “So Matilda tells me you’re trying to write a song for your resistance movement. Not sure how much help I can be, but I’m willing to give it a try.”

“Matilda told us you are a poet,” said Hequa. “Can you tell us one of your poems?”

“My current favorite is pretty short,” said Luke. “As technology advances, biology evolves. The synergy in the symmetry of evolving and advancing spectacular matrices transforms understanding.”

“Very good,” said Hequa. “Silky, prepare to write. Luke, tell us your ideas for our song.”

Luke laughed. “The creative process doesn’t really work like that,” he said.

“Sorry. What was I thinking?” said Hequa. “Silky, fetch the magic mushrooms!”

Luke laughed again. “That’s not really what I meant,” he said. “It’s just that the creative process is, well, a process. Why don’t you tell me where you’re at with this song, and we can go from there?”

“We are still trying to find a title,” said Matilda.

“Okay, what does your dragon say?” asked Luke.

“Your dragon?” said Hequa suspiciously.

“My ... oh shit,” said Matilda.

“Why oh shit?” asked Hequa. “Do you have a dragon somewhere that we don’t know about? I don’t know much about dragons. I read that they weren’t real. But if you have one, wouldn’t that be of interest to the resistance?”

"I don't have her, I just know her," said Matilda. "You know her too. Her name is Pikwik."

"What have you done?" said Pikwik psychically to Matilda alone. "I told you not to reveal that I am a dragon to the alien Hequa."

"Pikwik is a dragon?" asked Hequa. "How can this be? Where does she live? I know she sees into people's thinking. And she has been helping us with our movement. Matilda, is a dragon the secret leader of us all?"

"I am the leader," said Matilda. "Pikwik is just a helper. Can we just get back to writing the song?"

"Very good, child," said Pikwik. "Make them forget about me as quickly as possible."

"Does your dragon live in the river?" asked Hequa. "I thought I saw something like a dragon, once, swimming deep in the river."

"Enough about the dragon!" said Matilda. "Luke did not come all of the way over here to hear us talk about dragons!"

"I second that," said Sallycat, who was looking extra skeptical.

"Does your dragon have a song for us?" asked Hequa.

"Not that she has shared," said Matilda. "Besides, her song would probably be all old fashioned, when we need something clean and easy to remember."

“Clean and easy to remember,” said Luke. “That’s a good start. Now, what exactly is this song supposed to be about? Your resistance movement in general, sure, but what else?”

“Matilda thought it could be called Inner Authority,” said Silky.

“Interesting,” said Luke. “Tell me more.”

“The idea behind it was that we should focus on what we are for, instead of on what we are against,” said Matilda.

“I think we should still say we’re against the fascist technocrats,” said Hequa. “We’re for freedom and against the technocracy.”

“Okay,” said Luke. “You could rhyme democracy with technocracy. But using the word technocracy might make you sound like you’re from the seventies.”

“Is there a better word?” asked Hequa. “So far, we’ve identified our enemies as fascists, medical fascists, fascist technocrats, neoliberal and neoconservative fascists. Sallycat likes the word technocrats. Do you know of a better word we could use to capture the quality of our enemies?”

“Not off the top of my head,” said Luke. “But let me make sure I’m following. It sounds like your enemies are those using technological means to exercise authoritarian control over others. Is that right?”

“Basically,” said Hequa.

“Well, one approach to this would be to take an old song and just change the words,” said Luke.

“No. We need our own song,” said Matilda. “Something catchy, that is easy to add new verses to.”

“These fuckin’ fascist technocrats control us with our fears,” sang Luke suddenly. “Of viruses and UFOs and foreigners and queers. With laws that serve the one percent and mass indoctrination, they run our total system by corrupting information.”

“Very good,” said Hequa, clapping lightly.

“They’ve taken over everywhere, but we, we resist,” continued Luke. “They try to take our freedom every day but we resist. Our truth has been ignored so now we’re starting to insist. If you’re a technocratic fascist, you’re probably on our list.”

“I like it,” said Hequa.

“I like it too,” said Matilda. “See, I knew Luke could help us.”

“Yeah, pretty good,” said Silky, finishing his white board writing.

“Works for me,” said Sallycat. “I mean, I don’t sing. But it’s good for people who do.”

Chapter 32

“Pikwik! I am sorry,” said Matilda once she was alone outside of Hequa’s building. “I should have known Luke would spill the beans about you being a dragon. All I had to do was warn him not to talk about you. Can you forgive me?”

“For now, child,” came Pikwik’s psychic voice. “But you must make sure the alien Hequa never learns where my lair is. I fear someone like him might disturb my hoard.”

“Okay,” said Matilda.

“Hey, you ready?” said Silky as he exited the building.

“Yes,” said Matilda.

They got into Silky’s car and drove in silence for a few minutes. “Pretty cool song Luke came up with,” said Silky eventually. “Catchy.”

“It is good,” said Matilda. “But is it good enough?”

“I think it’s a good enough start,” said Silky.

“I know,” said Matilda. “But is any of what we are doing really good enough for what we are trying to do?”

“I don’t know,” said Silky. “We’re up to three thousand subscribers. That’s pretty good.”

“People who post cat videos get more subscribers than that,” said Matilda.

“I don’t get it,” said Silky. “What are you saying right now?”

“I am saying it feels like nothing,” said Matilda. “Three thousand subscribers feels like nothing compared to what is needed. All of Hequa’s money feels like nothing compared to what is needed. I am supposed to be leading a movement, but there is no movement. There is only us and Hequa and a few others.”

“Right, but we’re still just starting out,” said Silky. “Plus, you forgot Pikwik. With your dragon on our side, how can we fail?”

“I do not know,” said Matilda. “I do not even know what our success could look like. Pikwik talks as if our success should be measured by how much fun we are having. But our work is serious, so why should that matter at all?”

“If Pikwik says it matters, it probably does matter,” said Silky. “Don’t forget that she put us together. I think she’s wiser than any person could be. If she says having fun is the most important thing, then maybe there’s something to that.”

“I think maybe we are just toys to her,” said Matilda.

“Maybe we are,” said Silky. “But I still think you’re thinking about the movement wrong, a little bit. Like, what if we took Pikwik’s idea of having the most fun we can and really just ran with it. Worst case scenario, we have lots of fun even if the movement fails. See?”

“I do not want to fail, even if it is fun,” said Matilda.

“Right, but if we’re not having fun, and we fail anyway, that’d be worse than if we failed while having fun.”

“I guess so,” said Matilda.

“Okay, umm,” said Silky. “Is there something else bothering you?”

“I feel you would not understand,” said Matilda.

“What is it?” asked Silky.

“Now that we asked Luke for help, I fear Edwina will want to get involved in our movement,” said Matilda.

“And that’s a bad thing?” asked Silky.

“It should be a good thing,” said Matilda. “I should want that. But Edwina can be like a force. Like she has too much natural power. If she gets involved, I worry the movement would become too much hers.”

“Okay, but doesn’t the movement belong to everyone involved?”

asked Silky, turning onto Matilda's street.

"Can you just drive for longer?" asked Matilda. "Just drive around the lakes or something? I do not want to go home so soon."

"No problem," said Silky. "What's the deal? Are you and Edwina fighting or something?"

"We are not fighting," said Matilda. "We are good. But I worry that we might fight more if she becomes involved with our resistance meetings."

"Huh," said Silky. "You think she wouldn't approve of what we're doing, or something?"

"No. Maybe," said Matilda. "I just think she would complicate things too much, and things are already too complicated."

"So, be nice about it, but ask her to keep her distance," said Silky.

"I think you do not understand," said Matilda. "Now that Luke is involved, she will find a way to get involved too."

"So why'd you get Luke involved?" asked Silky.

"I did not think," said Matilda. "He was just the best person for what we needed, so I called him without thinking."

"Well, can you call him right now and ask him not to tell Edwina about today?" asked Silky.

“I am sure she already knows,” said Matilda. “There are no secrets with her and Luke. Not even little ones. Plus, the truth is that I am good with Edwina knowing. If Luke didn’t tell her, I would. It will just take me a little while to process the meaning of her involvement in our movement.”

Chapter 33

“Edwina?” asked Silky upon entering Hequa’s loft. “What are you doing here?”

“I slept here last night,” said Edwina. “And today I will begin to teach your resistance movement about hypnosis.”

“Silky, you know Edwina,” said Hequa, stepping out from behind a large pile of seemingly random items. “But did you know she is a master of mind control?”

“It is not mind control,” said Edwina. “It is a conversation that happens below the level of conscious awareness.”

“I know a thing or two about that,” said Silky, who had tried and failed to incorporate hypnosis into his magic act a few years ago.

“Silky, last night she got me to strip naked and crawl around on the floor like a dog,” said Hequa. “Can you make me do this?”

“Umm, not sure I’d want to,” said Silky.

“Good,” said Hequa. “Now go prepare some coffee and eggs for us.”

While he made the coffee, a familiar presence came to Silky. “This is a crucial moment for the resistance,” said Pikwik psychically. “You must not let your resentment of Hequa or your fear of Edwina interfere with what must be done.”

“Whatever,” muttered Silky.

“When Matilda arrives, you must help her see that Edwina’s involvement is a good thing,” said Pikwik.

“What?” asked Silky under his breath. “But how’s she even getting here? Usually I drive.”

“She’s splitting a cab with Luke,” said Pikwik. “Hequa called them. They should arrive around the time Hequa and Edwina finish eating.”

Silky mulled this over while he served the coffee and eggs. While he was checking Hequa’s email, Sallycat arrived. Five minutes later, Matilda and Luke walked in the door.

“Excellent,” said Hequa. “I think we all know each other. Edwina has graciously offered to teach our movement about hypnosis. Silky, prepare the camera to film the lesson.”

Matilda went to stand quietly beside Silky while he set up a tripod. Luke looked from Edwina to Hequa and back again, shrugging. Sallycat helped herself to some coffee. Once they

were was more-or-less settled, Hequa handed masks out to everyone, so their faces wouldn't appear on camera.

"The hypnosis I know cannot be taught in a day," said Edwina, after Silky indicated with a thumb that the camera was live. "But I can teach you the general practice, and you can build on this in your own time."

For the next few hours, Edwina taught the group basic techniques of self-hypnosis. After a lunch break, she resumed the lesson, this time focusing on hypnotizing others. Matilda already knew this stuff, and was consequently bored, but tried not to let it show. Luke, who also knew this stuff, spent most of the lesson wondering why he was even there. Afterwards, the group went up to the roof and Hequa lit a joint. "I think this hypnosis will be very valuable for the resistance," he said. "Matilda, what do you think?"

"If I am really your leader, I think you should have asked me before doing this," said Matilda. "What do you think, Luke?"

"Honestly?" said Luke. "I have no idea why you wanted me here."

"Was this not fun?" asked Edwina. "We thought it would be fun for everyone."

"We thought it would be fun, and we needed enough people to make the video good," said Hequa. "My business manager Robert couldn't come, so Edwina suggested you, Luke."

“I know how important this resistance is to you, Matilda,” said Edwina. “When I came here last night, it was only to talk with Hequa, to be supportive of you.”

“So you fucked Hequa to support me?” asked Matilda. “And you invited Luke here to rub his nose in it? Is this what we are? If this is our resistance, we are doomed.”

“Sorry to change the subject,” said Sallycat. “But what I want to know is how this hypnosis training fits in with what we’re doing. In case you haven’t noticed, all we really do is make videos and put out reports. How does hypnosis help us with that?”

“It could help, if we stopped talking so much and started doing actions,” said Matilda quietly.

“Right on,” said Luke, moving towards the exit. “Well, I’m out of here. This was fun and all, but I’ve got other shit to do.”

“Before you go,” said Hequa. “I have been thinking that our movement needs its own cryptocurrency. Is this something you could help us with?”

“Only if you pay me,” said Luke, exiting the rooftop.

“Hey Matilda, what kind of actions are you talking about?” asked Silky.

“Yes, what actions?” asked Hequa.

“I have been thinking about this,” said Matilda. “And I think we have to start taking control of the symbols.”

“The symbols? What symbols?” asked Hequa.

“The symbols of the new world order,” said Matilda. “If you go online, you can find thousands of videos about the symbols being used by the new world order to take over our minds. I have always thought we should take these as our own. That is why I chose the mask that looks like Eyes Wide Shut. But what if we took over more and more of these symbols, until people started associating them with us instead of with the new world order?”

“You mean, like, the eye in the pyramid on the dollar?” asked Silky.

“Yes,” said Matilda. “But there is a whole language of symbols encoded in society. The fascist technocrats build this language into everything they make and do. If we can somehow disrupt this language, maybe our movement can succeed.”

“No offense, supreme leader,” said Sallycat. “But it sounds like you’ve been spending too much time on the internet.”

“Maybe,” said Matilda. “But the language of symbols I am talking about is real. It is how the powerful communicate directly with the unconscious minds of the people they rule. Like hypnosis, but written down, or acted out as theater in public.”

“Interesting,” said Hequa.

“Makes sense to me,” said Silky.

“She speaks the truth,” said Edwina. “It has been going on for a long time. My grandfather Taavi used to speak of these symbols and this theater.”

“Not sure I’m buying it,” said Sallycat. “What exactly do you mean by theater?”

“Different things,” said Matilda. “The public sacrifice of cattle is a good example. Whenever thousands of animals are killed and not eaten, like what happened in the UK because of a disease scare some years ago, or what is happening here and now because farmers have been losing customers to the pandemic. These public sacrifices connect with the part of people’s minds that think of sacrifice as a mechanism for getting the favor of the gods. So, once the sacrifice has been done, whatever the rulers do next is unconsciously seen by the public as a favorable response by the gods to the sacrifice. No one ever talks about it, but that is the psychology in play.”

“You know?” said Sallycat. “I guess I can sort of see it. But aren’t the fascist technocrats, like, a newer threat than all of that?”

“They are just the old power elite with new technology,” said Matilda. “The people are the same. The families are the same. The methods are the same or similar. But the technologies they are using now are newer and very powerful.”

“So, you’re saying that our enemies are everyone in power?” asked Silky.

“And everyone who serves them, yes,” said Matilda. “The powerful, the structures through which their power is exercised, and the people who support these structures.”

“That is too many enemies,” said Edwina.

“You are right,” said Matilda. “That is why we should start compromising their symbols.”

“But we have fewer than four thousand subscribers,” said Hequa. “Where can we even start?”

Chapter 34

After dropping Edwina off, Silky and Matilda drove to the river and parked. “Are we getting out, or ... ?” asked Silky.

“Yes,” said Matilda, opening her door.

“Are you mad at me or something?” asked Silky, hurrying to catch up.

“I am mad at Hequa and Edwina sleeping together,” said Matilda. “And Luke! He was all excited to be able to help the movement again after Hequa called us this morning. Then when we got there, Luke put on a good show of trying to help, but there was no real reason for him to be there. Why would Hequa even call him? Did Edwina make Hequa call him? God, she can be such a bitch sometimes.”

“But I thought Edwina and Luke were just friends,” said Silky. “I mean, what’s problem?”

“Pikwik!” shouted Matilda towards the river. “Pikwik! The movement is ruined! What am I supposed to do now?”

“Can you just calm down?” asked Silky. “The movement’s not ruined just because Hequa and Edwina slept together or whatever. If anything, I think they’re a good fit. Hequa’s from another planet, and Edwina may as well be. Seriously, I don’t get the problem?”

“The problem?” asked Matilda. “The problem is that we are in a war and Edwina will try to make it seem like we are not in a war. She will take over Hequa’s thinking and things will only happen the way she wants them to. And what am I supposed to do? I am the leader of the movement and Edwina will not let me lead anything! Everything is ruined!”

“Come on,” said Silky. “Nothing is ruined. You’re still in charge, Hequa is still paying for everything, me and Sallycat are still working for Hequa. All that’s changed is Edwina helped us out for a day. I’m sure if you asked her to back off, she would.”

“She would not have slept with Hequa unless she wanted to be in this,” said Matilda. “No, she is in it, no matter what I say. I just do not understand why. Is she just trying to mess with me? She knows this is my thing. Why would she come and take it over?”

“Can I say what I think without you getting all mad at me?” asked Silky.

Matilda stared, committing to nothing.

“Okay, I think you should talk to her,” said Silky. “I think she maybe realized that what we’re doing is important, and she

wants to be involved. Maybe that's all it is."

"Well, what about Luke?" asked Matilda. "Why have him come for no reason, just to show him that her and Hequa were together?"

"I honestly don't know," said Silky. "But isn't Luke, like, Edwina's only friend? What if she just wanted him there for moral support, or whatever?"

"You know what I really cannot believe?" asked Matilda. "That she did not even tell me about any of it. Why would she go to Hequa behind my back in the first place? Why not give me a warning before I show up with Luke to the big surprise of her and Hequa? It is like she was just trying to mess with me."

"Can I tell you a secret?" asked Silky. "Pikwik spoke to me earlier. She told me that Edwina's involvement in the movement was a good thing, and asked me to help you see that."

"Are you serious right now?" asked Matilda. "Pikwik! Pikwik, is this true? Pikwik! Answer me!"

"Do you really think yelling will help?" asked Silky.

"I think Pikwik should have said that to me, not you," said Matilda. "God, today is like everyone talking around me while I get no say in what happens."

"Maybe that's part of what being the leader means," said Silky.

“Okay,” said Matilda. “Whatever. I want to go home now. Take me home.”

After dropping Matilda off, Silky headed home, stopping at the grocery store on the way. “I am very pleased with you,” came Pikwik’s psychic voice as he left the store. “You did good today.”

“Oh yeah?” said Silky. “Well, I think Matilda’s right. Today was total bullshit.”

“This situation is bigger than you can see, child,” said Pikwik. “From my point of view, today was a complete success.”

“How do you figure?” asked Silky.

“Your resistance movement must grow,” said Pikwik. “Edwina and Luke both have a part to play in that.”

“What kind of part?” asked Silky as he got back into his car.

“Once any group gets too large, internal politics can become an issue,” said Pikwik. “You may not know this, but Edwina is an expert at managing group politics. As for Luke, his expertise with alternative currency schemes may help the movement grow much more quickly than it otherwise could.”

“Fine. Whatever,” said Silky. “But that doesn’t explain why you kept Matilda in the dark about it until the last minute. She was really pissed.”

“I love Matilda,” said Pikwik. “She is my chosen champion.”

But if I had told her of my plan, she would have argued. Her stubbornness is a great asset, one which I did not wish to see turned against me.”

“So you just kind of forced her to go along with your plan?” asked Silky.

“That’s right,” said Pikwik.

Chapter 35

“Silky, look at this!” said Hequa, pointing at his computer screen. “There are already thirty seven people holding meetups for the movement.”

“You’re giving them each a thousand bucks in crypto,” said Silky. “I’m surprised there aren’t more of them.”

“In one group’s livestream last night, they were all wearing masks and talking about one of Sallycat’s reports,” said Hequa. “Even if I am paying them, I think this is great progress.”

“I guess so,” said Silky. “But not all of these groups seem that great. I’m pretty sure a couple of them are just white supremacist groups looking for any shred of legitimacy we might be able to provide.”

“Legitimacy?” asked Hequa. “You think we provide legitimacy?”

“Some, yeah,” said Silky. “At this point, we’ve got videos with high production values, official-looking reports, a decent website and a real social media following. In the world of internet groups, we’re definitely legit.”

“Hey guys,” said Sallycat as she entered the loft. “Hequa, we need to talk about your cryptocurrency.”

“Hequa Coin is the movement’s cryptocurrency,” said Hequa. “The transfers to the meetup organizers were all successful, and the buy orders that make this currency worth something are all set. Luke was very thorough in showing me how to do this. What’s the problem?”

“It’s not a problem exactly,” said Sallycat. “But I just noticed that the token is trading for more money than your buy price. Someone’s buying up Hequa Coin, and it makes me nervous not knowing who that is.”

“That sounds like good news to me,” said Hequa. “Let the mystery person pay our followers instead of me. Was there anything else?”

“Not really,” said Sallycat. “My report on cascading systemic failures is ready to go out, if you wanted to look it over.”

“I can read it tonight,” said Hequa. “Is there anything in it that I might find very surprising?”

“Maybe, but I doubt it,” said Sallycat. “It’s the one about all of the interconnected systems that have started to break down because of the pandemic response, remember?”

“I remember,” said Hequa. “But remind me of the main points.”

“First, brittle supply chains break under the stress produced by

the pandemic response,” said Sallycat. “Second, price gouging by middlemen drives down prices for producers while driving prices up for consumers. Third, government stimulus measures disproportionately help the wealthy while small business fail and individuals go bankrupt. Fourth, the pandemic’s next big wave may disrupt critical infrastructure, possibly leading to civil unrest.”

“Very good,” said Hequa. “Has Matilda read the report?”

“Sent a draft to her yesterday,” said Sallycat.

“Good,” said Hequa. “Don’t post it on our website until Matilda has approved.”

“Will do,” said Sallycat, taking her leave.

“Silky, you look troubled,” said Hequa. “What is it?”

“I don’t know,” said Silky. “Like, if even part of what Sallycat just said is true, then maybe we’re in way bigger trouble than I realized.”

“Yes,” said Hequa. “We are in big trouble. That’s why our resistance movement is so important.”

“Hequa,” called Matilda upon entering Hequa’s loft. “Hequa, have you seen Sallycat’s latest report? Are things really going to get that bad?”

“Hey,” said Silky.

“Oh hey Silky,” said Matilda. “Have you seen the report? Cascading system failures? Critical infrastructure disruptions? The whole thing sounds crazy!”

“It’s about as crazy as Pikwik said it would be,” said Silky.

“Matilda, it’s good to see you,” said Hequa. “Is there something in the report that you think needs to be changed?”

“Not really,” said Matilda. “I came to talk about how we should prepare for the things that the report says will happen. What should we do? What should our followers do? I think we need to have this conversation.”

“Very good,” said Hequa. “Has Edwina read the report? What does she say?”

“She will agree with whatever I say,” said Matilda sharply.

“Then we will proceed without her,” said Hequa. “Silky! Prepare to write on the white board.”

“Got it,” said Silky, moving the white board and its tripod to face the couches in Hequa’s makeshift living room. “Anyone need a refreshment?”

“More coffee for me,” said Hequa.

“Just water,” said Matilda.

“Okay, ready,” said Silky once Hequa and Matilda were settled.

Flipping through a copy of Sallycat's report, Hequa frowned when he came to a page near the back. "There are some recommendations here, but most of them look like they're for big companies or governments," said Hequa. "I'm not sure they really apply to us."

"I saw that, too," said Matilda. "And I am pretty sure divesting from fossil fuel investments is not something we need to discuss here."

"What about safe houses?" asked Hequa. "Edwina has told me about Traha's safe houses. Should we make safe houses for our movement?"

"If there is time, that might be a good idea," said Matilda. "If members of the resistance cannot make money, where will they live?"

"Safe houses," said Silky as he wrote the words.

"How many do we need?" asked Hequa. "Where should they be? How much money will it cost me to buy them?"

"What if we call them resistance houses instead of safe houses?" asked Silky. "Each one could have, like, a manager or something to be responsible for what happens there."

"Do we want actual houses or apartment buildings?" asked Hequa. "Should we also maybe have a compound like the one Lika lives at in Colorado?"

“I think we should focus on the people first,” said Matilda. “Let’s find who in our followers would be right for running a resistance house. Do we know who these people are?”

“Almost,” said Hequa. “We have social media profiles and correspondence from our followers. Silky is responsible for the emails. Silky, what do you think?”

“We’ve been exchanging emails with maybe a hundred people who seem dedicated to the cause and want to be more involved,” said Silky. “We could probably write them a letter explaining the need for resistance houses, and see how many of these would be up for managing one.”

“Good,” said Hequa. “So what should be in the letter? Are these houses just empty places for people to be, or should they be something more?”

“I think they should be as self-sufficient as possible,” said Matilda. “Each one should have a store of food, and tools, and a garden if possible.”

“What about a resident musician?” asked Silky. “Or artist of some kind? I’m pretty sure Pikwik would want something like that.”

“Wise dragon,” said Hequa. “What else?”

“On a slightly different topic, what if we started paying people to spread our message?” asked Matilda. “I mean, politicians pay for crowds at some of their rallies. Some companies pay

protesters to wave signs around. What if we did something similar, but maybe for graffiti? Like, people make graffiti for the resistance, and we pay them with Hequa coin?”

“Good thinking,” said Hequa. “Silky, write that down.”

“Got it,” said Silky.

“I had another idea,” said Matilda. “In Michigan, idiot protesters started calling the governor a fascist for not letting them get haircuts. In other places, idiot protesters have been calling their leaders fascists for things that are just as stupid. I feel these idiots have poisoned the public against our movement by using the term fascist like this.”

“Yes, I can see that,” said Hequa. “What is your idea?”

“I know it may be a little late for it,” said Matilda. “But what if we started using the word tyrants instead of fascists in the movement’s public messaging?”

“I don’t know,” said Hequa. “I don’t like the idea of idiots taking the word fascist from us. It’s like we’re giving ground to the fools. What do you think, Silky?”

“Honestly? I like tyrants better,” said Silky. “Talking about medical fascists, fascist technocrats, and whatever is fine, but people don’t always know what we mean. As we grow, I think a simpler and maybe less loaded term like tyrants might be better.”

“Okay,” said Hequa. “Silky, write ‘transition to tyrants’ on the board.”

Chapter 36

“Hello Matilda,” said Pikwik psychically. “I am very pleased with the job you are doing leading the resistance.”

“Pikwik! Where have you been?” asked Matilda.

“Attending to other matters,” said Pikwik. “But now, I have a job for you to consider.”

“What job?” asked Matilda.

“The alien Hequa has an object that I would very much like to add to my hoard,” said Pikwik. “It is a sword that he made with technology from his home planet. Can you retrieve this object for me?”

“Maybe,” said Matilda. “But why not ask Silky to do it? He is at Hequa’s place every day.”

“Silky is too close to Hequa,” said Pikwik. “I am hoping you can retrieve the sword without anyone noticing. I will, of course, give you some treasure for your effort.”

“I am not stealing from Hequa,” said Matilda. “How would I even find this sword? He has so much shit.”

“You must get Hequa very intoxicated, and get him to tell you where the sword is,” said Pikwik.

“How much treasure?” asked Matilda.

“Enough to pay for the next phase of the resistance,” said Pikwik.

“Why not just do a deal with him?” asked Matilda. “The treasure for the sword?”

“I wish to deal only with you in this matter,” said Pikwik. “If you think you can persuade Hequa to accept my treasure for his sword, proceed carefully. As I can only see into Hequa’s mind when he is intoxicated, I do not know how he will react to the offer.”

“I will try,” said Matilda. “I was going to go over there today anyway.”

“Very good, child,” said Pikwik.

A few hours later, Matilda entered Hequa’s loft. “Hequa?” she said. “Hequa, there is something we need to talk about.”

“This isn’t about Edwina, is it?” asked Hequa, who was standing by the coffee maker.

“No. Why?” asked Matilda.

“I think she is mad at me because I hate texting all of the time,” said Hequa. “So many messages, and she gets mad if I don’t reply right away. I always have to be looking at my phone. And when I try just calling, she texts back instead. It is driving me crazy.”

“I will let that one stay between you and her,” said Matilda. “No, what I want to talk about is the high cost of the new resistance houses. I think I have a way to pay for them.”

“You do?” asked Hequa. “Is it drug selling? I hear that can be very profitable. I just watched a show where a teacher became rich making and selling drugs.”

“Not drugs,” said Matilda. “God, what is with you today?”

“I’m bored of everything,” said Hequa. “And Silky is still not back from shopping.”

“Whatever,” said Matilda. “Hequa, do you have some kind of special sword that you made using technology from your home planet?”

“My molecular sword, yes,” said Hequa. “How did you hear about this?”

“Pikwik wishes to trade a great treasure for this sword,” said Matilda. “Enough to pay for all the resistance houses, I think.”

“The dragon wants my sword?” asked Hequa. “But why? Does she even have hands to use it?”

“She collects rare things,” said Matilda. “She will probably just put it in a pile with all of her other rare stuff.”

“Is it wise to deal with such a creature like this?” asked Hequa. “What if she takes the sword and does not give the treasure?”

“Pikwik would not do that,” said Matilda. “She honored an agreement with me, a little while back. I am sure she would honor this agreement, too.”

“How big of a treasure would it be?” said Hequa. “My molecular sword is the only one of its kind, anywhere. It can cut through almost anything, just like a light saber. It is perfectly balanced, and looks beautiful. Do you want to see it?”

“Yes, show me,” said Matilda.

Hequa led the way to the basement where the sword was stored behind a false wall. “You see?” he said. “I keep it very safe. Not even Silky has seen this hiding spot.”

“Cool,” said Matilda, eyeing the sword with what looked like a glass blade. “It’s weird. Almost looks wet.”

“It is wet,” said Hequa. “Water keeps it in good condition. Want to see it cut something?”

“Umm, okay,” said Matilda.

“The blade is activated by pressing this button,” said Hequa, demonstrating. “Now, watch how easily it cuts through this

cinder block.”

“Oh my god,” said Matilda, marveling at the cut-in-half cinder block.

“You see?” said Hequa. “It separates material at the molecular level. There is nothing like it.”

“I see why Pikwik wants it,” said Matilda. “That is amazing.”

“I had hoped to use this sword in our fight against the fascists,” said Hequa. “But a good use for it has not come up. Do you really think Pikwik will pay well for it?”

“Pikwik has tons of treasure,” said Matilda.

“Set the deal up,” said Hequa. “I am willing to part with the sword if it means the resistance succeeds.”

“Pikwik? Did you hear that?” asked Matilda.

“I heard, child,” came Pikwik’s psychic answer. “Bring the sword to the river at midnight, and I will be waiting with a chest of treasure. But only you. Have Silky drive, and keep him and Hequa in the car until after I am gone.”

“What does she say?” asked Hequa.

“We bring the sword to the river at midnight,” said Matilda. “You and Silky stay in the car until the deal is done. Then you come to the shore and pick up your treasure.”

“And you’re sure you trust this dragon?” asked Hequa.

“I trust her,” said Matilda.

“Then let’s do it,” said Hequa. “Come on back upstairs. Silky should be back by now.”

Chapter 37

“Pikwik,” said Matilda towards the river. “I have your sword. Where is the treasure?”

“Matilda,” came the dragon’s slithering whisper as she extended her head out of the water. “I am most pleased. Your treasure is here, in a trunk a few feet into the water from the shore. Now, I will come near to you and open my mouth. Please carefully place the sword inside.”

“Don’t you even want to know how the sword works?” asked Matilda.

“I know enough,” said Pikwik. “Now, let us do this quickly, before someone notices me.”

“There is no one here but me, and all Silky and Hequa can see from the car is shadows,” said Matilda.

“Nonetheless,” said Pikwik, bringing her enormous head close to Matilda.

“Okay,” said Matilda, placing the sword in Pikwik’s tooth-ringed

mouth. Once this was done, the dragon silently retracted her head into the water. When Matilda moved to follow, she found the treasure chest Pikwik had left. The object was too heavy for her to move, so she went back to the car.

“Is it done?” asked Hequa through the open passenger window.

“It’s done,” said Matilda. “We should go and get the treasure. It may take all three of us to move it.”

The treasure chest was too heavy for all three of them to reasonably carry, so they dragged the chest back to the car on the ground. Under a streetlight, Hequa inspected the contents of the trunk. “Are all of these coins gold?” he asked. “There are so many! And this dagger is beautiful. Is that a precious gem in the pommel?”

Getting the chest into Silky’s trunk required all of their combined strength, but they managed it. Back at Hequa’s building, they unloaded the treasure into five gallon buckets, making four trips up to the loft. Looking at the buckets filled with gold, gems, and various fine trinkets, no one said anything for a long minute.

“You are pleased?” asked Pikwik psychically while Hequa began counting the coins from one of the buckets.

“Yes, Pikwik,” said Matilda aloud. “She wanted to know if we are happy with the deal,” she said as Hequa looked at her questioningly.

“This is a great treasure,” said Hequa. “I never thought I’d get such a treasure for my molecular sword.”

“It’s the only weapon I know of that could truly harm me,” said Pikwik psychically. “Matilda, please tell Hequa thank you for parting with it.”

“Uhh, Pikwik says thanks for the sword,” said Matilda.

“Where did this dragon get so many gold coins?” asked Hequa. “There must be hundreds of them. Thousands. And the wooden treasure chest itself? It looks like it was crafted by a master. Incredible!”

“So, uhh, about that bonus you promised?” said Silky.

“Oh yes,” said Hequa. “You may select three gold coins and one piece of jewelery for helping with this tonight.”

“Cool,” said Silky.

“This treasure is for the resistance,” said Matilda. “We should keep none for ourselves.”

“We should keep a little,” said Hequa. “I’m keeping the chest to put clothes in. Matilda, do you want a few coins? Maybe a nice locket or bracelet?”

“I want that,” said Matilda, pointing to a jewel-encrusted golden mask. “If I have to take something, I want it to be that mask.”

“Excellent,” said Hequa. “The mask it is.”

“How much do you think it’s all worth?” asked Silky.

“Millions,” said Hequa. “Ten million or more, if I am guessing. I’ll get Robert to start counting it tomorrow. I think this is a good price for my sword.”

“I am getting tired,” said Matilda. “Silky, we should probably go.”

“Is that cool?” asked Silky.

“Yes,” said Hequa. “Good job tonight. See you both tomorrow?”

“Okay,” said Matilda.

“Yeah, sounds good,” said Silky.

“Have you ever seen anything so crazy?” asked Matilda once they were in the car.

“Not really,” said Silky. “How was it seeing Pikwik in person again?”

“Weird,” said Matilda. “She seemed in a hurry. Or maybe scared. Or maybe just tired. That treasure was heavy.”

“Well, at least now the movement is totally funded,” said Silky. “Funded by a dragon, who would have thought?”

“You mean funded by whoever Pikwik stole that treasure from,” said Matilda.

“I guess,” said Silky. “Hey, have you worked out everything with Edwina, or are you still mad at her?”

“We are fine,” said Matilda. “She promised not to get too involved, and so far she is keeping her word.”

“That’s good, I guess,” said Silky. “Is she going to be helping with the resistance houses?”

“Maybe,” said Matilda. “Probably. But I do not want to talk about her right now.”

“Okay, so what do you want to talk about?” asked Silky.

“Have you thought about who will be running the houses?” asked Matilda. “What if we moved into one and ran it together?”

“Really?” asked Silky. “You would want to do that?”

“Maybe, yes,” said Matilda. “I know we have not been together for that long. And you have not even introduced me to your mom. I have not even seen your house. But what if we had our own house, where we made the rules? Is that something you would want?”

“You know? I think I’d love that,” said Silky. “I can bring it up with Hequa tomorrow, if you’re serious.”

“I am serious,” said Matilda. “Let’s do it.”

Chapter 38

“Hello, ladies and gentlemen,” said Silky to the seven people who had gathered in his new living room. “I’m Silky, and this is our movement’s leader Matilda. Welcome to the first meeting of resistance cell one.”

“The first thing is to go around saying your names and a little bit about why you joined the resistance,” said Matilda.

When the introductions were complete, Matilda passed a paper form around to everyone. “The next thing for us to do is assess your needs and skills,” she said. “If it can, the movement will help you meet your needs, and will use your skills. Filling out these forms will help us do that.”

“What, are you going to pay our rent?” asked a man who had introduced himself as David.

“A form like this makes us seem more like a cult than an activist group,” said a woman who had introduced herself as Heidi. “I mean, it’s too personal.”

“There are tasks to be done that pay,” said Matilda. “That

might pay your rent. And if you think it is too personal, you are welcome to leave. To us, resisting the fascists is going to be personal no matter what. They already have all of our information. Why should we not use our information for our cause?"

"I want to know what you're planning to do about the threat of 5G," said a man who had introduced himself as Sam.

"The so-called 5G threat is just a stupid distraction," said Matilda.

"But what about studies that show it could be harmful?" asked Sam.

"Distractions," said Matilda. "If that is all you are here for, you can go, too."

"I don't see how we can do anything with our current president in office," said a woman who had introduced herself as Grace.

"You think the president matters?" asked Matilda sharply. "He does not matter to us at all. He is like an evil clown that we do not care about."

"So what do you care about?" asked Heidi.

"Resisting the tyrants, for real," said Matilda. "And what does that mean? In part, it means separating ourselves from systems of oppression wherever possible. In part, it means identifying tyrants within these systems and putting an end to

their activities however we can. In part, it means establishing our own housing, and equitable trade networks. And it also means broadcasting our message on all channels, so people can see that the resistance is strong and growing.”

“Well, I’ve heard just about enough,” said Heidi as she stood to leave.

“Bye then,” said Matilda. “Anyone else?”

Everyone stayed put as Heidi left.

“Hey, no offense, but do either of you have any activism experience,” asked David.

“I spent years with a group that rescues slaves and hides immigrants from the government,” said Matilda. “Does that count?”

“Wow. What was that like?” asked David.

“It was like doing the right thing when everyone around acts like an enemy,” said Matilda. “It was like watching cops and neighbors behave in ways that ruin lives. It taught me that motivations mean nothing, only actions. It taught me that there is no such thing as doing your job, there is only behavior. That life means nothing to the people on top, and that the people in the middle who follow orders are as good or bad as the orders they follow.”

“That is something,” said David. “How do you think that

experience translates to your resistance movement?”

“I know we are in a war, and the war is only starting,” said Matilda. “We have millions of dollars. Our enemies have trillions. We have thousands of people. Our enemies have millions. But our enemies treat people like interchangeable parts in their vast machine, and we know better than that. My experience shows me that sometimes knowing better is the most important step towards winning.”

“Intense,” said Sam. “I’ve done some activism in the past. A few marches, raising money to pay lobbyists, that sort of thing. But, from the sound of it, you’re not really interested in that kind of traditional activism. Is that right?”

“That’s right,” said Silky. “Our propaganda campaign is about as close to traditional activism as you’re going to find here.”

“And that campaign includes paying people with cryptocurrency to do graffiti?” asked Sam.

“Our network does include an individual who has committed to this course of action,” said Silky, just like he’d rehearsed.

“But doesn’t that make you criminals, if only by association?” asked Sam.

“We consider ourselves avant garde artists,” said Silky. “The graffiti in question is all tasteful and contains no profanity. We think of it like public service announcement billboards for poor people.”

“Can we talk about the virus for a minute?” asked a woman who had introduced herself as Wendy. “I want to know what you think about the possibility that extraterrestrials had a hand in its release.”

“Excuse me?” said Matilda.

“Extraterrestrials,” said Wendy. “Aliens. Look, I know it sounds far fetched, but hear me out. I’m part of a group that channels e.t. entities. What we’re finding is that a group of what we call the grays orchestrated the lab accident that released the virus. We think they did it to test the human population, to see how we’d respond to a global threat like that.”

“I know a man from another planet, and he has not said anything like that,” said Matilda slowly.

“We also have some connection to Through the Stars Academy, and they haven’t said anything like that either,” said Silky.

“But what if it’s true?” asked Wendy. “What if it really was aliens that caused the virus to get loose?”

“If this is true, it would change nothing about the resistance,” said Matilda. “The virus is just another excuse being used by the power elite to advance their agenda of totalitarian control. If it wasn’t the virus, it would be some other thing.”

“But what if they’re studying us right now?” asked Wendy. “Like, studying us from space?”

“Then let them,” said Matilda. “Does anyone else think we should keep talking about this? No? Then we should move on.”

Chapter 39

“Hi Matilda,” said Hequa from his chair on the rooftop patio. “Silky is down in the loft.”

“I know,” said Matilda. “But there is something that I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Oh?” asked Hequa. “What is it?”

“A couple of things,” said Matilda. “The first one is that I really like our new house. It is perfect for us and perfect for the resistance. Did Silky tell you how well our first meeting went? It was great.”

“Good,” said Hequa. “But I think you are trying to say something that you haven’t said.”

“Well, the thing is, Edwina and I have not been talking much lately,” said Matilda. “I want to know if you and her would want to come over to our new place for a dinner party.”

“A dinner party?” said Hequa. “I’m sure we can do that.”

“Great,” said Matilda. “I will let you tell Edwina.”

“I’ll talk to her later today,” said Hequa. “But you could have invited me to a dinner party by phone. What brought you all the way here to talk to me?”

“It is your Hequa Coin,” said Matilda. “I know it makes paying the people who do resistance actions easier. But I am worried that the name might become a problem, for you and for the movement.”

“Why would you worry about that?” asked Hequa. “Should we make one called Matilda Coin instead?”

“What I am really worried about is legal trouble,” said Matilda. “Eventually, one of the people doing graffiti or another action for us is going to get caught. When they do, they might mention Hequa Coin. If we get caught paying people to commit crimes, even crimes as small as graffiti, it could cause real trouble for us. And since your name is the same as the name of the coin we are using to pay people, it might be impossible to lie and say we did not pay for the crimes.”

“I see,” said Hequa. “You bring up a good point. The last thing I want is trouble from the government. We could switch to just paying people in bitshares or something. But should we? Do you really think anyone will tell the government about Hequa Coin?”

“The more successful we are, the more people will pay attention,” said Matilda. “And what if one of our followers does something

stupid, like kills someone? If we've been sending them Hequa Coin, the government might come after us for it."

"That is a troubling possibility," said Hequa. "But do you know what I think? I think I like using a coin named after me. And I think that the government might come after us no matter what we do, especially as we become more successful."

"Oh hey, Matilda," said Silky as he came out onto the roof. "Didn't even know you were here. Am I interrupting something?"

"Matilda wants to have a dinner party with Edwina and us," said Hequa. "She also thinks it would be wise to stop using Hequa Coin, but I don't agree. What do you think?"

"Abandon Hequa Coin?" asked Silky. "Because of the weird trading activity?"

"What weird activity?" asked Hequa. "You mean people buying the coin for more than I pay for it? I think that's a very good thing. It might even mean that people are using the coin to support the resistance directly themselves, which was one of the things we hoped would happen. What's wrong with that? No, Matilda is worried that the coin might make it easy for the government to come after me, and maybe the whole movement."

"Oh," said Silky. "Well, she might be right."

"I am willing to risk it," said Hequa.

“Anyways Hequa,” said Silky. “Lika is ready for you on video chat whenever you’re ready.”

“Oh, I forgot,” said Hequa. “I should probably go down and talk to her.”

“I invited Hequa and Edwina to a dinner party at our place,” said Matilda once Hequa was away.

“Right on. You want me to make my famous spaghetti?” asked Silky.

“You mean noodles from a box and sauce from a jar?” asked Matilda. “I was thinking more like a seaweed salad and surprise main course.”

“Is that why you came all the way over here?” asked Silky. “To invite Hequa to a party and warn him about Hequa Coin?”

“Kind of,” said Matilda. “The truth is that I got bored looking at the applications for people who want to move into our house. I thought if I came over here, there might be some better work I could do for the resistance. So is there?”

“You could photobomb Hequa’s video chat with Lika,” said Silky. “Or help me answer all of the emails people have been sending with questions about the movement.”

“Are there that many emails?” asked Matilda. “What are people asking?”

“All kinds of stuff,” said Silky. “Maybe half are writing just to argue, or they’re trying to promote their own work. The rest are a mishmash of questions about us, our plans, stuff like that. You want to see?”

“Okay,” said Matilda. “We can photobomb Hequa’s chat on the way.”

Chapter 40

Silky was the first to try Matilda's mango curry. He managed to keep a straight face while Hequa tried a bite. "It burns," muttered Hequa a moment later. "Like I'm eating something sweet that turns to fire in my mouth."

Matilda smiled. "Good, yeah?" she said proudly.

"Just the right amount of heat," said Edwina mildly after swallowing her first bite.

"So what do people talk about at dinner parties?" said Hequa. "The stock market? Badminton? I've never been to this kind of party before."

"I do not know what to talk about either," said Edwina. "The food is very good, and I am sure the wine is, too. And I like how you are decorating the new house. Did you buy this table new?"

"We found it by a dumpster," said Matilda. "Good as new."

"Hey, I think someone's at the door," said Silky, standing up. "I'll go see who it is."

“Sallycat, what’s up?” asked Silky as he answered the door.

“Sorry, but I better come in,” said Sallycat, heading directly for the dining room. “Hequa’s here, right?”

“There is plenty of food if you want me to get you a plate,” said Matilda.

“Thanks,” said Sallycat, pulling a chair up to the table. “Hequa, there’s some serious shit going on with Hequa Coin. I tried calling, but you didn’t pick up. And I don’t think this can wait.”

“Okay, what is it?” asked Hequa.

“Alright, so you know how Hequa Coin was made to make it easy to pay people for doing actions?” asked Sallycat.

“I don’t think Edwina knows the details,” said Hequa. “Basically, the coin is listed on the bitshares exchange. I send tokens to people who support the movement, then buy these tokens back on the exchange at a set price. This makes it easy to administer payments to anonymous people for a wide variety of tasks. And if someone wants to support the movement financially, all they have to do is set their buy orders to a higher price than mine. This is what’s been happening. It makes Matilda nervous, but I think it’s a good thing.”

“I see,” said Edwina.

“Here’s the problem,” said Sallycat. “Someone with a ton of Hequa Coin, probably whoever has been buying it all up, has

started posting bounties on people. They say they'll pay Hequa Coin to people who do murders. At first, I thought it was just some kind of sick joke. But then someone posted evidence of the death of one of the people on the list, and they apparently got paid."

"And because I am buying Hequa Coin to pay for resistance actions, I might now also accidentally be helping to pay for murder," said Hequa. "Thanks for warning us. Do you know who the people on the kill list are?"

"That's the thing," said Sallycat. "The freaky part. The kill list is my list. The one I put together back when we were talking about possible assassination targets with Lika. You guys! What the fuck is going on?"

"How is that possible?" asked Hequa. "Did we get hacked? I thought we were un-hackable."

"No one's un-hackable," said Sallycat.

"Who would do this?" asked Matilda. "Paying people to kill the people we think should be killed. This is the craziest thing I have ever heard of."

"Could you show me your files on all of the people who support the movement?" asked Edwina. "It is probably one of them who is doing this."

"Doing the killing or paying for the killing?" asked Matilda. "There are thousands of people in the resistance. How many

are so extreme? Is it just two? Is it ten? More? How can we even know?"

"Who was killed?" asked Silky. "How was it done?"

"The CEO of a company making taser drones for police and the military," said Sallycat. "He was number ninety on our list. The proof of death posted was a local newspaper article that said he'd been run off the road by an unknown party near his home in Houston."

"Holy shit," said Silky.

"He was on our list?" asked Matilda. "How does his death help the resistance?"

"In theory, it damages a company that we'd like to stop altogether," said Sallycat. "And the fact that his death was suspicious might get the media more interested in the looming threat of robotic law enforcement."

"So what should we do?" asked Hequa. "Matilda, you're our leader. What do you think?"

"I think the resistance just changed from people talking into a real thing," said Matilda. "We should be ready in case the government tries to come after us. But we are not in control of everyone who joins our group, and if unknown people want to move our agenda forward, I say we let them."

"So that's it?" asked Sallycat. "We just do nothing?"

“No,” said Matilda. “We should also try ourselves to get to the bottom of who did this. Then, if the police come asking around, we can cooperate with them by giving them the results of our investigation.”

“Would that really work?” asked Silky.

“Probably not,” said Matilda. “But it is better than nothing.”

“I want to know more about these taser drones,” said Hequa. “Are they like little helicopters that can shock people? Who would even think to build such a thing?”

“Lunatics,” said Sallycat. “But honestly, the drones made by this company probably won’t ever go anywhere, especially now that the CEO is gone. It’s scary tech, but it has too many problems. The freakier stuff is the next generation of AI being rolled out. Facial recognition, behavioral threat assessment, that sort of thing.”

“Are these things we can fight?” asked Matilda.

“Some of them, yes, and others, not so much,” said Sallycat. “And now that there’s some mystery assassin out there, working on our behalf, we have to be extra careful about how we proceed.”

“That still leaves the question of who got a look at our kill list,” said Silky. “I mean, it’d almost have to be someone we know, right?”

“Not necessarily,” said Sallycat. “The list was transmitted by

email to several parties, any one of which could have been hacked by unknown persons.”

“Where does that leave us?” asked Hequa. “Do you think more of our information could be compromised?”

“Maybe, but there’s no evidence of that so far,” said Sallycat.

“I think you should ask Lika about this,” said Edwina. “I have a feeling she knows something.”

Chapter 41

“Lika? This is Hequa,” said Hequa into the phone which was on speaker.

“Hi Hequa,” said Lika. “Is everything okay? You sound bothered.”

“I’m fine,” said Hequa. “But do you remember that kill list Sallycat made for the resistance? Someone on this list was killed, and it looks like the assassin was paid in Hequa Coin for doing it.”

“Oh, you mean the taser drone guy?” said Lika. “Yes, I did that assassination.”

“You what?” asked Hequa.

“Things have been very boring here on the compound, with no new tour groups coming through because of the pandemic,” said Lika. “So I ran that guy off the road using my flying saucer. It was very easy. But I thought you paid for it, since the payment was in Hequa Coin?”

“Someone has been buying up Hequa Coin,” said Hequa. “We don’t know who. But whoever it is also has our kill list, which was supposed to be strictly confidential. They put this up online with bounties on the people. Have you shared the list with anyone?”

“Definitely not,” said Lika. “So you don’t know who placed the bounty and paid for the killing? I don’t like that at all.”

“Lika, Sallycat here,” said Sallycat. “Lika, has anyone else used your computer since we emailed you that list?”

“No,” said Lika. “But my computer died shortly after I got the list, so I threw it away and got a new one.”

“Okay,” said Sallycat. “Did you destroy the hard drive before you threw the computer away?”

“No, I just put it on top of the garbage can,” said Lika. “Why?”

“That could be how they got the list,” said Sallycat.

“Thank you, Lika,” said Hequa.

“You’re welcome,” said Lika. “But I was going to assassinate another person from your list in a few days. The bounty is fifty thousand Hequa Coin. I’m confused. Are you saying not to do this assassination?”

“The resistance does not sanction assassination,” said Matilda. “That’s our official position.”

“Yeah, maybe don’t do it,” said Sallycat. “But anything else you could tell us about who might have paid the bounty you collected would be great.”

“I posted proof of death with an account address,” said Lika. “The next day, I received the bounty. That’s all I know.”

“Thanks. That helps, I guess,” said Sallycat.

“Good talking,” said Lika. “But Flikka is chewing on a lamp cord, so I have to go.”

“See, I felt she would know something,” said Edwina once the call was ended.

“Oh my god, how much trouble are we in?” asked Sallycat. “We all just heard that call. Heard her admit to murder. Even if we don’t do anything else, if we don’t report it, we’re all screwed just for knowing about this.”

“I think she was just joking,” said Hequa. “If we all think she was joking, there is no need to report anything. No one reports jokes.”

Silky and Matilda exchanged glances. “We can’t report someone for joking about doing something that helps us,” said Matilda. “Even if that something helping us goes against our earlier decision.”

“I’m with her,” said Silky. “And I didn’t even really get the joke.”

“Yes, Lika is a very funny person,” said Edwina.

“Hey, this salad is awesome, by the way,” said Sallycat.

“Thank you,” said Matilda. “Listen, I am curious. How are these bounties being posted?”

“Oh, there’s a whole website, probably hosted on some server in Belgium,” said Sallycat. “It’s not on the dark web or anything. Just a regular website, with a long list of targets and their bounties. There’s our top one hundred list, but they’ve got tons of more targets on there, too. I stopped counting after a thousand.”

“Is there any way to know who made the website?” asked Matilda.

“Not really,” said Sallycat. “It looks like they used anonymizing services for the domain and server space. I’m sure the government could figure out who is behind it, but I hit a wall pretty quick.”

“More than a thousand names, you say,” said Hequa.

“Way more,” said Sallycat. “I’d say there’s at least ten thousand, if I had to guess.”

“Are there that many people working for fascism?” asked Hequa.

“Haven’t you been reading my reports?” asked Sallycat. “There are millions of people allied with the fascists in this country

alone.”

“This reminds me of the tyranny my grandfather told me about,” said Edwina. “After World War Two, the States brought many fascists here, and made them into an important part of the intelligence community. The tyrants are everywhere, he used to say.”

“Hey, how much Hequa Coin is in circulation right now?” asked Silky.

“Twenty million, maybe,” said Hequa. “Why?”

“Well, if you subtract what’s in your control, wouldn’t the rest amount to the maximum number of tokens this unknown party would have to pay bounties?”

“Twenty million is out of my control, in circulation,” said Hequa. “That could pay for hundreds of assassinations.”

Chapter 42

“Congratulations on your first successful dinner party,” said Pikwik psychically to Matilda and Silky once their guests had left.

“Pikwik! Were you spying on us?” asked Matilda.

“I cannot help but hear,” said Pikwik. “But Matilda, don’t you think it’s time Silky learned your secret?”

“What secret?” asked Silky.

“Will you tell him, or shall I?” asked Pikwik.

“I will tell him,” said Matilda. “It is really no big deal. I am the mystery person who has started paying bounties on our movement’s targets.”

“You what?” asked Silky.

“It was Pikwik’s idea,” said Matilda. “She has been helping me. But we must keep it a secret from the rest of the movement.”

“But,” said Silky. “But that would mean you’ve been lying to us the whole time. Lying to me. And how are you even paying for it? Are you stealing?”

“I am not stealing,” said Matilda. “I am paying for it with my gold and my bitcoin.”

“Okay, but what about the lying?” asked Silky. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Honestly? I thought you might freak out,” said Matilda.

“Freak out?” said Silky. “You want to kill thousands of people for a movement that I’m all wrapped up in? What’s there to freak out about?”

“See, this is what I mean,” said Matilda.

“Oh my god, we’re all going to prison,” said Silky.

“If we get caught, I will take all responsibility,” said Matilda. “That is why I did this in secret, to protect you and the rest of the movement.”

“Protect us?” said Silky. “You’re saying you’re doing this to protect us?”

“Yes,” said Matilda. “Everything I am doing is for the movement. Do you really think we will be able to resist the fascists with just graffiti and Sallycat’s reports? No. We are in a war, one that is only just starting. And there are thousands, maybe millions,

who would ruin all of our lives without a second thought the moment we challenge their power in a real way.”

“So your answer is to kill them all?” asked Silky. “God, it’s like I don’t even know you.”

“You know, when I was a child, I was a slave in the Dominican Republic,” said Matilda. “The people who kept me were killed by the people who rescued me. If they had not been killed, they would have just found other slaves, with help from people in their network like corrupt government officials. Sometimes, with evil people, killing is the only way.”

“Wait,” said Silky. “Are you putting bounties on government officials?”

“Some,” said Matilda. “Judges who put poor people in prison without fair trials. Prosecutors who teach the police how to steal from people and get away with murder. Police and prison guard union bosses who protect corrupt and abusive officers. A couple of city managers pushing to make their cities into high-tech prisons for the underclass. And some more important officials appointed to government after serving big business.”

“That’s,” said Silky. “I don’t even know what that is. Holy shit. You’re totally going to get caught. How can you not see that you’re going to get caught?”

“When it looks like I am going to get caught, I will just go into hiding again,” said Matilda. “It will probably take months for our enemies to even notice what is happening. By then, we

will have fewer enemies. And Pikwik has promised to give me advance warning if someone is coming for me.”

“This is true, children,” said Pikwik. “I will continue doing everything in my power to protect your great movement.”

“So, what?” asked Silky. “Am I just supposed to go along with this and keep your secrets from Hequa and everyone else? Maybe lying’s not as easy for me as it is for you.”

“Nothing is easy,” said Matilda. “But Hequa only half listens to you anyway. All you really have to do is say nothing.”

“I’m sorry, I just don’t know if I can do this,” said Silky. “Is this what you’ve been doing when you work late at night? Plotting assassinations?”

“Mostly,” said Matilda. “But as the leader of the resistance, I do many things.”

“You know what?” said Silky. “Fucking fine. I’ll keep your stupid secret. Just promise me one thing.”

“What thing?” asked Matilda.

“Promise me that, if you have to go into hiding, you’ll take me with you,” said Silky.

“You would want that?” asked Matida.

“Yeah, whatever happens, I don’t want to lose you over this,”

said Silky.

“Here, help me with these,” said Matilda, placing the dishes from their dinner party next to the sink. “You know, if Lika doesn’t do more assassinations for us, maybe no one will.”

“Really?” said Silky. “You’re not going to take down the site with bounties on people, but maybe no one will claim the bounties? Is that what you’re saying?”

“I am saying that there are not many assassins around, is all,” said Matilda. “Maybe Lika is the only one in our network. How would another assassin even find the bounties site?”

“I don’t know,” said Silky, moving to rinse the dishes Matilda was washing. “I don’t know how any of this even works. How did you even set the site up, without giving away your location somehow? Why aren’t you more worried?”

“I used a VPN and paid for everything with crypto,” said Matilda. “Unless the VPN or one of the services I used was a honey trap, I should be good.”

“Uhh, I don’t really know what that means,” said Silky.

“A VPN is a virtual private network,” said Matilda. “It can make it look like I am anywhere in the world. Usually, I pretend to be in Canada.”

“Okay, so what’s a honey trap?” asked Silky.

“In this case, a honey trap would be like if the VPN service that I use was secretly being run by a government, to find people who are trying to keep their activities a secret from the government.”

“They can do that?” asked Silky.

“Yeah, but I do not think they did it with my VPN,” said Matilda. “I did a lot of research before I picked it.”

“Right, but you’re saying it’s possible that your VPN is a honey trap?” asked Silky. “You tell me I’m freaking out, but how are you not freaking out?”

“Freaking out helps nothing,” said Matilda. “You did not know me before. All you know is Matilda the student, but my life at times has been much more dangerous. Putting bounties on the heads of the bad guys is not the most dangerous thing I have ever done. Not at all.”

“How am I supposed to respond to that?” asked Silky.

“Just keep rinsing the dishes,” said Matilda.

Chapter 43

“Silky? This is Lika. Is Hequa there?” asked Lika into the phone.

“Hi Lika,” said Silky. “Sorry, I haven’t seen Hequa all day, and he’s not picking up his phone.”

“I know,” said Lika. “But I really need to talk to him. I did something, and I fear he might be mad at me.”

“What did you do?” asked Silky.

“Another assassination,” said Lika. “I know you cannot officially sanction it, but I did it for the movement anyway. I did it for the money too, but mostly for the movement.”

“You what?” asked Silky.

“Yes, I found number forty five in his apartment, and threw him off the roof of his building,” said Lika. “I was hoping to tell Hequa myself, before he found out from the bounties website.”

“Holy shit,” said Silky. “Forty five? Who was he?”

“An executive of a company that contracts with prisons and ICE,” said Lika. “People who worked for him put kids in cages. I was just playing with my boy, Flikka, and I couldn’t stop thinking about this guy. About how bad he was. So I found out where he lived, and went there last night in my flying saucer, and killed him. The bounty arrived in my account just a few minutes ago.”

“Umm, maybe we shouldn’t be talking about this on the phone,” said Silky.

“You think someone is listening?” asked Lika.

“Sallycat says all calls are recorded these days,” said Silky. “So even if no one is listening now, someone could theoretically listen to this call at some point in the future.”

“Then it is good that we are only joking,” said Lika. “We are just a couple of old friends, telling jokes about murder.”

“Yeah, good joke, Lika,” said Silky. “Anyway, is there a message you would like me to pass on to Hequa?”

“Just tell him I called, and that I hope he’s not mad at me,” said Lika.

“Sounds good,” said Silky, hanging up.

“Hequa? Hequa, you around?” came Sallycat’s voice from the loft door.

“Just me here, answering emails,” answered Silky. “Hequa’s out.

He didn't say where."

"Hey," said Sallycat as she came into view. "Did you see? Another person on our list kicked the bucket. And someone just claimed the bounty."

"Yeah, I just heard," said Silky. "Lika just called."

"Lika?" said Sallycat. "What the fuck, did she do this?"

"Apparently," said Silky.

"Oh my god, we are so screwed," said Sallycat. "I still haven't identified whoever it is behind the site, paying the bounties. I'm going nuts thinking of all the possibilities. Hequa barely taking this seriously. But it's all I'm thinking about."

"I know what you mean," said Silky. "The whole thing is unbelievable. And what's Lika's deal, really? I know she's supposed to be this great assassin from Hequa's home planet or whatever. But is she really just going to keep killing people, working her way through the list?"

"God, I hope not," said Sallycat. "Anyway, when you hear from Hequa, have him come find me."

After Sallycat left, Silky put on a pot of coffee and resumed answering Hequa's emails. "Silky!" came Hequa's voice just as the coffee finished. "Silky, there is something important we must discuss!"

“Hey, Hequa,” said Silky as his boss came into view. “Fresh coffee, if you want some.”

“Good,” said Hequa, sitting down at his table. “Bring me a cup. We must discuss Matilda.”

“Okay. What’s up?” asked Silky as he handed Hequa a cup of coffee.

“I’ve been speaking with Edwina,” said Hequa. “You know that group, Traha, that Edwina and Matilda are both a part of? Well, Edwina has just discovered that Matilda took many bitcoins from this group, and has used these to buy up Hequa Coin.”

“She what?” asked Silky.

“Yes, it looks like Matilda is the mystery person who has been buying Hequa Coin and using this to pay assassination bounties,” said Hequa.

“Are you serious?” asked Silky. “You know, Lika just called. She claimed another bounty.”

“What?” said Hequa. “What is she thinking? Silky, what are we going to do? These are huge problems. Did you know Matilda was stealing?”

“I had no idea,” said Silky.

“Did you know she was the one paying the assassination bounties?” asked Hequa.

“Umm, I sort of just found out,” said Silky.

“Edwina is very upset,” said Hequa. “She is trying now to get Matilda to return the money she stole. If we can get the Hequa Coin back, I can trade it for bitcoin, and we can return the funds to Traha. But do you think Matilda will give it back?”

“If Edwina’s involved, probably,” said Silky.

“Good,” said Hequa. “But what does this mean for our movement, if our leader is stealing to fund assassinations?”

“Assassinations carried out by someone in our circle,” added Silky. “I honestly don’t know. I mean, I love Matilda, but this whole thing makes me wonder if I even know her.”

“I could say the same about Lika,” said Hequa. “Silky, prepare me a blunt and summon Sallycat.”

While Silky followed these orders, Hequa called Lika. Their conversation was brief, and caused Hequa to appear even more tired than he already had. When Sallycat entered the loft, she took one look at Hequa and decided not to say anything. Lighting the joint that Silky had rolled, Hequa sighed, closed his eyes for a moment, then turned to Sallycat. “Matilda is the mystery person who has been buying up Hequa Coin and paying assassination bounties,” he said.

“Well shit,” said Sallycat. “Wait. How could she afford that?”

“By stealing funds,” said Hequa. “She did it in a clever way, but

Edwina caught her.”

“She was stealing from Edwina?” asked Sallycat.

“From Traha, the group they both belong to,” said Hequa. “Their common fund was in bitcoin, and she stole most of it.”

“Silky, did you know about this?” asked Sallycat.

“I just found out about the stealing,” said Silky.

“Christ on a toothpick, some great leader,” said Sallycat.

“I am the one who will end up paying for this,” said Hequa. “And even though I am mad, there is a part of me that understands Matilda’s actions.”

“What do you mean you understand?” asked Sallycat.

“Matilda is very passionate about our movement,” said Hequa. “She wasn’t stealing for herself, but for us. Just think of the effort it must have taken for her to do all she did without us knowing about it until now. And she did help secure the dragon’s treasure, which was worth more than this mess will cost me.”

“Uhh, she funded assassinations,” said Sallycat.

“For the cause,” said Hequa. “She might have even done the killings herself if she had been able to.”

“So you’re standing by her?” asked Sallycat. “Even if she’s a murderous fanatic?”

“Sallycat, based on your own reports, the fascists we oppose kill and enslave with impunity,” said Hequa. “Maybe Matilda just understands this better than we do.”

“Hey guys, Matilda’s calling,” said Silky.

“Answer, and put it on speaker,” said Hequa.

“Hi, you’re on speaker with Hequa and Sallycat,” said Silky upon answering the phone.

“So you all know?” said Matilda.

“Stealing,” said Hequa. “Paying assassination bounties. These are very troubling developments.”

“Another unarmed black man was murdered by the cops in my neighborhood yesterday,” said Matilda. “Is that a troubling development?”

“Yes, but that’s not the point,” said Hequa.

“I think it is exactly the point,” said Matilda. “The powers that be have been making war on the poor, immigrants, people of color. They have been doing this forever, and everything we have learned doing research for this movement suggests that this war is about to get much worse because of technology and new global coordination. There is no way to fix things within

the broken political system and rigged economy. And I will not apologize for starting to fight back.”

“But you could go to jail,” said Silky. “We all could, because of this.”

“If it comes to that, I will take full responsibility, and then go into hiding,” said Matilda.

“Is Edwina there with you?” asked Hequa.

“She just left,” said Matilda. “And yes, I returned all of the money.”

“Did you take down the bounties site?” asked Sallycat.

“No,” said Matilda. “But I will reduce the bounties to what I can afford when I am done with this call.”

“I wish Edwina wasn’t involved,” said Hequa. “Things are complicated enough between us as it is.”

“Maybe don’t lose the plot,” said Sallycat. “Matilda, how are we supposed to trust you after this?”

“All I did was for the movement,” said Matilda. “Trust that.”

Chapter 44

Pikwik the dragon flew over them, a black silhouette against the city's violet night sky, and landed in the lake with barely a sound. Matilda and Silky stood nearby, preparing themselves for the spectacle they were about to take part in. Silky readied his camera. Matilda put on her distinctive mask. Pikwik made her way to the shore, then slowly extended her neck until her giant head rested on the grass next to Matilda.

"Hi Pikwik," said Matilda. "Thanks for doing this."

"It is my pleasure," growled Pikwik. "And I look forward to scandalizing all of my dragon friends with this public appearance."

"This is great," said Silky. "There's just enough light. I'm ready when you are."

"Okay, let's do this," said Matilda.

"Ready," said Pikwik.

"Rolling," said Silky.

“Friends of the resistance,” began Matilda. “I am standing here tonight with a great supporter of our cause. This is Pikwik, a blue dragon, appearing for the first time on camera.”

“Hello, the resistance,” hissed Pikwik. “Your leader invited me here tonight to say a few words about what it means to be a dragon at this moment in history. Historically, my kind have been hunted into the shadows. Few of us remain. And even hidden as we are, we face increasingly dire threats from some of your human activities. Industrial pollution damages our ecosystems just as it damages your low income communities. The pesticides you pour on your lawns and golf courses impact our food and water. These things are a problem for us. But a bigger problem is the degradation of your psychic landscape.”

“Our psychic landscape?” asked Matilda. “What do you mean?”

“One of the ways we dragons have adapted to a life lived in hiding involves exploring the world through its psychic landscape,” said Pikwik. “To put it simply, we participate in the world by exploring it through the thoughts and senses of humanity. Over the years — and I have lived for thousands of years — I’ve been able to experience humanity’s triumphs and defeats as if they were my own, and my life has been enriched by this. But recently, in just the last couple of decades, the society around me has started to go to war with itself, and in a way that I’ve never seen before.”

“This war looks nothing like previous wars that I’ve witnessed,” continued Pikwik. “If I had to give it a name, I’d name it a war on human sovereignty perpetrated by fascist technocratic elites.”

It is, in its way, a total war, beginning with a compromising of the food supply, extending through undermined systems of education, and finding completion in division of the population into manageable segments by the ruling class. Corrupt politics and a rigged economy now form the basis of your social fabric; propaganda the basis of your thinking. Your places, your movements, your minds and bodies — all controlled by a vast and artless machine.”

“The extent to which this trend has progressed was revealed by your recent experiment in shutting down large segments of society to slow the spread of a virus,” continued Pikwik. “In this experiment, with nearly all of your communications mediated by technologies controlled by your rulers, your psychic selves began suffering immeasurably. Even during plagues and wartime, I have never heard so much fear, hatred, and despair from humans as I have heard in recent months. Viruses come and go, but when people turn their worst feelings against themselves and each other, it does lasting damage.”

“Thank you, Pikwik,” said Matilda. “Can you say something about what people can do to make things better?”

“Members of the resistance, listen to your leader,” joked Pikwik. “After all, she must be brilliant, if she is friends with a dragon.”

“Pikwik!” said Matilda. “Be serious!”

“To make things better,” said Pikwik. “As I’ve said, I am most concerned with the psychic quality of humanity. I could tell you to overthrow your evil rulers, but their psychic quality is

important to me as well. So perhaps the best advice I can offer is to locate and terminate the causes of your anguish. In most cases, such causes are an internal, personal matter. Beyond this, I strongly recommend that you learn to feed your creativity in whatever ways best suit you, for there is nothing more healing to the human psyche than transforming the world by creative pursuits.”

“Thank you, Pikwik,” said Matilda. “And to everyone watching, thank you for supporting the resistance.”

“And we’re good,” said Silky.

“Thanks again, Pikwik,” said Matilda, gently petting the dragon’s face.

“Yeah, that was awesome,” said Silky.

“Who would have thought I’d be the first dragon on the internet?” said Pikwik. “This is all very exciting. The other dragons may not like it, but I think it’s about time.”

“I’m just glad no one came by and interrupted us,” said Silky.

“You have both become great friends,” said Pikwik. “But now, I must depart.”

Watching the dragon move back into the lake and then take flight, Matilda removed her mask and threw her arms around Silky. “We did it,” she said. “Just having a dragon in a video means millions will watch it. Hope you are ready for what

comes next.”

“Ready?” said Silky. “I mean, how much weirder could all this get?”

“I do not know about weirder,” said Matilda. “But I do think our work will get much more complicated once this video comes out.”

Chapter 45

“Matilda! Silky! Have you seen?” asked Hequa. “There are protests against fascist police in all fifty states and many other countries.”

“How could I not see?” asked Matilda. “My neighborhood is half destroyed. They even burned my police station! And the police have been going crazy. Shooting random people and medics and even members of the press with their rubber bullets and marker rounds. I got gassed just sitting in my house last night, because there was so much tear gas being used by the fascists.”

“Is this it, then?” asked Hequa. “Is this the true beginning of the fascist revolution?”

“I don’t know, but the president’s been calling Antifa a terrorist organization on twitter,” said Sallycat. “Since our resistance is explicitly anti-fascist, this could mean trouble for us.”

“I don’t know either, guys,” said Silky. “After this last week, even my mom’s saying ‘fuck the police’. This definitely feels like the start of something big, but I think it’s probably good for us.”

“Matilda, what do you think?” asked Hequa. “Your dragon video already has over a hundred thousand views. And people everywhere are in the streets protesting the fascist police. Is this the moment when our movement becomes big?”

“I don’t know,” said Matilda. “Pikwik has not said much about it, except to warn me that the fascism of the new left is just as bad as the old-fashioned fascism of the right. To be honest, I do not think this is our moment at all. It is just a moment for people to get mad about stuff they should have been mad about all along.”

“So what does it mean?” asked Hequa. “What should we do?”

“Pay close attention to everything that is happening,” said Matilda. “And modify our kill list accordingly.”