

Visitor's Day

**By
'The Nine'**

The Writers ('The Nine')

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This work was written by nine different authors from various parts of the globe. As you read through the book, you may notice that in some chapters American English has been used while in other chapters, British English has been used.

We wish to inform you, the reader, that this is not a mistake but rather a conscious decision on the part of the writers. In the spirit of this being a collaborative work written by writers from America, Australia and the U.K, it was decided to let the authors individual voice shine through, rather than homogenize (homogenise!) the writing to one particular kind of English.

We hope you enjoy the book.

Chapter One

By Effigy2000

The warm summer sun shone down upon Peter Stryker's face while a cool ocean breeze blew through his long, brown hair. Sitting here, on this rock wall looking out at the vast blue expanse of water stretching out towards the horizon, it seemed to him as though nothing could spoil this pristine moment.

Still, in spite of this paradise, he could not stop dreaming of *her*. It was over—long over. Regardless, she occupied his thoughts, his dreams, his every moment, waking or not. It was his mistake that had torn them apart. A stupid, idiotic mistake. He regretted it and would have taken it back if he could. Yet what was done was done, and now he had to live with the consequences of his actions.

His friends told him he had to move on. Only by doing so, they said, could he forget about her and get on with his life. But they didn't understand. They couldn't. How could he just move on when, as a couple, they had shared so much? When they had shared each others' lives, thoughts and dreams for so long? When a life without each other had once seemed akin to tearing off an arm or a leg? How could he simply forget the past and face the future alone?

Despite the repeated urgings of his friends, it had actually been his mother who convinced him that he should take a break from his daily routine. And why not? It made sense, Peter thought. He needed to be in a place which was a far cry from the everyday stress of the office he usually inhabited back in Australia. There he faced deadlines, a constantly ringing phone and the pressure of a prominent, high-stakes job. Here, in this tropical paradise, all he had to deal with was the burning question of whether the green Hawaiian shirt was too loud or just right for the occasion. Now he faced three weeks of vacation where, hopefully, he could forget the troubles of his life and find the peace for which he longed.

Taking one last look at the picture-perfect scene in front of him, Stryker stood up and began the walk back to his cabin. It was time to go back and prepare for the evening ahead of him. A party was happening that night, and he was hell-bent on going.

Later that night, dressed in yet another busy, colourful holiday shirt (he had so many of these stuffed away in his suitcase that he felt almost embarrassed), Peter sat at the bar sipping slowly from his beer as partygoers danced all around him. The music, a typical dance mix with a heavy beat, thudded through him as he stared morosely into his drink. Over the din, Peter heard the bartender speaking to him. A fellow Australian, Peter had shared a few polite words with the guy earlier in the night when he had first entered the bar.

"Mate?" asked the bartender, addressing Peter. "You obviously haven't cheered up much since you first walked in here tonight. Not having a good time here, eh?"

Peter looked up from his drink and raised an eyebrow. "How could you tell?"

"Well, it would have to be the melancholy mood you're projecting over the whole place, for starters," the bartender replied. "That and the sunburn you've developed."

"The sunburn's because I burn easy," Peter said. "My skin's usually alabaster. The mood is just because this trip isn't turning out the way I'd planned."

The bartender laughed. "You are totally letting our side down, mate!" he said. "Here in Hawaii, we Aussie blokes have a bit of a reputation as hard-partying, womanizing drunks. You've got the drunk thing happening, I can see that. But where's the partying and the womanizing?"

Peter chuckled. "I guess I'm not much in the mood for either," he replied. "I had planned on having a good time tonight but, well... yeah. I guess that didn't really end up happening." Peter sighed, his head drooped down and his eyes stared into the amber void of the beer in his glass once more. The music stopped momentarily before the club patrons let out an enormous cheer as the song of the moment, one that Peter thought sounded oddly like the previous one, resumed blaring through the speakers.

The bartender leaned onto the bar and put his hand on Peter's shoulder. "Oh, mate. Sorry. I didn't see it at first, but I can totally see it now."

"See what?" asked Peter, looking up again.

"You recently lost a girl, didn't you? Someone special?"

Peter nodded quietly in response.

"Yeah, thought so. Sorry mate. I should have seen it earlier but it's been a pretty busy night, as you can see, so I haven't really been at the top of my game."

"That's alright," Peter said in response. "Never mind."

The bartender smiled. "My name's Adam, by the way. So, uh... if you don't mind my asking... what was her name?"

"Harmony," replied Peter, looking up at him. "Her name's Harmony and she was the most important thing in my life and now she's gone." Peter picked up his glass and gulped the last half of it down quickly. Slamming the glass down on the bar, he reached for his wallet. "Another."

"Harmony, eh?" asked Adam, reaching for a new glass. "Nice name."

"Yeah," replied Peter, eyeing his glass being filled. "And she was beautiful too, mate. Drop-dead gorgeous." Opening his wallet, Peter spied the small photo he still kept of her in there; it often kept him company during his long nights alone. "Here," he said, offering the photo and a \$20 note to Adam. "This is a photo of her. What do you think?"

Adam examined Harmony's photo. She had shoulder-length blonde hair and a warm smile. Adam certainly agreed she was a beautiful girl. However, a look of confusion was slowly spreading across his face.

"What's wrong?" Peter asked.

"Mate, I think I've seen this bird before. Whereabouts in Australia did you say you were from?"

"Melbourne... Narre Warren, to be specific."

“Hmmm, well that rules that out,” said the bartender, the tone of his voice clearly expressing his confusion. “I’m from Mackay up in Queensland. But still, I’m sure I’ve seen this bird somewhere before.”

At this point, the line-up at the bar had grown quite long. Handing Peter his beer, his photo and his change, Adam turned his attention to the crowd of patrons who pushed their way towards him.

“Look, mate. I’ve gotta get busy serving these people,” Adam said. “Cheer up though, and try to have a good time. You’re in Hawaii, after all! And I’ve always said that the best way to get over someone is to live life like you’re on vacation. Get out on the dance floor for a bit. Who knows who you’ll meet tonight?” Adam patted Peter on the shoulder and turned his attention to the other patrons. Peter watched as he walked away. *Great advice, buddy*, Peter thought. *But somehow, I still don’t feel like taking it.*

The night dragged on; all the while Peter stayed by or near the bar, ordering drinks and getting increasingly more intoxicated and depressed. It had been maybe an hour or so since his conversation with the bartender and Peter had barely moved from his seat, only crossing the dance floor to make his way to the toilets. On his way back to his chair, Peter considered that maybe this wasn’t the best place on the island to be right now. *Just one more drink*, he thought. *Just one more and then I’ll go back to my room.*

Sitting down at the bar once again, he called for Adam.

“Another drink, mate?” Adam asked, smiling. Peter, quite drunk at this stage, simply nodded.

As Adam poured another glass, he looked at Peter. “So, uh... if you don’t mind my asking, what did you do to lose that girl of yours?”

“I do kind of mind you asking, actually. Let’s just say it was a mistake. A stupid one that I’d do anything to take back.”

“You didn’t hit her or anything, did you?” asked Adam, handing Peter a newly replenished pint.

“No,” responded Peter tersely. “What’s with all the fucking questions, anyway?”

“Easy mate, easy,” the bartender said, trying to calm Peter down. “I just needed to be sure you weren’t some crazy stalker guy or something.”

“Stalker?”

“Yeah. See, um... remember how I told you I had seen that girl of yours, Harmony, somewhere before? Well, I remember now. She’s here.”

Peter’s eyebrows furrowed, and his lips pressed together. “Here?” he asked. “Here, in Hawaii?”

“Not just Hawaii, mate,” said the bartender. “*Here*. Over there, in fact.” The bartender pointed across the room. Peter stood up on the lower ring of his barstool in order to get a better view across the crowd to where Adam pointed. And sure enough, there, across the floor and behind the throng of people dancing the night away, sat Harmony, talking to a man Peter didn’t recognize. He hopped off the chair—losing sight of her in the process—and was about to move away when Adam grabbed Peter’s arm to stop him.

“Hold on a second. If you’re gonna go over there, please, for your own sake, don’t do anything stupid. Just keep your cool and leave her be!”

“I won’t cause a scene, if that’s what you’re worried about,” retorted Peter while pulling his arm free. “I just need to go over and say hi. Apologize or something. I dunno... I just... I just *have* to go over there.”

Peter walked away and pushed a path through the dancing crowd. The heavy beat of the current song combined with the noise of multiple conversations was so loud it could have stirred the dead, but in Peter’s mind, everything was silent. Weaving his way through the crowd, he was a man on a mission. He wasn’t sure exactly what he would say to her, but he felt that he had been handed an opportunity to fix things. It was too good an opportunity to pass up.

Peter emerged from the crowd and found Harmony’s table, but neither she nor her partner were there. Peter looked around the club frantically, but could not find her. He did, however, see the man she’d been sitting with and approached him instead. “Hi,” said Peter, putting his hand on the man’s shoulder. “Was there a girl sitting here with you just a second ago?”

“What?” said the man in what sounded like a Brooklyn accent. “No. There wasn’t any woman there.”

“Are you kidding me?” said Peter, aggravated. “I saw a woman sitting here not even one minute ago. Why are you lying to me? What the fuck do you think you’re playing at?”

The man from Brooklyn was clearly starting to get angry. Getting right up in Peter’s face he yelled “Listen pal, if I had a woman do you think I’d be here tonight? Now piss off and get your hands off me!” He pushed Peter’s hand off of him and began to walk away. Peter grabbed him as he did. “Wait a minute!” he yelled. “I’m not through with you yet mate!”

At which point Peter was stopped cold by a hard sucker-punch to the jaw, delivered by the man from Brooklyn. Peter tried to dodge it to no avail; his drinking binge earlier in the night had slowed his reflexes considerably.

He didn’t remember much of what happened next—only that he had tried to throw a punch back and several girls nearby screamed as the scuffle started and their partners watched and cheered. Then, Peter remembered only darkness...

Some hours later, Peter awoke to find himself lying face down on his bed. His jaw hurt like hell, and thanks to the effects of the beer, so did his head. He rolled over, groaning, and looked at the alarm clock on his bedside table. It read 3.18 a.m. Peter felt a draft blowing over him. His shirt was ripped and torn. He looked up as best he could and saw that the door to his beachside unit was slightly open; the ocean breeze wafted in. The sound of the waves lapping at the beach was all he could hear. Everything else was dead quiet.

Peter rubbed his jaw. *I must have met the bouncer, and not in a nice way*, he thought to himself. The door creaked open a bit more. The breeze swirled its way around the room. “Better close that,” groaned Peter, rising.

He staggered to the door and looked outside. It was a beautiful night. A full moon was out and it shimmered on the ocean below. The palm trees swayed gently in the breeze. Peter smiled and, despite the pain, he suddenly didn't feel much like sleeping.

Grabbing his keys, which lay discarded on the floor like an afterthought, Peter left his unit and locked the door. He gingerly walked down to the beach, wincing.

Reaching the water's edge, he walked barefoot along the shore line. The night was as still as death. Virtually everyone had retired to their rooms for the night. The sun would rise in only a few hours, but for the moment, it seemed as though the entire island was his alone.

As he walked along the beach, Peter spied something far off in the distance. It looked like a person except it was emitting a bright, white sort of glow and was hidden just behind a palm tree. He stopped and squinted, trying to get a clearer picture of the shape. It hadn't been there a moment ago, but now, suddenly, it appeared out of nowhere. Peter walked toward it. Though naturally intrigued by the figure, Peter almost felt as though he was being willed by some kind of invisible force to draw himself closer.

Peter...

Peter stopped dead in his tracks, his eyes wide open in stunned surprise. A voice echoed inside his mind. He knew that voice. It was Harmony's! But could it really be her, he wondered? Had the girl he'd seen at the bar earlier that night really been Harmony—and not just an illusion or figment of his imagination?

Peter. Come closer. It's me...

"Harmony!" he yelled. Yes, Harmony! He was now sure it was her! He ran towards the figure. As he did, the bright light which surrounded the figure seemed to dim before Peter's eyes. By the time he reached the tree, breathless and sweating, the light had extinguished itself and there was nothing left of the once clearly recognizable shape. Confused (and a little afraid), Peter looked around frantically to see where she had gone.

Peter...

He spun around. There was the bright light again—though this time it was further away, nearing the fence line that separated the resort from the forest. Early in his stay here, the locals told him it was a branch of the Akaka Falls State Park. He ran towards her. "Harmony!" he screamed. "What are you doing?"

Follow me, Peter. Follow me and we can be together forever.

Her words tugged at his heart. They were everything he had ever wanted to hear since they had separated. It was Harmony! She wanted to reconcile! His pain could finally be over and their lives could start anew. He longed to hold her in his arms again; to kiss her as passionately as he had on that first date they had shared so many years ago. But as before, the closer he got to her, the dimmer the light surrounding her became, until she was no longer standing where she once was.

Peter...

Again he looked to where he perceived the voice to be centered. This time it was deep inside the forest. Peter hesitated. It was still night and he did not want to enter the forest without some essential supplies that he would need for a trek through any kind of wilderness.

“Peter, don’t be afraid. Follow me and we can be together. I will protect you, my love.”

Somehow, those words, which rang in his head as loudly as if she were speaking them right into his ear, calmed him and allayed his fears. He climbed over the fence. The rough forest floor hurt his bare feet but it didn’t matter. Stryker entered the forest, approaching the light. As he got closer, it did not dim as it had before, but rather began to move. It was leading him deeper and deeper into the forest.

Harmony, or whatever this creature might be, weaved and ebbed her way effortlessly through the trees, almost as though she were floating on air. In stark contrast, Peter found following her hard going. His bare feet were sore, and were almost certainly bleeding. He’d sustained cuts to his face from low-hanging branches and the occasional stumble. The sheer amount of alcohol he had consumed earlier in the night, not to mention the fight he was still feeling the effects of, were not exactly helping him either. Sheer determination and the adrenalin pumping through his system kept him going.

It seemed as though he had been following her for hours though Peter had to admit that he had lost all track of time. This was because right now, all that mattered to Peter was Harmony. He knew that something was amiss; he certainly wasn’t that drunk or naïve. After all, in the time he had known her Harmony had never been able to emit light, let alone levitate. But whether he was following the real Harmony, somehow evolved beyond the woman he once knew, or even if she were only an illusion formed in his alcohol-soaked mind or the product of a concussion, it didn’t matter. Peter was adamant that he would see this through to the end.

Suddenly, the light disappeared. Were it not for the glow of the moon shining through the canopy, Peter would not have been able to see at all. His eyes strained to make out anything in the near-darkness.

“Harmony!” he screamed. “Harmony!” His voice echoed throughout the forest but received no response. No voice echoed in his mind. He was completely alone.

Instinct took over; this was fight-or-flight time. He chose flight and ran. He wasn’t sure in which direction he was running, but it didn’t matter. He had to get to safety. His eyes, now slowly adjusting to the dark, did everything to ensure he didn’t stumble on his way. But even so, he couldn’t see clearly where he was going. He managed to avoid several trees in his desperate run through the forest, but he did not see the dip in his path. Running at full speed, he tumbled over the edge of it and fell hard. As he rolled further and further down the slope, his body bore the brunt of additional cuts and bruises. Then came the crash; his descent had been stopped by a line of bamboo.

Breathing heavily and having sustained more than a few injuries, he lay face up on the ground and turned his head to have a look around at his new environment. The light of the moon helped him realize he had stopped in a bamboo grove. *I'll get up in a minute*, he thought to himself. *Then I'll find my way out of this place.*

Being a relatively fit man in his late 20s, it took Peter only a few minutes to catch his breath. He tried to sit up, but as he did, he screamed and lay back on the ground with a thud. There was pain—a lot of pain. He wasn't sure what sort of injury he had sustained, but whatever it was, it was bad. He thought his ankle might be broken, too. *How the hell am I gonna get out of here?* Peter thought.

Peter's hand flinched. It was resting on the ground beside him and he felt something crawling across it. And then he felt more... *things*... crawling on him. He strained to look down at what could be causing the crawling sensation. *Spiders!* And they weren't just on his hands—they were all over him. His legs, his chest, *his face!*

I must have hit a nest or something on my way down, he thought. And then, without warning, came yet more pain. *Oh my fucking God*, Peter thought as he realized what was happening. *They're biting me!* Screaming, Peter could not help but think that this was the end. But he didn't care. After all he'd been through, if this was to be his end, then so be it.

Out of nowhere came a blinding light. His eyes struggled to adjust. And somehow, all the pain that had only moments before been wracking his body simply vanished. The spiders that had only moments before been crawling all over him quickly returned into the dark places from whence they came.

Peter.

It was Harmony! She had returned to save him! The light dimmed slightly as Peter's eyes adjusted to it. And there she was, as beautiful as ever. She leaned down and offered Peter her hand and as she did, he could not help but think she looked as beautiful as an angel sent down from heaven.

Come with me, my love, she said. *Take my hand and arise. I promise I will never leave you again.*

Peter took her hand and melted with her touch. It was warm, wonderful. How he had missed it; the soft feel of her skin and her slender fingers clenched between his. Snatched seemingly from the jaws of certain death only a few seconds ago, he was happy again.

She led him back through the forest. This time he had no need to chase her. They held hands as they walked with her leading the way. There was no need to talk. Peter couldn't help but think that he still loved the way she looked, her beauty perhaps further enhanced by the faint glow she was still emitting. Her shoulder-length hair was a bit longer than it was in the photo he carried. She was walking barefoot, just as he was, and she was wearing a long, flowing white dress that shone and sparkled in the unearthly light.

After a short while, the sound of a waterfall broke the silence of the forest. The source became readily apparent: Harmony had led him into a clearing. Peter looked around and couldn't help but think how utterly stunning a scene this was. Lush tropical forest encircled them while the light of the moon reflected off a lake at the bottom of the clearing into which the waterfall roared. Harmony let go of Peter's hand and walked to the edge of the lake. She smiled at him, but Peter no longer felt quite as happy as he had during their walk through the forest together.

She looked at him and spoke. When she did, it was not inside his mind as she had spoken to him before. This time she actually *spoke* her words to him: "Are you not happy to see me, my love?" She had seen the pained expression on Peter's face.

Solemnly, he replied: "I am, I suppose. But I can't help but think that... you aren't Harmony, are you?" He knew he was asking the obvious, but he couldn't help but ask anyway.

"No," she replied enigmatically. "And... yes."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I have taken on her form, so, yes—in that sense, I am Harmony. And you have called me by her name several times tonight, so in that sense, I am also Harmony. And I sense that you feel the same sort of amorous feelings toward me as you felt towards her. But I am not the same Harmony you once knew."

"Why would you 'take on her form', as you put it?" asked Peter. "And if you're not her, then who are you?"

"I will tell you all these things, my love," said the Harmony light-creature. "You do have a right to know, after all." She then gestured behind her and Peter saw something he had not seen there just moments before. Either some kind of illusion had hidden it from him, or perhaps his eyes had merely adjusted to the light, but Peter now saw that the waterfall cascaded down upon something. Squinting, Peter focused upon the object and could not believe his eyes. It was strange to admit, but it seemed as though he was looking at... a ship. *A space ship*. He felt almost silly in thinking it but there was no other way to describe what he was seeing. And yet, it was a thing of contradiction. Its height was intimidating — probably two or three stories high, Peter estimated — and yet, despite its size, it was sleek and slender, almost like an F1-11. Parts of it seemed to be camouflaged while other parts were as visible as one could expect in the limited light. The parts he could see appeared to have sustained some damage but what from was not readily apparent.

"Is that... is that what I think it is?" Peter asked, his face almost child-like with a wide-eyed amazement.

Perhaps reading his thoughts, Harmony seemed to know what he meant. "In a manner of speaking it would match what your people call a space-ship" she said. "This is our vessel."

"Your vessel. So... you're from another world, then?"

"Yes. We have landed here on this island. In preparation."

“Preparation for what?” Peter asked, walking forward into the pool and holding Harmony’s shoulders.

Before Harmony could answer, the ship glowed with the same kind of bright light that had emanated from Harmony earlier. Blinded at first, Peter eventually saw that this new source of light came from inside the ship through a variety of different doors and windows which had opened. Standing in them were dozens of tiny figures, no taller than children, almost all of them silhouetted against the bright light emanating from within the ship. Peter couldn’t believe what he was seeing with his own eyes; he was sure he must be dreaming. The figures—those he could make out, at least—looked just like the typical ‘grey’ aliens he’d seen on shows like *The X-Files* years ago. Dozens of aliens, their large, black, pupil-less eyes staring down at him as he and Harmony stood in the pool. And just as he thought he understood what Harmony had implied when she spoke earlier, she answered his question.

“Preparation for revealing ourselves to your world.”

Peter blinked. “You plan to reveal yourselves to us? But why?”

“Humanity is on the verge of something great,” Harmony replied. “Something truly amazing and spectacular. This is why we have come. We simply must be here when it happens.”

“When what happens?” asked Peter. “What’s going to happen?”

Harmony smiled. “All in good time. You asked me earlier why I have taken on the form of the one you know as Harmony. Do you not also wonder why I look so different from those you see standing on board our ship?”

“I... I don’t know,” stuttered Peter. “There’s a lot of things I don’t understand about what’s happened tonight. I don’t understand why you look like her. Why you look different from them,” said Peter, gesturing to the ship and its inhabitants. “Why before you seemed to speak to me telepathically and why now you’re speaking to me like I normally would, out loud. I asked you before and you said I had a right to know these things. I want to know... so for the love of God, please tell me!”

“It is really quite simple, my love,” said Harmony. “I spoke to you telepathically because I could and because I knew that forming such an intimate bond with your mind would make you trust me and draw you to us. I needed to take on the form of someone you knew because I wanted your physical side to feel comfortable with what we intended to share with you. I did all these things because my people need your help when we reveal ourselves to your kind. We want you to join us during our time here on your world.”

Peter gasped. “Come again?” he said quietly. “Join you?”

Harmony merely smiled. “You have a choice to make,” she said, taking his hand in hers. “Join us tonight. Join us, my love, and help your people take the next step towards their destiny...”

Chapter Two

By WPW

What were these overalls made from? It felt a bit like wax paper, but didn't tear. Adam had known one material like it. He used to work as a motorcycle courier and had handled his fair share of Tyvek envelopes; it felt like Tyvek. He did not imagine, however, that Tyvek was particularly breathable, and this stuff was like the best surf gear he had ever worn. All the same, it was both white and waxy. Remembering the envelopes pleased him. He felt a lot like a package that had been posted, grabbed by couriers, thrown in a helicopter and then air-freighted to what he imagined was Honolulu. No one had taken the time to fill him in on that detail. The initials "USAF" were stamped on the overalls where the faux-heraldic crest would appear on a cheap blazer.

Stamped and posted by the US Air Force—and now he was resting in someone's pigeonhole. It wasn't a cell, at least; it wasn't a bunk and a bucket in a windowless room with a caged light bulb and wiped-clean walls. It was a lot more like some of the smaller, cheaper hotel rooms occupied by the people he tended bar for at Akaka. There was a veneer of institutional grimness to the fixtures, though; no miniature bottles of shampoo or complimentary Gideon Bible awaited his perusal. From the window—no visible bars, but it was a thick kind of plastic that didn't look like it would break easily—Adam could make out a strip of scrubby brown grass, the flat roofs of a cluster of buildings beyond a sharp drop, and the unrelenting blue of the Pacific Ocean filling the horizon.

Adam heard a click from behind the locked door of the room. It swung open to reveal a young man in khaki fatigues.

"Mr. Conor?" the young soldier—or was it airman?—said. "The colonel would like to see you."

An institutional corridor met Adam, complete with the expected depressing carpet under Adam's bare feet. Carpet, mind—this might be a military building, but they clearly weren't expecting its communal spaces to be filled with heavy traffic wearing combat boots. This was strictly admin personnel only.

Adam was led through to a conference room dominated by four long tables arranged in a square. A blank whiteboard filled one wall; on yet another hung a framed antique map of the Hawaiian Islands. A tall, balding man sat, seemingly casual and relaxed, on one of the folding chairs that surrounded the square of tables. He wore the same all-in-one fatigues as the young airman who fetched Adam, but the stripes and bars revealed a much higher rank. Adam's escort stopped dead by the door and saluted stiffly. The colonel unfolded himself from his seat with the relaxed ease of a man spying a friend across the bar of a golf club and walked over to Adam with his arm outstretched.

“Mr. Conor,” the colonel said, smiling. “I’m Colonel Fells. May I call you Adam?”

“You can call me an Australian citizen,” Adam said. He kept his hands firmly by his sides. “I want to see the Australian consul.”

Colonel Fells broadened his smile in an attempt to appear consoling and aborted the attempted handshake, clapping his hands together instead. “Lieutenant, you’re relieved. Adam, please, have a seat.” He pulled out the chair next to the one he’d been sitting in when Adam walked in; Adam picked out one a bit further away and sat in it warily.

“I can understand...” the colonel began, with another conciliatory hand gesture straight out of the USAF Guidelines on Mollifying Foreign Nationals.

Adam interrupted: “Colonel, really, all you need to understand is that I am an Australian national and I want the Australian consul here. And a lawyer.”

“Why would you want a lawyer?” the colonel asked. “You’re not under arrest.”

“Just the consul, then.”

“Adam, really, I appreciate that this is inconvenient, but please understand that you’re not under arrest, you’re not in trouble and you have nothing to lose from cooperating with us for just a short while.”

“I’m not under arrest?” Adam said. He made as if to stand. “I’m free to go?”

The colonel didn’t flinch. “Sadly, no. Not for the time being. The sooner you agree to cooperate, however, the sooner we can think about that.”

Adam crossed his arms. “Can’t I at least call my folks?”

“Not until we’re clear that we’re singing from the same hymn book here, Adam,” Colonel Fells said. “Stop and think for a moment. We can’t keep this secret longer than about 72 hours, and we wouldn’t want to. Whatever you might have seen on the news, we’re really not all men in black and cover-ups... but we do need to keep it secret for a few days while we figure out what we’re dealing with, especially if this is a threat of some kind.”

“Do you think this is a threat?” Adam asked. He felt stupid for asking; he felt even more so when he realized that he really hadn’t considered that this whole situation might be one of intense peril, or that the planet might have been... invaded, or something. Adam hadn’t felt threatened until now. A chill passed through the air.

“At the moment, Adam, I don’t really know any more than you do,” the colonel said. “What you know could be important to us. You’re a valuable guy, Adam, and you’re lucky as well—you’ll have a ringside seat for this, whatever it is. Historic stuff.”

“What are you doing to them now?”

“We’re not doing anything to them,” the colonel said. For the first time in their conversation, Adam felt Colonel Fells lose some of his calm. A shadow moved across his face as the colonel’s smile faded. “We discovered very early on... After we tried a first approach, ah, we didn’t like the results so much and we established a cordon, a very wide cordon. We’re just securing the area; we’re not approaching the site.”

It had all seemed rather chaotic to Adam. Just like the colonel had said, it wasn't all grim-faced men in black wearing earpieces and shadow-government efficiency—there had been a lot of guys running here and there shouting at each other, all under a din of sirens and helicopter rotors. He had spent an hour in the little office behind the bar at the hotel being shouted at by someone in some sort of military uniform—army, he had thought at the time, but it could have been the Boy Scouts of America for all he knew—and an agent from the FBI office in Hilo, while he shouted back, louder, and with more swearing. Meanwhile, in the bar, soldiers had been running around, pushing all the chairs and tables aside and bringing in boxes, lots of boxes. Then two guys in white Hazmat suits had burst in yelling about procedures and exposure and jurisdiction and the CDC while the guy in uniform yelled even more about jurisdiction, first response, procedures and “guys out at Pearl.” Then the suit had yelled about authorization, DC, jurisdiction, the FBI, procedures and the NSA. This abbreviation-riddled death match didn't last long before the Hazmat twins grabbed Adam and hustled him through the bar (which now looked like something out of a CNN report from the Green Zone in Baghdad) and out onto what had been the volleyball court, where a marquee had been erected.

By this time, shock had caught up with Adam and he didn't put up much resistance as they pushed him, fully clothed, into a shower that tasted of pool chemicals and Listerine; all he could think was, How come these guys put up this tent in 10 minutes and it took the caterers two days to do it for Lindy's wedding? Then they told him to strip. Adam obliged because his clothes were wet. Once naked, Adam got pushed into another shower; then, he was handed a towel and the overalls he was wearing now and forced to run to a large double-rotor helicopter outside. What followed was a long, boring flight out over the ocean—and then he was here.

When the helicopter was taking off, though, it tracked along the coast for a while before striking out into the Pacific. From there Adam had seen the resort, the coast roads and the state park, far below him. He had seen that the resort was a bedlam of cars, trucks, ambulances, flashing lights, and a series of more tents that were going up. Guests were being ushered out of the hotel buildings and yanked out of the pool. He saw that there were a lot more vehicles on the normally quiet coast road, heavy-duty vehicles, armored personnel carriers, a couple of tanks, and perhaps most shocking of all, a line of black helicopters lined up by the roadside as neatly as SUVs in a showroom. There were some little torpedo boats in the water, and further out, some bigger ships were converging on the same stretch of coast, throwing up long, violent, chalky wakes, moving fast. It was, what, two or three hours after Valerie got scared and called the police?—The military presence had moved in almost instantly.

It was strange how Adam's mind, under stress, fumbled through its boxes of index cards and scattered memories like the confetti at his sister Lindy's wedding—he had found himself recalling the Marx Brothers film *Duck Soup*, right at the end where Groucho cries out: “Help is *on the way!*” followed by a montage of scores of unlikely people racing to the scene—the cavalry, monkeys in little cars, some rowing eights. This benign memory made Adam smile before he remembered

himself and started to loudly question the parentage of the two grim soldiers wordlessly guarding him, even going so far as to call into question the sexual probity of their mothers.

And then he was here, in this room, with Colonel Fells. His first attempt to find out why he was here and what was going on hadn't yielded good results.

"You guys haven't got a clue what you're doing, do you?"

Colonel Fells gave a prim little smile. "It would help us," the colonel said, "if you could tell us exactly what happened."

Adam felt the colonel's patience ebbing, and he remembered the look in the eyes of the military personnel who had poured into the resort during his extraction. It was a look of deadly seriousness and uncertainty bordering on fear. Even Adam was growing tired of his own defiance. What else would he be doing if that Aussie tourist Peter hadn't walked into the bar this morning? Sweeping the floor?

Peter. It was Peter's fault, not Adam's.

"Really, you guys should be talking to Peter, Peter... Strider, or something," Adam said. "He knows a lot more about this than I do. It was like he knew them *personally*. Are you interrogating him?"

"He's, uh, we're trying to talk with Mr. Stryker," the colonel said. *You've got a terrible poker face*, Adam thought of Colonel Fells. You, uh, can't get the words, ah, right when you're holding something, um, back. How'd you end up in this line of *top-secret* work?

"Is he here?" asked Adam, trying to sound aloof.

"He's in Hilo. How about you tell me how you two know each other?"

Adam tried to remember. "He was a guest. Of course. High-paying, too. Aussie. He was in the bar last night, drunk as a skunk, looking for someone. Seemed like a bit of a mess. I thought he'd pass out, sleep it off in his room, and come down red faced this morning. But earlier he was absolutely wild."

"Go on," the colonel said encouragingly. For the first time, Adam realized that the colonel wasn't taking any notes. Was the conversation being taped? He would lay money that it was.

"Well, I had just arrived at the bar; it was about 10-10:30 p.m. and I was tidying up some stuff left over by the cleaning staff. Val was there—Valerie Benson. Hey, where is Valerie?"

"She's here at Pearl. You'll see her soon. Please, continue. Tell me what happened this morning."

"Yeah... so Val and I were getting stuff straightened out downstairs," resumed Adam. "Sometimes guests like a drink before lunch so we try to open just before noon normally, and this guy Peter bursts in, and he's *crazy*. He's still wearing the same clothes he was wearing the night before, only he looks like he's been wearing them a *week*. He had been running about in the forest. You're not meant to do that at night, right? Not on your own, not out-of-your-skull drunk. Crazy, I'm telling you. He says that he's found something out at the falls."

"What was his condition?"

“His condition?” Adam laughed. “He looked like he had been living with a pack of wild dogs. He was filthy, covered in cuts, torn clothes. And... he had this grey stuff. All over his hands, up to the wrists, this grey stuff. Like, I don’t know, powdered metal. I remember because he leant his hands against the bar, which I had just wiped down, leaving this stuff all over it... I tried to wipe it off, but it wouldn’t come off.”

“We’ve encountered this substance before.”

“What is it?” asked Adam.

“We don’t know.”

“Oh.”

“Please...” The colonel beckoned Adam to continue with a hand gesture.

“Oh, sure. Anyway...” Adam felt as if he was telling the colonel an elaborate joke and realized halfway through that it really wasn’t all that funny. “He said he’d found something, and he wanted us to come and see it. To come and see *them*, he said, you have to come and *meet them*. Just like in the *X-Files*, he said, and I’m thinking, dude, never drink the bong water.”

“Why did you go?”

“This stuff, this stuff on the bar,” said Adam. “I didn’t like it at all. It stained right into the surface, and as I looked at it I realized the stuff had burned—or cut, or whatever—this grid into part of the bar top. Like someone burned the bar with a waffle-iron.”

“Yes, we’ve encountered this same phenomenon.”

“What is it?”

“We don-”

“Don’t know, right,” Adam interrupted. “I thought maybe it was dangerous, and I wanted to see where came from. You know, it could have been a chemical spill; it could have put the guests at risk, you can’t mess around with something like that... so I gave Peter a pair of Marigolds, left Val in charge and we went out.”

“Did you encounter anything along the way?”

“Uh... like what?”

“Dizziness,” the colonel said. He cast his eyes upwards, as if recalling a multiplication table. “Spotty or impaired vision. A sense of euphoria.”

“No...” Adam began. Colonel Fells cut him off.

“...Delirium tremens. Shortness of breath. Migraine. Sudden incontinence. Diarrhea. Vomiting. Visual, auditory, or olfactory hallucinations. Strong memories of deceased relatives or lovers. Intense sense of fear or foreboding. Synesthesia or sudden urge to hear or play music. Religious phenomena. Heartburn. Anything like that?”

“*Religious* phenomena?”

“Stigmata, speaking in tongues? Anything like that?”

“No! No.” Adam’s stroll through the woods suddenly began to feel less interesting. “It was a nice day,” he added, uselessly.

“OK, we’ll be sure to make a note of that.”

“You’ve had folks ... hallucinating?”

Colonel Fells smiled. “You understand that there are some questions that I have to ask, correct? There are procedures ...”

“Sure, sure,” Adam said. “It just seemed ... kinda specific.”

“Anyway, please, continue.”

“Sure,” Adam said. “Well, we came up to the falls, and there it was! Incredible.”

“There what was?” the colonel asked, leaning forward. “What did you see?”

“Well, you’ve seen it,” Adam said, puzzled.

The colonel stayed silent, serious.

“You haven’t seen it?” Adam asked, incredulous. “Why not?”

“Confirmation bias,” the colonel said, mysteriously. “It’s... at the moment, we’re making sure no one looks at it directly, and we’re trying to approach it with remote-control devices.”

“I looked at it directly,” Adam said. “Nothing happened to me. Well, I ended up here, but...”

“What did you see?”

“I saw,” Adam said, with exaggerated care, conscious of the absurdity of what he was saying, “a flying saucer.”

“That’s how you would describe the vehicle?”

“Well, it wasn’t actually flying... it was jammed in under the falls. But it was saucer-shaped, y’know, circular, grey, like it was made out of brushed metal. Kind of featureless, not much to see, just this big metal Frisbee wedged under the falls.”

“Was there anything written on it?”

“Yes, ‘Mars Air Force’.”

“*What?!*”

“Kidding! There was nothing written on it.”

“For fuck’s sake, Mr. Conor...” sputtered the colonel. Adam was strangely gratified. This was the first bit of absolutely bona fide emotion he had seen from the colonel.

“Look, I had a lot of trouble taking it seriously, too,” Adam said. “I felt like laughing. Seriously, I was looking around for the hidden cameras. But this Peter guy was absolutely rapt. He kept saying ‘aren’t they beautiful, aren’t they beautiful.’”

“The creatures? You also saw them?”

“Yes.”

“And what did they look like?”

“Little green fellas with antennae.”

“Adam, this really isn’t a good time for jokes.”

“No, mate, I’m on the level this time. They were, I swear, little green men. Little green men with their flying saucer, just like in the cartoons I watched as a kid.”

“In other words, you saw exactly what you expected to see.”

"I beg your pardon?"

"You saw exactly what you have previously imagined aliens to look like," clarified the colonel.

"I guess," Adam said. "I don't think I've given it much thought in the past, to be honest, mate."

"Right." The colonel leaned back and rubbed his hands together thoughtfully. Adam wondered what time it was. He was beginning to feel hungry. "What were they doing?"

"Just kind of milling about the saucer. All moving about, but it didn't really look like they were doing anything specific. At first I thought they hadn't seen us. But then some of them turned and waved at us."

"What did you do?"

"I waved back. It was what Peter was doing."

"They saw you?"

"Yes, sure. But I didn't really want to go near them. Peter was... he kept going on and on about how amazing it was, how beautiful and peaceful they were, and about this girl Harmony."

To Adam's surprise, this revelation caught the colonel's attention. "He talked about Harmony? What else did he say?"

"He thought she was there," Adam said. "It was funny... he had been looking for her the previous evening... He seemed really happy. Suddenly he changed... he had been incredibly excited, sort of babbling, and then he went very, very quiet for a while, like he was listening to something that I couldn't hear, and after that he became... like a different person. Very calm, serious. He said we should go back to the hotel. I agreed, I was happy to go back, I didn't know what to think and I wanted to get my camera."

"So you came back."

"Sure. And when we got back, Val was so freaked out by what had happened to the bar, she decided to call the police. And then you guys showed up."

"A flying saucer," the colonel mused, "and little green men. Incredible."

"Jeez, I wish I knew what to tell you," Adam said, "but that's what I saw."

"I don't doubt you," Colonel Fells said.

"So... what do you think we're dealing with here?"

"It's incredibly serious."

"But these guys are... aliens, right? We're dealing with aliens?"

"I hope so," the colonel said. "Extra-terrestrials... it sounds crazy, but we *know* about ETs. I don't mean we've encountered them before. I mean we can encompass them within our imaginations. There's a strong risk of misleading anthropomorphism, but we can mentally deal with the idea of ET visitors. If this is something else, well, we don't even know where to begin."

"You mentioned a threat," Adam said. "The fact that this, that they, might be a threat to us ... you think that this might be an *invasion* of some sort?"

"Yes, it could be."

"It's just one ship."

“As far as we know. And I can just hear the Aztecs saying that about the Spanish. Look how that ended up. You could be crawling with some unearthly infection. I’m not married, I don’t have children and my parents are dead, God rest them. I don’t have any close relatives. That’s why I’m on this duty. Because we could both be dying already. It’s the same with young Benitez, who fetched you from your room. This whole complex is sealed because of you. Epidemics breaking out on ships or submarines, that’s what the Navy built it for, stopping tropical diseases from getting into the civilian population. You and Valerie are the only residents right now. The level of potential exposure down in Akaka has been... dozens of folks without suits, the FBI sticking their goddamn noses in, every rule in the damn book broken. If there’s an epidemic, that island is basically lost. We’ll have to take it out from the air.”

“It’s the only way to be sure,” Adam said sympathetically.

Either the reference was lost on the Colonel or he wasn’t impressed by it. “So thank God they landed on an island, that’s all. We’ve really fucked up first contact as far as disease goes, anyway. Hell, *they* could all be dying right now. Maybe Wells was right. Let’s hope they’re a bit more sensible than we are. But do you know what really frightens me, as a military man? What really scares the crap out of me?”

Adam swallowed. “What?”

“The fact that you weren’t frightened. You weren’t scared at all. They didn’t make you feel threatened in the least? You went right up to them and haven’t acted remotely scared since I’ve seen you.”

“Maybe I’m made of sterner stuff,” Adam said.

“You’re not. If I was an alien and I posed a threat to this planet, your reaction is exactly the one I’d want at first—total lack of concern.”

“Right,” Adam said. His guts churned. “Jeez. So what now?”

“Now,” the colonel said, “you help us find Harmony.”

Chapter Three

By Mister_A

“Stryker,” he muttered. “Stryker, Stryker, Stryker.” Bad enough to say it once—it became nonsense on repetition. Still, he couldn’t get past it. He could do a search and replace on it later, if he thought of a better name. One that sounded like a real person, not a strong-jawed Anglo-Saxon action hero. And that Australian dialogue! What the hell? It seemed to have been written by someone who had once heard a guy quoting lines from *Crocodile Dundee 2: Electric Boogaloo*. A pale imitation of a poor imitation.

“Time to quit,” Ben said, yawning. When he was tired he tended to edit himself brutally and he didn’t want to derail the story. Australian dialogue he could fix later, long after he got the story down.

After his morning Clif Bar and coffee, Ben pushed his bike out the front door of his building, nicking the woodwork with a stray pedal as he went. “Sorry, Mary,” he grumbled in supplication to his landlady, wherever she was. He bounced the bike jauntily down the brick steps on its back wheel and hopped on. The 15-minute bike ride to the office was one of the highlights of Ben’s day, especially on a dry, warmish morning like this.

IRL Advertising was not a bad place to work. They let Ben bring his bike up to the office, limiting its exposure to Philadelphia’s natural elements and bike thieves. The free coffee was surprisingly good, the pay was OK, and there were a few genuinely interesting people beyond the usual agency stock characters. The founders of IRL had carved out a niche, helping web-based businesses “create awareness” (also known as running ads) in traditional media. Ben was an IT guy at IRL and a fiction writer for fun. Actually, Ben was a Senior IT Guy, according to his business card, a useless chip of medium-quality stock. The founders (or Founders, according to their own, more useful and higher-quality cards) thought that it would be fun to put kitschy light-hearted titles on the cards, although every employee also had a standard “official” title. It was the sort of thing that quickly goes from cute to mildly grating, Ben had discovered, but he didn’t think it was worth complaining about.

As a Senior IT Guy, Ben was charged with keeping cantankerous computers and operators working in harmony and he was good at it. He avoided the common IT Guy pitfall of assuming that all users were wing-nuts and that every problem could be ascribed to user error, even though most of the problems he solved were actually user-induced. Ben didn’t mind; it kept him employed and more-or-less content.

At the coffee machine, Randy the Writer chatted him up. “Big trouble in Hawaii,” she mumbled as she poured white powder into a mug shaped like a giant Easter Island stone head. Randy

didn't talk much, and people thought her odd for this and other reasons, but she was comfortable around Ben, who didn't often think much of anything was really odd.

"What happened?" Ben asked, his curiosity piqued.

"Terrists." After years of living in the northeast, Randy still carried a residual Tennessee twang. The youngish, hip staff at IRL found Randy's accent positively droll. It was one of the reasons she seldom spoke.

"Really? In Hawaii? That's messed up."

"Sure is. Chemical or biological agents, apparently, at some resort. Shut the place down. The resort, not Hawaii. "

"What was the name—" Randy cut Ben off before he could finish the question.

"Shit. I gotta go. Goddamn status meeting."

Randy shuffled off in the faster of her two slow, shuffling gears, leaving Ben with a puzzled look on his face. Ben moved mechanically through the rest of an unremarkably busy day, his thoughts focused on Hawaii. No one else mentioned anything, so he figured it was some typical disgruntled employee anthrax-hoax kind of thing.

Back at home once more, Ben searched for news from Hawaii. There were vague reports suggesting that some sort of attack may have taken place, but there were no eyewitness accounts and even fewer real details available. Ben couldn't even figure out on which island the alleged "national security incident" had taken place. No sense calling over there right now either—it was only noon in Hawaii, and his night-owl sister would doubtless still be sleeping.

Frustrated and worried, Ben blew off some steam with SnoWhite, his other hobby. SnoWhite was his avatar, or "toon", in the popular online role-playing game *Armageddon*. More correctly, SnoWhite was the leader of his deadly gang of toons. *Armageddon* had a wildly popular and competitive player vs. player, or "PvP" combat system, and Ben had mastered it.

Instead of the usual limit of one toon per player at any given time, Ben ran five *Armageddon* accounts on a mix of real and virtual machines, and linked the actions of five toons with some clever macros. The adorable ivory-skinned pixie SnoWhite was the "leader", directing the actions of her four Tra'ag riflemen (stocky, greenish humanoids that were the closest available match to dwarves). When Ben targeted an enemy with SnoWhite, her henchmen Grumpy, Grumpy2, LOLGrumpeez, and SofaKingGrumpy attacked in unison relentlessly with very limited input from Ben, who was free to heal the deadly dwarves with SnoWhite's medic abilities. The effect was devastating and demoralizing to opponents. and had earned Ben a mixture of awe, respect, jealousy, and hatred on his *Armageddon* server.

Ben had just entered the battlefield when he was messaged by his old friend CraftyLover, an eight-foot-tall, blue, vaguely humanoid thing with tentacles and a polypous octopoid head.

CraftyLover [Dreadlords]: Hey buddy I got something for you.

This generally meant that CraftyLover had baited an entire guild into fighting him... or else had identified a griefer in need of re-education.

SnoWhite [Dreadlords]: What's the word?

CraftyLover [Dreadlords]: Guy wouldn't STFU about the Red Sox so I crushed him. Then he starts going on about how I must be hacked to beat him, so I killed him again.

SnoWhite [Dreadlords]: Sounds like you got it under control...

Craftylover was a wicked player, the best Ben had met so far. One-on-one, without the deadly dwarves, Ben suspected CraftyLover would own him.

CraftyLover [Dreadlords]: So I'm like '86 Mets FTW noob! And he goes and starts calling me a fag, whilst hiding in the neutral zone. Then one of his guildies shows up.

SnoWhite [Dreadlords]: Ahh.

CraftyLover [Dreadlords]: So I'm like, "come get killed by a fag, bitches!"

SnoWhite [Dreadlords]: You are a master of diplomacy.

CraftyLover [Dreadlords]: I know. So out they come and I stun his buddy the second he hits the field, then chase the punk-ass engineer all over the place 'til he falls off the bridge into the plasma! PWND BY DUH!!!11!

SnoWhite [Dreadlords]: What a dumb-ass.

CraftyLover [Dreadlords]: So now there's like ten of 'em, they're from Knights of Mars or something retarded like that.

SnoWhite [Dreadlords]: Well, I wouldn't be here if I didn't want to kill a bunch of people.

CraftyLover [Dreadlords]: Mwahaahaa!

SnoWhite and the deadly dwarves joined CraftyLover on the battlefield proper. They talked strategy briefly.

CraftyLover [Dreadlords]: So I'll keep 'em off Sno and you kill everyone.

SnoWhite [Dreadlords]: Good plan.

The six toons from the dreadlords guild killed the entire Hot Martian Knights squad repeatedly. The game was starting to get boring because the Knights, even with their superior numbers, were terrible long-range attackers. They had three competent space marines that kept Crafty and Sno on their toes, but the rest of the guild withered quickly under the dwarves' synchronous strikes. After a particularly poor showing, the Knights lingered in the neutral zone longer than usual, talking strategy. When they came out they immediately pounced on Crafty; the three marines managed to disarm him and neutralize his shield, quickly killing him. Then they wore down Sno, who after a couple of minutes ran out of energy and couldn't heal her remaining dwarves.

CraftyLover [Dreadlords]: They zerged me

SnoWhite [Dreadlords]: They finally tried something different after all those EPIC FAILS

CraftyLover [Dreadlords]: We have to melt their faces now. Fuckin homophobes!!!11!

When they returned to the field, Sno ordered the dwarves to concentrate on the strongest marine while Crafty rushed their healer. The marine and the healer were dead in seconds, but the remaining Knights managed to cripple Crafty, who reminded them that immobilizing a powerful close-range fighter in their midst didn't really do much for their cause. As the Knights fled from Crafty's powerful shotgun-style blasts, the dwarves picked them off at will and the Dreadlords won their most decisive battle of the evening.

A few battles later, CraftyLover signed off, citing a pending rendezvous with an emo chick. Ben looked for trouble and found it—, over and over again, taking on groups large and small, both random and organized, and generally getting the upper hand in the fighting. *Armageddon* lived up to its reputation as a huge time suck because of the human element at its center. As the night wore on, the population thinned as the game's players conceded to the demands of real life.

Ben was about to call it quits when he spied an unusual toon wreaking havoc on everything in its path. It was a ponderous space marine, a class usually played as a tank or “meatshield”, meaning the player had high defensive capabilities and a limited offense. The toon appeared to be a Gorlon, the *Armageddon* version of a Klingon, more or less, and the diametric opposite of SnoWhite and the elfin Zeeriae according to the complicated factional combat system of the game. The Gorlon applied the coup de grace to a wolf-like creature, then approached SnoWhite and the dwarves. Ben had never before seen the black armor and fierce-looking gun it carried; Ben suspected it might be a game-master appearing to reprimand him once again. However, its name, “Xenoid”, did not appear in orange as it would have if the toon were indeed a GM. The toon holstered its weapon and bowed before SnoWhite, who returned the courtesy. A chill ran up Ben’s spine—this toon was something new, something completely different, and it was both unnerving and flattering. Maybe the developers were trying out some new toys on him?

Xenoid: Stryker.

Ben stared at the screen in disbelief.

SnoWhite [Dreadlords]: What?

Xenoid: Stryker.

SnoWhite: Why are you saying that?

Xenoid: Stryker.

SnoWhite: Fuck you Crafty!

The false bravado heartened Ben a little; he knew that Crafty had no idea about the story he’d started last night, but the act of defiance rallied his nerve a bit.

Xenoid: Stryker.

Xenoid bowed again and drew its weapon. SnoWhite targeted the blocky humanoid. Ben saw a bright flash and all was still.

Ben awoke, gasping. The sun sat low in the eastern sky. It was a few minutes after seven. He stumbled to the bathroom and took a look at himself. Bloodshot brown eyes stared back at him. Coffee-colored bags cast shadows beneath them. He lurched into the shower and replayed the

strange events of the previous day. He must have fallen asleep playing Armageddon and dreamt the encounter with the Xenoid toon. Any other explanation was literal madness. He was obviously a little unnerved about the maybe-could-be attack in Hawaii, which was natural—he had just written a story about strange happenings in Hawaii, and he had a sister there, so of course it was an unsettling coincidence. And that was all.

After brushing his teeth, he texted his sister:

Call me.

She was fine. No one was talking about any casualties, this was not another 9/11. He left home early despite his fatigue, deciding to walk the 15 blocks to IRL. He stopped at Lenny's news-stand for gum and undemanding, cheerful companionship. "Hey, cuz! What's the word?"

"Thunderbird," replied Ben, smiling in spite of himself. It was reassuring nonsense, the best kind.

"Nice shades, bro!" Lenny bellowed. Then, lower: "Wake and bake, man? I know how you young guys roll."

Ben laughed again, coming back to life and re-joining the human race through the power of Lenny's stale jokes and invincible affability. "No. I didn't sleep so good last night, and you know, black guy with bloodshot eyes equals crackhead, right?"

"Ahh, and black guy with shades, that means what? Pope o' fuckin' Rome?"

"You are the least racist guy I know, Lenny."

"I call 'em like I see 'em. Speaking of which, I was at the Phillies game last night. Howard hit a homer in the fifth that's still going I think. Anyways, the ump calls strike three on Utley to end the game, and the ball's like in Camden or something, it's so far outta the strike zone. Hey, cuz, you OK?"

Ben was collapsing into the news-stand, clutching the *Inquirer*. A headline over the two far right columns read: "Aussie Held in Hawaii Terror Plot". Ben went a little weak at the knees when he read this, but he willed himself to read more. "Peter Stryker, an Australian national said to be vacationing..."

That was when Ben collapsed. "Hey! you look like you seen a ghost."

"I think a goose just walked over my grave," Ben spluttered.

"You don't look so good. Kinda pale, relatively speaking. Come on, sit down a minute," Lenny said, offering a milk crate.

"Len, I'm gonna go home. Stomach bug," Ben croaked. "I'll take the paper, too." He tossed 50 cents on the counter.

"Take care, Ben! Go puke that shit out!"

Ben waved diffidently and stumbled around the corner. He took a deep breath and read the paper again. He felt dangerously unmoored, His seasonal moodiness and benign quirks giving way to strangling metastatic horror. Ben felt himself slipping into raving, his future looming darkly, another weathered hand begging alms, Another failure. He had always borne a measure of paranoia and now feared that his mind had surrendered to fearful delusion—that he had lost, all at once, the sense of what was real and what was merely shadow. “Not me,” he whispered to himself, “not me.” It became a mantra, a shield against the chaos that swirled around him on a partly cloudy, mostly pleasant early spring day. “Not me.”

He remembered the story—the one he had started sometime night before last, when his biggest concern had been accurately representing Australian dialect. The story of Peter Stryker, Australian drunk extraordinaire. He read the paper again, looking for any mention of Adam, the other Australian. Or Valerie. Valerie was in the story he’d written, too, but not in the *Inquirer* story.

Valerie. The love of his life, his twin sister, Valerie Benson. Valerie was in a lot of his stories; it began as a joke and became a tradition, or crutch, depending on how you looked at it. Ben always got on pretty well with women in a casual, social way, but was too shy to pursue romantic attractions. He didn’t think he wrote women well and felt that the names he gave female characters sounded like porn stars or drag queens. For this reason, he generally called them Valerie Benson until he finished the story, then enlisted Valerie, his few close friends and the phone book to find suitable monikers. “You’d better not write a story with two girls in it,” Valerie once teased him.

This story was different. This time, Valerie Benson really was Valerie Benson. Usually she was an astronaut or soldier or veterinarian or advertising exec, but this time she was a cute, charming, irresponsible black girl who tended bar in Hawaii. Valerie Benson.

Ben panicked thinking of Valerie in trouble, his earlier feelings of dissolution now supplanted by a terrified energy and renewed sense of purpose. He ran the mile home from the news-stand, determined to find the story fragment and, through it, to find himself and his sister.

At home, the story was where he’d left it: right there on his hard drive. A file dated two days previously, the same name, the same weird spelling, the same general outline of Peter Stryker, Australian. He checked the Internet. Peter Stryker was returning hits now, but nothing on Valerie Benson. Ben hoped no news was indeed good news.

Ben called his manager, Dave. “Dave, I have to go to Hawaii. Valerie’s in trouble... I don’t know... it’s hard to explain... yes... I don’t know, probably a week. I know... yes, it is a shame about my poor grandmother... quite a shock... thank you so much, Dave.”

Ben had a massive reserve of goodwill and trust to draw on with Dave, and he was tapping it pretty hard today. He had made up his mind to get on the next plane to Hawaii and find his sister. Turned out he had to get the next plane to LAX, and fly from there on to Hawaii. Derrick "Ben" Benson booked his tickets, pulled \$1000 out of his bank account, and hailed a cab.

Chapter Four

By cortex

Seven miles above the Pacific, with a row on the under-booked airliner to himself and a lukewarm beer losing the last of its luke on a spare food tray, the day caught up with Ben and caught up hard. He'd spent the last flight and the first few hours of this one trying not to pace in the aisle, but now he was having trouble keeping his eyes open.

He dropped his pen on the notebook sitting open on the nearest of his three trays—the page frustratingly blank, save for the inky pox of his frustrated gotta-think jabbing—and pulled his feet into the empty seats next to him, bracing his body against the concave wall of the fuselage. The sounds of the aircraft crept across his awareness; the murmur of a tourist couple in the next row; some unsettled infant's fussing and almost-crying; the mechanical whine of the flaps adjusting; and over, under, through it all, the constant, ear-stuffed rumble of the plane's engines dragging this impossible chunk of metal through the air.

Ben grabbed the notebook and propped it on his knees, considered transcribing the soundscape, shook his head, and dropped his pen-hand into his lap. He didn't need story fodder, he needed to think. If he couldn't think, he could at least get some sleep and hope for a clearer head afterward. When his eyes closed this time, he didn't force them back open. Instead, he dozed off thinking about Val--

--erie Benson's Ad-Hoc Journal, MM/DD/YY xx:yy PM

Fuck. This. Noise.

You think, okay, things aren't bad. Don't be such a cynic. You've got a cush job, you're getting laid, you live on a tropical fucking island, okay. Don't worry, be happy, wevs.

So you fold up your placards and skip that petition and stop reading the news and let someone else get their ass teargassed at this year's Illuminati Summit. Fine. You relax. You get lazy. You get fat and drunk and satisfied and you finally stop being paranoid.

And then your bar gets stormed by army stoolies and you're in "protective" custody and you can't a straight answer from anyone, and am I free to go, am I being charged with something, did my copy of the Constitution have some sort of typo or something because this is a crock of shit, and all you get is Yes But No But Yes But I Can't Disclose That Information, Ma'am, and you

know what? Don't call me fucking MA'AM, pencil dick.

They'll probably just confiscate this, too. Here, please enjoy my diary, spooks. I'm not the writer in the family but I made this just for you. Fascists.

They want to know what happened, but nothing DID happen, except some crazy drunk tourist managed to eat a hole in the bar with some goddam pixie dust and I'm not sure how many times I can tell them that before they'll stop asking me. I didn't see any aliens, I don't believe in aliens, and basically just, you know, shit on you and your questions about aliens. And I know it's supposed to be about aliens, because that's what that tourist asshole was yelling about and the Gestapo here all get quiet and no-commenty when I ask them. So, c'mon.

And hey, follow-up question for the fascist shits reading this: the strip-and-shower thing? These space-pajama overalls?

1. Fuck.
2. You.

And who the hell is this chick Har--

--mony" was supposed to be a key word. Why did we fail?

We did not fail.

The earthlings are not behaving according to the model.

We had to expect some divergence. The simulation cannot be perfect.

The simulation was not remotely accurate. Why did they retrieve the stryker?

They were surprised.

The model did not predict surprise. We made contact. We spoke with him. "Harmony" spoke with him.

He was receptive. We saw this. It is a good sign.

He was receptive and yet they retrieved him.

They were surprised.

We repeat ourselves. They should not be surprised; we spoke with him.

They fear us, perhaps.

But he was receptive. How can they fear us if he was receptive?

Their communication is imperfect.

Very imperfect. The model did not predict this. We have observed them. We have studied their signals.

We do not yet fully understand the signals. We do not know their purpose.

Their purpose is not in question. They broadcast signals from their planet. It is a beacon. Their images, their language, their culture. It is an introduction.

Perhaps it was not intended as a broadcast. Perhaps the signals were meant only for consumption by the earthlings themselves.

Bizarre. No.

Perhaps the signals we received were spillage. Perhaps they broadcast omnidirectionally for some reason.

Bizarre and wasteful. And why would there be a need? They created the signals, they must know what they contain.

Perhaps they must trade signals mechanically.

Impossible. That would imply that--

--that they are psychotic, yes.

That theory has never been accepted--

It is an unpopular theory, but we have never rejected it either. What if--

We are wasting our time.

--what if they cannot hear each other?

We must resume contact with the stryker node.

What if the signals are their sole form of communication?

The stryker must be studied further. We must understand why they retrieved him.

They spoke aloud to one another. We observed this.

Perhaps we can retrieve his companion as well.

Why would they use verbal utterance, if the model is correct?

The model is sound.

What if they are individuals?

We have communicated with them in the past. They can share minds.

Perhaps only a few have this capability. Perhaps we have been victims of some experimental error, finding earthlings to be responsive to our searches because only those earthlings who were receptive could respond in kind.

It is madness. Why some but not others?

An accident of genetics. Something suppressed by chance, or something developed. A branch in their evolution.

We would be gravely mistaken. The model--

--would be useless. The plan cannot succeed.

We don't know that.

If they do not share minds, we cannot hope to broadcast with sufficient speed.

Perhaps they are dormant. The model could still be sound. We would need only--

--to awaken those who are not yet receptive. Yes. The model could be vindicated.

We must study this possibility further.

We must hurry.

We must re-establish contact.

We must.

Where is the stryker now? Where is his fel--

--low Australian, sure, but that's it, mate. I don't know the bastard to save my life." Adam
Conor rubs his eyes and glares at the soldier with the clipboard and the pistol holstered on the
soldier's belt. "So to speak."

"You had never met, contacted, or associated with Peter Hofstadter Stryker prior to the events
of the last few days."

"No, I--for fuck's sake, I've already answered these questions, I already told Fells everything I--"

"Sir, I'm required to interview you. Please just answer the questions honestly and--"

"I'm BEING bloody honest, you--"

"--and we'll be done as quickly as possible, I promise you. You work as a bartender at Akaka
Nights. How long have you been in that position?"

Adam shifts in his chair, sighs, takes a slow breath. "Two years, about."

"Your coworker, Valerie Benson, has worked there for how long?"

"Eight, nine months. Look, what does--"

"Had you met, contacted, or associated with Valerie Benson prior to her employment at Akaka
Nights?"

"No."

"Are you now or have you ever been in a romantic or sexual relationship with Va--"

"Oh fuck you, mate, what has that got to do with anything?"

"Please just answer the question honestly, Mr. Conor."

"We're friends. We work together. That's all."

"You have not had any romantic or sexu--"

"We're just friends."

The soldier scribbles on his clipboard, flips back a page and forward again. Adam watches him and shifts again in his chair, ache and annoyance taking turns wearing down his patience.

"She's alright, isn't she?"

The soldier glances up. "Hrm?"

"Val. She's not--"

"She's fine. She's being interviewed as well."

"Interviewed."

"Let's keep going. You identified a Harmony Kearsh on the premises of Akaka Nights--"

"Is that her name?"

The soldier frowned, and flipped through pages again. "I have it here that you've previously referred to her by name--"

"Her first name, yeah. I didn't know her last name was Kearsh."

"You identified her on the bar's premises while Peter Stryker spoke with you."

"Yes."

"Had you ever met, contacted, or associated with Harmony Kearsh before--"

"No, never seen her before in my life."

"But you recognized her when Stryker showed you her photograph."

"Well, yeah, I guess I'd seen her in the bar a bit earlier, and--"

"Can you confirm that?"

"Well, I mean, look, I recognized her, and she was there, so--"

"Can you confirm that you saw Harmony Kearsh on the premises of Akaka Nights prior to viewing the photograph Peter Stryker shared with you? Can you recall when and where you saw her prior to that specific moment?"

"I--no, look, I've got no idea, mate. You work in a bar, you see everybody there—but you don't REMEMBER seeing them until they order a drink or make trouble or something. It's just background noise, y'know, you recognize someone if they've been wandering around even if you haven't really SEEN them."

"You can't confirm having seen Harmony Kearsh or detail when and where you saw her prior to Stryker showing you her photog--"

"No, Christ, I just explained--"

"Are you certain you did in fact see Harmony Kearsh prior to being shown her photograph?"

"For god's sake, how many--"

"Is it possible that you mistook a general feeling of recognition and nostalgia for a specific

memory of Harmony Kearsh when first approached by Stryker, and that you only first visually identified this woman, Harmony, after having seen her image in that photograph?"

"Is it poss..."

"Sir, please answer the ques--"

"Oh. Oh fuck me. Oh shit. I get it, I--"

"Sir, can you--"

"Fells. It's what he--the anthropomorphization thing. Confirmation bias. Christ..."

"Please, sir--"

"I've got to talk to the colonel. It was there. It was IN THE BAR. Let me talk to Colonel F--"

"--ells here. What's the status on your end?" The colonel sat with the phone crooked against his ear, his feet crossed straight out in front of the leather chair he was slumped in. Good leather. Very comfortable. A ridiculous, lazy thing to sit in, could swallow you right up, put you to sleep, let you drift through your days half-awake. It wasn't his chair or his office, but it was his now, until the quarantine lifted or they were all dead. He shouldn't have been slumping either, but once you make your peace with a chair like this, well, son: the slumping's an afterthought.

The phone chattered back in his ear, an all-business CO in Maryland summing up the rumors and the news bubbling out of the national media. It wasn't great, but it wasn't terrible.

"Just keep it contained. When this breaks, we want it to be the President breaking it, not some god damned Internet blogger. What about the psych ops? Any new hits?"

There were, but mostly unverified. A medium in Jersey attacked a beat cop, screaming about an invasion; a government sensitive in the Pentagon started pinging hard before collapsing in her office. And there was an Echelon hit for what was looking like an unregistered channeller's home computer, and the subject himself was unaccounted for.

"Right, fine. Give me the guy's name, I'll check it out with the folks we're holding. Okay. That's romeo-romeo? Okay. Let me know if you get more."

Fells fought his way upright against the chair and grabbed a pen and a pad of paper from his ridiculous adopted desk. In clean, precise print he wrote out the name Derrick Ben--

--son woke with a start to sharp pain in his right hand. A cramp. He massaged it with his left hand and ground his teeth while he blearily reoriented himself in the cabin. His neck and back ached from the strange ergonomics his body had conformed to in sleep. The beer was still sitting, mostly full, on the far tray. He reached over and touched it, using its temperature as a rough clock—still a shade cool. He couldn't have slept that long.

He picked up the beer, thought better of it, swallowed with a dry throat and thought worse again after all. Then his eyes landed on his notebook, and he dropped the beer back on the tray with a heavy thump. A splash of weak pilsner geysered from the mouth of the can and splattered onto the tray, seat and the AirFone embedded in the foam above the tray's clasp.

The previously empty notebook page was now covered in words. Meandering, frantic handwriting, rendered at rough slants and overlapping itself in places, but it was undeniably his writing. Pages of it—a dozen sheets lay turned over the binding, all filled with messy scrawling, some pages nearly torn where he'd have turned them over for a fresh page. In his sleep. Writing in his sleep. No wonder the hand cramp, no wonder--

His own name. A colonel he'd never heard of and never written about. Parts of a story he'd never plotted out. He shuttled through the pages, back and forth—"Valerie Benson", oh. Shit. Stryker; Conor; quarantine, Harmony, unregistered channeller—and then forced himself to stop and take a breath. He started reading again from the top.

When he finished, he set the notebook aside, closed his eyes and thought for a long time. Then Ben sat up, grabbed the notebook and flipped to a clean page. He shut his eyes tight, held his breath, and wrote:

"Somehow, she found her way to a telephone. Valerie dialed, and hoped."

Ben opened his eyes and stared uneasily at the ringing, beer-spattered handset of the AirFone in front of him.

Chapter Five

By It's Raining Florence Henderson

Stryker came fully awake as if someone had flipped a switch in his head. And maybe someone had. Whatever dreams had recently premiered behind his closed eyes were instantly forgotten when he opened them. But Stryker still felt a lingering trace of... otherness, beyond even the metaphorical sticky aisles and suffocation by butter normally associated with exiting his personal Realm of Dreams Cineplex Odeon. It was as if the pimple-faced Sandman who sold him the tickets had recently bathed in cheap cologne.

He wasn't alone, was the thing. Not in this sterile field hospital room, and not in his mind. Even in the dark, he could sense the silent presence watching him from somewhere just out of sight. He reached out with his mind, but felt nothing in the vicinity beyond a profound, cold indifference. Stryker suddenly felt like a character in a bargain-bin Sci Fi novel—as if he no longer fully recognized himself, and wasn't entirely in control of his own actions.

"Who's there?"

"It's me," said Harmony. "It's Harmony." And it was, too. It was Harmony.

Harmony stepped into the light. This was the real Harmony. Not some holographic Jedi-mind-trick blow-up doll Harmony. *His* Harmony. The flesh-and-blood Harmony. The off-limits Harmony. The break-your-heart-with-extreme-prejudice Harmony.

Reflexively, Stryker reached out to her with his mind, even though this was the very act that had driven them apart.

Nothing. Or... *something*.

Knock it off, sport. A mind is a terrible thing to rape.

It was a stranger's voice. In his head.

Stryker was being Psi-blocked.

Who the fuck are you?!

Silence. Shit.

"Harmony. What are you doing here? I thought you never wanted to see me again?"

"I don't! *They* brought me here. The Americans. You know—Black helicopters? Secret-goth-army creeps? To this dump. To talk some sense into you. You *seriously* need to cooperate with these people, Peter. They have commissary expense accounts and they know how to use them. I need to get the fuck out of here before they infect me with whatever cheap-and-tacky virus the government unleashes on civil servants."

That was his Harmony, alright.

Stryker decided to try another tactic. He launched a sudden, direct, full-frontal-cortex attack against his anonymous Psi-blocker, who immediately consolidated all mental resources to block the assault, leaving Stryker free to bounce his attentions over to his suddenly unprotected ex.

Revulsion! Disgust! Utter contempt!

Then Stryker received the psychic equivalent of a punch to the nuts. He let go of Harmony's mind with an audible groan.

Don't do that again!

You got it, Boss.

No need, anyway. Stryker had learned all he needed to know. When Harmony had first caught him reading her mind, she had felt violated. Frightened and angry. Hurt. And rightfully so! But in their time apart her feelings had matured. She now hated Peter Stryker. Absolutely, and without reservation. With every fiber of her well-manicured being.

Stryker was oddly relieved. The finality of her loathing was like a reprieve from a life sentence of obsessing. He was dead to her. Move along. Nothing to see here.

"Well, we can't have you slumming on *my* account. You can tell Colonel Fells that I've agreed to cooperate if he lets you go."

"Really? Thank you, Peter. I thought-"

"I know what you thought. I know *exactly* what you thought."

"You bastard! Stay out of my head!"

Harmony stormed out.

Stryker smiled sadly. It had been a cheap shot, to be sure, but he couldn't help himself. If his life was to be entirely without Harmony, now, then maybe he could at least manufacture the occasional shred of dignity in its place.

"*That* went better than expected."

"Did it, Colonel? You think he was serious about cooperating?"

"Maybe. Or maybe he just doesn't want us to think we can use his girlfriend against him."

"*Ex*-girlfriend. You think he's still protecting her?"

"He's obviously hung up on her. Enough for the enemy to use her to try to manipulate him with, anyway. So why not use that to our advantage, too?"

"Well, if he got a good enough look at her thoughts tonight, he might just have a different opinion of her now."

"I thought you said he didn't have time to read her, Lieutenant?"

"Not in depth, no. But she was radiating pure hatred, Colonel. He couldn't have missed that."

"So why agree to cooperate, then? Why change his mind now?"

"I don't know. I don't. But I wouldn't underestimate him, is all I'm saying. He's strong. And almost clever, now that he's sober."

"Should we drug him first?"

"I wouldn't. Not yet. If he loses control again, somebody's liable to get hurt. If he was serious—if he agrees to let me scan him without a fight—it's better for everyone. Me, for instance. And maybe him, too."

"What happens if he finds out we haven't actually let his girlfriend go?"

"I have a theory about that."

"Care to elaborate?"

"Let's just see what happens, Colonel."

"Don't fuck this up, Devon. We don't have time for character development and subplots, here. If this is the real deal, and we're at war—you're way more valuable than he is. And Bio Ops is just itching to crack open Stryker's skull, anyway. I have half a mind to let them. I'm not even sure Stryker is still relevant."

"Better to be thorough."

"My thoughts exactly, Lieutenant..."

Colonel Fells tapped the odd black helmet cupping his skullcap.

"My thoughts *exactly*."

"Nice beanie, Magneto. Does it work?"

"Try me."

Stryker grinned.

"Already did, mate, already did. Bupkis. Wasn't sure if it was the toque, or if you're really just that empty-headed. So the tinfoil-hat guys were right all along, eh?"

"Psionic waves aren't electromagnetic. Metal doesn't help at all."

"Well it sounds like you lot know what you're doing here, at any rate. Why do you need me?"

"Two days ago we couldn't get you to shut up. Now suddenly, you've got nothing to say. Why? What are you hiding?"

"I sobered up, for one thing. And I think I was under some other kind of influence, too, until I got here. I assume this whole compound is covered by a giant yarmulke of silence?"

"We're protected from outside influences."

"What about inside influences?"

"You didn't answer my question."

"I came to my senses, that's all. Realized some Psi-cho had had a bit of fun at my expense. I've squeezed the last kernel out of your bloody shit questions twenty times over, and I really didn't

want some US government goon stomping around in my memories, scrambling what's left of my brain."

"But you've changed your mind again?"

"Sure, why not? I'm obviously not going anywhere soon. Why not get it over with? *Before* you decide to force the issue."

"It's in your best interest, too, you know. If there's a real threat out there—whatever the origin—anything we can learn about them is important."

"Whatever you say, mate. Let's just get it over with, shall we?"

"Stryker, meet Lieutenant Devon Marsh. She's our top-of-the-line memory stomper."

"We've met. I think."

Stryker began to sweat.

"Look, maybe this wasn't such a crash-hot idea, after all..."

"Intimidating, isn't it, Stryker? The thought of a beautiful woman reading your mind? Well, don't worry. She's been a Class 1 Psion since puberty. She already knows that men are pigs."

"Colonel, if you don't mind, this type of procedure really works best without an audience."

"Of course, Lieutenant. I'll be right outside—"

"And Stryker? Don't blow this. I'm going to be honest with you; this is pretty much your last chance to do the right thing. So if you can't muster up a sense of duty, you might want to start thinking in terms of self-preservation."

"Sorry about that," Devon sighed, as Colonel Fells exited. "Not really the tone I was hoping to establish."

"Sure, he's crunchy on the *outside*, but *inside*, you just *know* there's a chewy nougat center."

"You know what? I seriously doubt that."

Stryker smiled.

"Yeah. Me, too. So. How does this work? I suppose I should just go ahead and apologize up front for the sheer volume of shit you're about to wade through. I don't really self-censor much."

"No kidding? Listen, Mister Stryker: I don't care if you cheat on your taxes or have mommy issues. I don't care about your sick fantasies or what you think about me. I don't care if you're a total asshole or have a heart of gold. Honestly. I just don't. I don't care, and chances are, I'll never know, anyway. This isn't a blind fishing expedition. This is going to be a very controlled and focused memory exercise. Nothing more. We'll start with a few rapid relaxation techniques, and then you're going to walk me through the events in question. I'll just tag along for posterity."

"Oh, so *first* you're going to hypnotize me, and *then* you're going to read my mind? No offense, but how do I know I can trust you?"

"How do you know you can trust anyone?"

"Easy. I read their minds."

"Well, that's not going to happen today. Maybe it would help if I shared a secret with you first?"

“Anything’s possible, I suppose.”

“They’re not really letting your friend go.”

“No shit.”

“You knew?”

“This is a bloody *quarantine* site, Lieutenant. But they marched Harmony right up to me. Zero protection. I may be a lot of low things, Lieutenant, but I am not fucking stupid. Fells isn’t about to break quarantine just because I asked nicely. Not that I asked nicely.”

“Well, I’m afraid that’s all I’ve got.”

“Quid pro quo, Clarice!”

“Not me. I *like* my lamb chops screaming-rare. With mint jalapeno jelly.”

“Hmm... Good answer. You may proceed.”

“Really? You can be bought for a cheap movie reference?”

“I can be bought for less than that. Unless you’ve changed your mind...”

Devon ignored the come-on.

“That first night. When you thought you saw Harmony at the bar. Do you remember what you were wearing? Don’t answer; just try to picture your clothes. Now, try to feel them against your skin. How about your drink? What are you drinking? Can you taste it? What does it *smell* like?”

Devon slipped into Stryker’s stream of consciousness in the transition between memory taste and smell:

Mmm. I always forget how great Hawaii smells.

Like Corona and lime?

Like a poolside bar in heaven, yeah. That music in the background, Stryker—Can you make out what they’re playing?

That techno dance shit all sounds the same to me.

It’s got a sexy rhythm, though. Like a racing heartbeat. Can you feel that? I think it’s a Latin remix.

If you say so.

Where’s Harmony?

Devon and Stryker turned slowly together in Stryker's mind's eye, as if cheek-to-cheek in an impossibly intimate tango.

There she was. Harmony. An ethereal vision, idealized, bathed in an other-worldly glow.

Seriously? That looks nothing like Harmony. Maybe if Thomas Kinkade touched up a glamour shot of Harmony...

*What is this, the *Mystery Science Theater 3000* home game? Of course it's not Harmony. But the running commentary isn't really helping me concentrate.*

No—You're right. You're right. I'm sorry. I have an idea. Why don't you sit here, drink your beer, and talk to the bartender. Rewind to a minute or so before you saw Harmony. I'm going to try and slip into your subconscious.

You want to take it down a notch and watch the dailies.

The what?

The daily rushes. The raw footage. Unedited. No voice-overs, no soundtrack, no CGI.

No ego.

*Good luck with *that*.*

Stryker sat back down at the bar, head buzzing with déjà vu and cold, sour regret. He called for Adam. Again.

"Another drink, mate?" Adam asked, smiling.

Devon let the buzz of conversation and the music from the dance floor wash over her. The taste of Stryker's drink. The smell of sweat and salt air and cocoa butter on rayon. She observed from a deep, still place of pure sensation as the one called Peter Stryker turned his booze-blurred gaze across the throbbing crowd toward the woman he so desired to find there.

Back in the field hospital, the one called Lieutenant Devon Marsh whimpered.

It wasn't Harmony there, that's for damn sure. And it wasn't a Grey, or a little green man, or a slime-jawed monster with acid for blood, either. It wasn't anything at all. It was nothing. Or everything. Or just the *idea* that nothing has of everything...

There was a sense of light, flickering just over the horizon. A sick green glow, like lightning playing in the clouds. But there were no clouds, per se, just a shimmering in the atmosphere, like heat rising from a dead, dry desert floor. A mirage forming in the warped, twisted air. As if the night itself were boiling with the shadows of faces... painfully deformed faces; countless, horrible, tortured parodies of faces erupting from one another, swallowing each other. One writhing scream-of-a-face formed from the violent death-spasms of all possible faces.

And they were all looking at her.

Devon!

It/They called to her. A whisper and a gurgle and a shout—and somewhere, back in a dark room, she began to shiver with waves of nausea and terror.

DEVON!

It was Stryker. He could sense her distress. With one final shudder, Devon shook off the vision locked in Stryker's subconscious and rose to face him.

What's wrong? What did you see?

Not now. The ship, Stryker. Take me to the ship.

And there it was, just as he'd first seen it. A huge spaceship encased in a waterfall, buzzing with doe-eyed Greys, bathed in a Hollywood glow. And angelic Harmony holding court over all.

But even now, Devon could already sense the lie behind the scene. With a chill in her heart, she let herself slip below the surface of Stryker's thoughts and almost immediately, the ship disappeared.

Because there was no ship. There had never been a ship. Instead, where Stryker had been shown a ship, there stood a doorway. A hole, really. A hole between this place and some other, unthinkable place; swarming with legions of impossible non-beings, mad with whatever unfathomable hungers the non-corporeal feel for the living.

Devon turned to the thing that was not Harmony and was instantly lost. Engulfed in horror.

Devon. We've been waiting for you.

After a while, Peter became aware of an emptiness. A strange sense of normalcy returning around the edges of his awareness. Peter realized that he was suddenly alone in parts of his psyche where he hadn't been alone for some time. It wasn't just Lieutenant Marsh he was missing, either. Something else...

But where was Lieutenant Marsh?

He still felt a trace of her there, somewhere deep within himself. Faint, and somewhat muffled. He could still sense her presence in the room with him, too. Unguarded. For a moment, Peter was tempted to slip in through her metaphorical back door. Have a look-see around the Lieutenant's subconscious while she was busy digging through his. But he decided to follow her down, instead. Plumb his own depths.

The shock of what he found there was overshadowed by the immediate threat to Lieutenant Marsh. For the first time in two days, the attention of the entity hiding in Peter Stryker's subconscious was no longer focused on Peter, himself.

And there was no doubt in what was left of Peter's mind that that was exactly what he was witnessing. He had a stowaway. Some kind of psychic parasite. Only now the parasite seemed intent on jumping ship for Lieutenant Devon Marsh. Or... sinking her, at any rate.

Whatever that thing was, it had completely surrounded the Lieutenant's consciousness. She was struggling, but there was no way she could withdraw from Stryker's mind without taking the stowaway with her.

Peter couldn't let that happen. He didn't know Devon from Adam, but she was a guest in his mind, and he couldn't just let some alien demon shit-bird go around possessing his guests. Not in *his* house. Of course, he didn't really want it to continue pulling *his* strings, either... And what was to keep it from burrowing back into his broken mind once it realized he was onto it?

He'd had a bit of a split personality lately, due at least in part to the alien's influence, no doubt. But Peter wondered if he could use that to his advantage now. He felt around for his inner Stryker. A cockier, disassociated version of himself. If Peter could successfully divide his own attention, he might be able to attack the alien entity on multiple fronts without giving himself away.

Stryker? It's me: Stry- *Peter*.

Holy crap!—They've got you talking to yourself, now?! Well, I've got this alien ass-face covered, mate. You go around the back side and we'll meet in the middle. Last one up the Devil's bunghole buys the drinks.

Riiight. When this is all over, you and me have got to have a little chat. *Mate*.

Peter rose back out of his own subconscious and carefully reached out to Lieutenant Marsh's. His psionic signature was familiar to the Lieutenant now, and he was able to slip into her mind

without setting off any alarms. No surprise, really—she was busy fighting another battle. Peter could sense her fear and desperation mounting. Along with her determination.

Peter rode a wave of Lieutenant Marsh's anger down until he reached the very core of her self, even as that self was being slowly swallowed by the gibbering alien entity.

It's about goddamned time you got here, Stryker! Get this sick son-of-a-bitch off of me!

It's Peter.

What the fuck, Stryker?! Now's not the time to get cute!

I'm *Peter*. Stryker's back in the... Shit! Never mind. Let's just do this. On three, we hit it with everything we've got. One...

...Two...

...Three!

Peter and Devon slammed into the alien mind from within, while Stryker attacked simultaneously from without. It was the psychic equivalent of a massive train wreck.

Back in the hospital room, Peter and Devon screamed simultaneously. Devon was thrown to the floor. Peter collapsed in his hospital bed, bleeding profusely from the nose and mouth.

Colonel Fells rushed into the room, gun drawn.

"Lieutenant! Lieutenant Marsh, can you hear me?!"

Taking the silence as a "no," Colonel Fells stepped purposefully around Peter's hospital bed and pressed the barrel of his gun to Peter's forehead.

"Let her go, asshole! *Now!* Let her go, or you die!"

"Wait! No, Colonel. He risked his life to save me."

It was Devon. She was weak, but alive.

"What are you talking about, Lieutenant? Save you from *what?*"

"We were right, Colonel. It's an invasion..."

Devon sat up, painfully.

"But it isn't aliens in space ships out there. It's a Non-Corporeal Hive Mind from Dimension X."

"A *what?*!"

"One of them hitched a ride into the compound in Stryker's subconscious. But the psionic shield cut it off from the hive mind. Weakened it. When I discovered what was going on, it attacked me. Tried to jump into my mind. It might have succeeded, too, but it wasn't strong enough to control

both of us at the same time. It had to let go of Stryker to take control of me. Once that happened, Stryker jumped in and we were able to fight it off together.”

“So it’s still in Stryker, then?”

“No. Stryker’s clean. *Comatose*, but clean.”

“Well, where the hell is it, then?!”

“Not sure, Colonel. It’s probably still trapped inside the compound by the psionic shield. But we hurt it. It’s weak. So it would need a receptive mind to hole up in. Someone with a touch of psionic sensitivity, but no real defense skills.”

“Well *that* narrows it down without helping at all. What the hell do these things want from us, anyway, Devon? What does a non-corporeal hive mind want?”

“They want *us*, Colonel. Our bodies. Our *lives*. They want to wear us like cheap meat suits until our brains cook from the inside out.”

Valerie Benson's Ad Hoc Journal, MM/DD/YY xx:yy PM

Must. Get. Out.

So alone. So alone.

Chapter Six

By rtha

It was hotter than he'd expected. Valerie had told him about the cooling trade winds, but maybe they didn't affect airports.

The cab didn't seem to have air conditioning, but Ben rolled the window down a few inches and let the salty air rush against his face. The cabbie wasn't big on talking, which was fine.

He'd grunted something that Ben interpreted as "yes" when he'd shown him the address of the bar where Val said she'd been working.

Once out of the city proper, the traffic cleared a little. Ben closed his eyes, knowing that exhausting himself with worry over his sister wouldn't help either of them. They'd been getting each other out of scrapes since they were kids; he knew that she could take care of herself.

Yes. She could take care of herself. He took a deep breath and willed himself to relax.

She banged on the door again.

"I'm not kidding! I have to pee! And if I don't get a bathroom in the next ninety seconds I'm going to piss all over the floor in here, and one of you motherfuckers will have to clean it up!"

She heard the lock click, and stepped back. The soldier who opened the door didn't look a day over 20, but her eyes told a different story.

"This way, please." Her voice was uninflected. Her right hand rested on the butt of the holstered pistol at her hip.

"You don't have to shoot me," Val grumbled. "I just have to piss. And I want my phone call."

The soldier kept two paces behind Val and to her right. "Last door on your left, ma'am."

Fuck you, Val thought.

Urgent business taken care of, Val washed her hands and splashed water on her face. She groped for the paper towel holder, eyes shut against the dripping water, and heard something small clatter onto the sink. She dried her face quickly and opened her eyes.

A cell phone.

She glanced at the door, then flipped open the phone. Val closed her eyes for a minute to remember her brother's number—he was number two on speed dial in her cell phone, and it had been a long while since she'd actually had to dial it from memory. She pressed what she hoped was the right sequence of keys and prayed that he would pick up.

Ben woke from a light sleep as the cab slowed.

"You sure this is where you want?" the cabbie asked.

There was yellow crime scene tape wrapped around trees, and across the driveway's gate. There were Jeeps parked in front of the low building Ben took to be the bar. Jeeps,

two HMMVs, and a black sedan. But there were no people around.

"I think so," he answered. Ben pulled out his wallet and handed the driver some bills. "Can you wait a minute?"

The cabbie made the sound that Ben again took as "yes." He got out of the cab and walked up the driveway, mouth dry and palms damp with nerves.

"Hello?" he called. His voice cracked. He swallowed, and raised his voice. "Hello? Is anybody here?"

No one answered. No one appeared. He stepped through the open door of the bar then down a short hallway. Bathroom. Storage room. Office. Office. A burgundy sweater hung on the back of the desk chair, and the desk calendar was covered with doodles that Ben knew had been made by his sister. A stack of printed invoices lay in a shallow tray on one corner of the desk, and next to it was a beautiful wooden bowl that held a ring of keys, a tube of lipstick, and a cell phone. He flipped it open and scrolled through the list of contacts. It was his sister's phone, no question. Fuck. Where are you?

He turned to leave the office and nearly jumped out of skin when his own cell phone began to vibrate violently in his pocket.

"Ben! Thank God!" His sister's voice, panicked and whispery.

"Val—where the fuck are you? What the hell is..."

"I don't have time. Some shit happened. I'm being held by some Army goons. You have to get me out of here!"

"Where's 'here'? Where are you?"

"Underground bunker. I think I'm still in—hang on..." There was a rustling sound, and then silence.

"Val!" He shouted into his phone. "Val!" He looked at the display. "Call ended", it said helpfully. Unhelpfully, it also refused to display the number from which the call had been placed. To keep himself from smashing the phone against the wall, he kicked the desk instead, sending a coffee mug full of pens tumbling to the floor. He stood quietly for a moment, breathing hard, staring at the pens and pencils at his feet. His notebook was clutched in his left hand. He leaned down and picked up a pen. He opened his notebook. He wrote.

"Where did you find him?"

"In the office at the bar. He was lying on the floor, not entirely conscious. He's been decontaminated and the doc is checking him out."

Colonel Fells flipped through the notebook in front of him. "And this is all he had with him?"

"The notebook, two cell phones, some cash. His driver's license. We think he's related to Valerie Benson, the bartender. Same last name and one phone has him listed in the contacts. The other phone has her listed as well."

"I want to see them both. One hour. And tell Marsh we'll need her services."

“Yes, sir.”

Valerie figured the phone wouldn't show in the pocket of the weird paper overalls, as baggy as they were. The young soldier with the gun on her hip kept the same two paces behind her as they walked down the hall and back to her room.

A man turned the corner at the end of the corridor,, and Valerie and her escort stopped.

“Fells wants her,” he said.

“When?” Her escort asked.

“Now. In the briefing room.”

“You heard the man. Let's go.”

At the end of the hall, they turned right. Another fifty feet, and right again. The place was quiet; the doors they passed were closed. No lights showed through the small windows set in them. They reached a door that had a keypad set in the wall next to it.

“Step back, please.” The soldier punched in an entry code. The door clicked open and Val let herself be pushed gently into the room. There was a large table, some chairs, a coffee machine off to the side, and...her brother, pouring himself a cup of coffee. He turned, saw her, and dropped his cup. She fell into his arms, sobbing with relief.

Ben rubbed his eyes with his free hand. His other hand was tightly clutching his sister's. Their fingers and palms were sweaty, but he refused to let go.

It was not at all reassuring that the man they'd been talking to—Fells, Army guy, clearly in charge—had no idea what was happening.

“So you think we've been invaded. By psychic aliens. And you think my brother here has written this whole thing into existence, or something. Do I have that right?” Valerie's tone was disbelieving, almost insolent. But she didn't sound afraid.

Fells drained his coffee cup and set it down carefully on the table. He noted the minute trembling of his hand. He turned his attention to Ben.

“You've been working on this story for a month, you said.”

“Off and on, yes. Mostly off.”

“Where did you get the idea?”

Ben shrugged. “It's just been kicking around in my head for a while. Val sent me an email awhile back,” he turned to look at her. “You remember? The one where you told me about the ghosts that are supposed to haunt that graveyard behind the bar?”

For the first time, the woman that Colonel Fells had simply introduced as Marsh spoke.

“Are you superstitious, Valerie? Do you believe in psychic phenomena?”

Val laughed. “I want to believe!” she said mockingly. Ben squeezed her hand tighter. “Listen. You people are the ones talking about aliens and invasions. All I did was call the cops when a fucked-up customer started babbling about someone named Harmony and smeared the bar with

some kind of acid or something. You lock me up, ignore my rights, make me wear this weird get-up, and treat me like I'm crazy or dangerous or both. And now you've dragged my brother into this shit. *Fuck all this.*"

"Val." Ben's voice was calm, warm. He'd always been the less excitable of the two. She took a deep breath.

"Tell me about the ghost story," Marsh asked. The siblings looked at each other.

"It's just your standard Hawaiian ghost story. There's an overgrown graveyard maybe half a mile behind the bar. The locals give it a wide berth. But people have seen lights back there at night, heard voices and footsteps."

"Why would that be from ghosts, rather than, say, drunken customers? Or local teenagers?" asked Marsh.

"Because the local teenagers drink down at the beach. And none of my customers speak Hawaiian, or glow in the dark." Val let go of Ben's hand and got up to get another cup of coffee.

No one said anything for a long moment.

Fells tapped Ben's notebook. "But you didn't write a ghost story."

"No. It was just jumping-off point. Hawaii, and lights in the trees." He sipped his coffee.

"You wrote the story of what's been happening here. Can you explain that?"

"I can't." Ben looked at his sister. Her eyes were bloodshot with exhaustion and a spark of anger, or maybe fear. "I write what comes into my head. I write from things I've heard or read or made up." He looked at Fells, then at Marsh. "I want to meet Peter Stryker."

It's so cool and quiet. The quality of light seems to indicate early morning, but under this canopy of trees, it's hard to tell. Peter stands up slowly. He brushes the dirt from the seat of his pants and takes a deep breath. He has been in this clearing before, although it had looked quite different in the glow of the alien ship. He moves through the leaves and branches and steps carefully over the low stone wall that's just a few feet from the edge of the pool at the bottom of the waterfall. He kneels and plunges his hands into the water, splashes some onto his face. He sits up, glances over his shoulder into the clearing, and after a moment, Harmony emerges.

"What the hell, Peter?" She's pissed, but not scared. Not yet.

He shrugs. "I needed to see the scene of the crime, I guess you could say."

"So you, what, decide to psychically kidnap me? You're lying in a hospital bed in that bunker, in a coma, and yet you think it's a good idea to send your spirit—and mine, without my fucking consent thank you very much, and you wonder why I broke up with you?—on this pointless little look-see? When are we, anyway? I don't see the ship."

"It isn't here yet. That's what I wanted to see. They picked this place for a reason." He turns to look at her.

"And I'm here because..."

Peter shifts to a more comfortable position. His relaxed attitude dissolves some of Harmony's

panicky anger and she sits next to him. She surprises them both by taking his hand. His skin is still cool from the water. He looks at their hands.

"You're here because just as they chose this place for a reason, they also chose you."

Harmony stares at him. "They picked me—or some representation of me—because you're still hung up on me. It's you they wanted, Peter. They just used me to get to you."

Peter cradles her hand in his gently, and Harmony tries to ignore the little burst of warmth and affection that flares inside her chest. She tries to remember how she felt when she first recognized what he could do, what he had done, to her. She tries to concentrate on how angry she was—is! She's still angry!—that he brought her here.

"I think," he says slowly. "I think that we were both necessary. I think that whatever it was that was in my head, that...thing that tried to jump into Marsh, needed us both."

"Why? I mean, what for? Needed us both in order to...what?"

Peter shrugs. He lets go of her hand and stands up. "When it was in my head, I felt completely different than I did when you—sorry—when the, um, the alien brought me here to see the ship. I was happy. I was sure that the aliens meant us no harm. But that thing. That thing...It's not here for us, to help us, or to share with us. It has its own purpose. I think it was already here, waiting for the right time, and the right people."

"And we're the right people." It isn't a question.

Peter picks up a stone and skimmed it into the pool. "We're not the only ones, though." He looks at her, right into her eyes, and Harmony feels her breath catch. For the first time, she begins to feel a little afraid.

"Can you see?" he asks. "We only have pieces of the whole. Someone knows the entire story. And I think we have to find them before that...thing does."

"He's been unconscious for almost a day." Marsh stood at the foot of Stryker's hospital bed.

She fiddled with the blanket covering him and looked at Ben.

Ben gazed down at Stryker. There was a bruise on his forehead, and a little dried blood still clung to one earlobe, but he breathed easily, as if he were only sleeping.

"You say you fought some kind of psychic battle. Something attacked your mind while you were poking around in his, and you and Stryker joined forces and chucked it out. And now you don't know where it's gone."

Marsh sighed. "No."

"It could be inside someone else now." Ben sounded remarkably calm, even to himself.

"Yes."

Ben turned to look at Colonel Fells, who was standing near the door.

"And somehow, what I write happens. We think. But I didn't write any of this." He riffled the pages of his notebook. "It isn't in here. It isn't on my computer at home." Ben started to pace.

"You've got some sort of alien invasion happening. And maybe they're not going to just invade

our planet, but our minds and bodies too. And the guy who might be able to help you out is in a coma. Have I covered everything?”

Fells had the good manners to look a little embarrassed. “Well...” he began.

Ben threw his hands up in exasperation. “This is bullshit! I mean, this is the pulpiest kind of science fiction—an alien invasion? Really? And you think I would write something like this?”

He looked over at his sister, who was nearly asleep in the one chair in the room. “Val,” he pleaded, “Tell them. Tell them I don’t write stuff like this.”

“He doesn’t,” she said. She sounded bored. “He’s never written a story with aliens in it. Or if he has, he keeps it buried under his porn stash, never to see the light of day.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Marsh’s voice was tired. “What we know is that your writing changes things, or creates things, or...something. You have to let your ego go on this. Because, as you’ve noted, the guy who can answer some of these questions is in a coma, and we’ve got some mind-raping invader on the loose. We may not know all the details, but we can be damn sure it’s not here to bring us faster-than-light technology and the cure for cancer.” Marsh looked at them, her eyes pleading.

“I know it’s not a garret in Paris, but if we find you some quiet space, do you think you can write us out of this clusterfuck?”

Val stood up and moved to her brother’s side. She slid the notebook from his fingers and plucked a pen from her back pocket. “We’re going to need coffee,” she announced. “A lot of coffee.”

Chapter Seven

By never used baby shoes

Adam stretched, feeling the muscles in his back and shoulders pop. He felt frustrated and exhausted. Adam had been in the room for four hours, but he had no idea how long they had been going before that. Colonel Fells' genius idea had been to bring everyone into the room to help Ben.

The white board was covered with notes—the names of all the principals; a timeline of events on the ground, matching them up to events from Ben's story and when he wrote them. There was also plenty of conjecture on the nature of the aliens. Empty coffee cups were deployed in a skirmish line on the table.

"Mates, I think we're not getting anywhere with the current approach," Adam said. The hope had been to present Ben with multiple points of view on the events, allowing him to come up with a neat solution for everything.

"What do you suggest, Mr. Bartender? A shot of whiskey?" Fells asked from his position in the corner. His arms were crossed and his face provided a study in thunderheads.

"Might not be a bad idea," said Adam. "In all seriousness, I do think we need to give the bloke a break, here. Maybe some fresh air?"

"Nobody leaves the compound," said Fells. Devon nodded.

"Then some recycled air," Adam said, standing up. "And a drink of something other than this terrible coffee."

"Alright," Fells said after a long moment. "Let's take five, everyone."

The room emptied. Val and Devon fled for the bathroom. Fells marched off down the corridor. The door to the room stayed open, but a look down the hall showed the guards still present. Adam turned back inside, facing Ben. Ben doodled on his notepad.

"Alright, mate," Adam said. Ben started, looking at him with haunted eyes.

"Let's get down to brass tacks, shall we?" Adam said. He pulled a chair up to the table, opposite Ben. "If I had my way, we'd be down on the beach right now. And I'd be handing you a beer or a martini or some fucking drink with an umbrella in it. That would be a much nicer way to do this, don't you think?" Ben smiled, nodding, and Adam went on. "I'm sorry we can't do that, mate. But the fact remains that I can help you with your problem."

"What's my problem?" Ben asked. His eyes were bloodshot.

"That's for you to tell me, mate. People always tell their bartenders their problems."

Ben looked back down at his notebook. "I don't know where to start."

"Your problem's something to do with writing, right? Tell me about writing." Adam's hands itched for a bar towel or a glass; he liked to keep his hands busy. With nothing else to do, he grabbed a couple of the Styrofoam coffee cups and swept them into the trash.

"Writing? Some writer once said that it was easy—all you had to do was sit down at the keyboard, open up a vein, and bleed."

Adam chuckled.

"It's one of those things, you know?" Adam nodded, although he had no idea what Ben was talking about. "You either do it or you don't; lots of people talk about it. Far fewer actually write."

"And you write," Adam said. "Pretty well, from what I hear."

"Not great," Ben shrugged. "I mean, I don't make a living at it. A few sales."

"That's still better than the great unwashed, isn't it?"

"I guess." Ben looked up at him. "I mean, I'm not some great artist or anything; I'm no Hemingway or Faulkner. I write. I send some stuff out, and now and then, I get published. It's not a big deal."

"How do you write?"

"How? You sit down and you do it," Ben said, looking puzzled.

"No, I mean the ideas, the process. Do you always know how your story will end before you start?"

"Some writers do. I've never been able to work that way. I just get an idea or a character in my head and I see where it goes."

"And you write alone, right?"

"Yeah, I mean, everyone does...writing is a solitary thing. I guess maybe some collaborators can work together, but, you know, my process is pretty simple—ass in chair, summon idea, then write. It's not really a team event."

Adam nodded. He noticed that the coffee cups had bounced off the wads of paper in the trash can and fallen to the floor. Scooping them back up, he started re-arranging the cups on the table.

"But it's always a little scary, you know? You start writing with just an idea—or just a character—and you don't know where anything is going to go. You just go with it."

"Kinda like what's going on now," Adam said.

"Yeah," Ben said, sitting back with a sigh.

"Tell me about this story," Adam said, shuffling the cups into an arrowhead formation.

"What's to tell? We're living it." Ben got up from the table with a disgusted snort.

"Go back to when it was just a story," Adam urged.

"It started as an idea; the ghost stories about the forest behind your bar were really a cover for the aliens."

"And Peter Stryker? When did he come into the story?"

"I needed a character; the name just...came to me. And his back story."

Adam sat back. He looked at Ben, fidgeting at the white board. "Go back to the aliens then; tell me about them."

"I don't know a lot about them, yet. I've only been working on the story for a few days. They were just a neat way to transform it from a ghost story into something else." Ben grabbed the eraser and started to clean the white board.

"OK, so you have no idea about their motivations?"

"None. I hadn't even got there yet—just the concept, and the Peter Stryker character."

"And you work alone on your stories?" Adam asked, getting up and joining Ben at the white board.

"Yep."

"Then here's the problem as I see it, mate. Your story has become a collaboration. I mean, you now have five other people in this room telling you what to do with it."

"So?" Ben asked. "To tell you the truth, I'm somewhat glad for the help. I don't know where to go with it."

"Get off it. You told me not two minutes ago that writing isn't a team sport." Adam turned to face Ben.

"OK, but still...this is kind of intimidating, to think your writing is truly affecting reality." Ben looked at Adam with a small grin.

"I bet. This is going to get worse, though."

Ben arched an eyebrow.

"Because of the nature of this story, your gift, Stryker's gift, the aliens themselves, whatever—you're now collaborating with a boatload of others. You put the aliens out there—or built the bridge for them to come here—but they are a blank slate." Adam jabbed at the clean board for emphasis. "And everyone else is writing their motives."

Ben looked confused.

"You're talking about confirmation bias," said Fells from behind Ben and Adam. Both men whirled around in surprise; he had come into the room without making a sound.

"Confirmation bias?" Ben asked. "You mean, everyone is seeing the aliens as they expect them to be?"

"Exactly," Fells said. "We've been worried about it from the first eyewitness reports. Everyone has seen them differently. They conform to what the viewer seems to expect of aliens, or whatever strong emotion is at play at the time."

"Then the one we think is here, the one that was in Stryker's head," Ben said. "It became aggressive..."

"When we exposed Devon to it," Fells said. "She triggered it with a mindset predisposed to see the aliens as invaders. It's a military thing." He shrugged.

"And now..." Ben said.

"And now," Adam said, "they are a mess of conflicting motives and desires. Your job, Ben, is to sort those out—make them understand how dangerous this situation has become. Cut through it somehow."

"How?" Ben asked. His shoulders slumped even further. "It's a goddamn mess."

"I'm not the writer, mate. But I think we should all get out and let you focus. And, Ben," Adam said, turning to look at Fells, "I think you better be about it quickly. Because if I know the military mindset, Colonel Fells here is already under some pressure to solve this problem the Gordian Knot way. The application of force. Nuke the site from orbit."

Fells said nothing for a long moment, his face stony. Then a smile split his lips: "Not bad for a bartender."

Alone.

It had never been alone before, but the others had asked it—asked it to ride along with the stryker, to understand. So it had.

It had been scary inside stryker, but bearable. stryker was known; stryker's exceptional mind had called to them, helped them to anchor their bridge, made them think the humans were ready. But when the other came...when confronted with the aggressive one, all it could do was to fight and attack. The devon had strength, and strength was desirable. For a moment, it had desired nothing more than to take her and use her body, add her strength to its own. To smash its way to freedom and conquer these pathetic beings who had not yet learned how to discipline their minds.

Alone, it would have been able to defeat the devon. But stryker was not as safe as expected. Fleeing was the only option.

Now, it had a temporary refuge. But it had to get out, get back. Things were wrong here, horribly wrong. Not what they had believed at all. The imaginations of the humans were strong, wild, and chaotic. During the time apart from the others, it had been twisted. The others needed to be warned. But it felt changed. A corner of it seethed with hate and aggression. Wanted to consume the mind that carried it, take charge, destroy them all. Self-control was hard to maintain. It worried that it had changed too much and couldn't rejoin the others.

It was sick. Poisoned by this close contact with the humans and their uncontrolled ideas.

It needed to get to the writer. The bridge-builder. Maybe it could soon.

Peter and Harmony sat together and watched the clearing. There were no more words left to say to each other. Peter felt like he had been rubbing at wounds half-healed.

In truth, he was surprised he could do this at all—but carrying an alien in his head seemed to change the rules. Somehow he could backtrack, come back to this moment of their arrival. Perhaps he had ripped away some of the creature's memories or filtered them out subconsciously as it meshed with his unconscious mind. He did not know. But before coming to

Hawaii, all he had ever been able to do was to read minds. Now the possibilities seemed endless.

Peter had waited long enough. He released his hold upon reality and let it begin. Now they could look at this piece of the puzzle.

At once, his brain split. He was again sitting on the beach, looking out over the ocean. At the same time, the waterfall began to change in the clearing, rippling with colour. Harmony gasped and grabbed his hand.

...in spite of this paradise, he could not stop dreaming or thinking of her...

The waterfall stopped in mid-stream, still changing colour. Reds, greens, violets.

...It had been his mistake that had torn them apart...

The waterfall started again, stopped, reversed. Blue and yellow.

...forget about her and get on with his life...

Orange now, then indigo. All the colours, dancing and dappling. The waterfall stopped again, then parted to the sides like a curtain opening.

...How could he simply forget the past...

In the hole created by the parted waterfall, something ripped open. Colour blasted around the clearing. Harmony screamed, but Peter felt no fear.

...A party was to be held that night, and he was intent on going...

Peter's brain returned to one place and time. The waterfall reverted to normal, but Peter could still see the split there, almost hidden by the crashing water. As he squinted at it, it changed...became the slick hull of a space ship; the curve of a flying saucer, a dark portal. All of these and none.

"Peter, what—what did you do?" Harmony asked. Her eyes were wide.

"Nothing," Peter said. "We just saw the aliens arrive, Harmony." His hand—the one Harmony wasn't holding—was shaking.

"You were thinking of me," Harmony said. "Thinking about us."

"Yes," Peter said. No point denying it. He turned to look her full on. "I can't forgive myself for what I did to you. I don't understand what this gift is, what I can do with it...but I know now—after what happened with us—I can't keep using it the way I have been. Out of self-interest. I just wish the lesson hadn't been so costly, so --."

"Peter," Harmony said, looking intently at him. "Was it just me, or could you hear typing, too?"

"Typing? What?"

Ben sat alone in the room. They had brought him a laptop to work on, but the empty white screen intimidated him as much as the pages in his notebook. He had to find a way back into the story. One word at a time. It was a hard shock to realize his writing had influenced so many things. Influenced? Or had been influenced, or created outright? All of the above? Those questions rattling around his brain prevented him from writing. Had he created the situation, or

was he documenting it? He wondered if there was another writer somewhere writing about him and everyone else trapped in the military complex. And if there were another one past that. An infinite recursion of writers.

With a smile, he brought himself back to the problem. Peter Stryker was the one character he hadn't met yet. Perhaps talking with him would open up something new, something different. At the beginning of the story it had just been Ben, Peter, and the blank page. That connection needed to be re-established.

So, start with a premise. Stryker had not been conjured into existence when Ben had started typing back in Philadelphia. Somehow, Ben had connected with Stryker, a real man with real problems. But had he only documented Stryker's thoughts and activities that night on the beach? Or had he somehow influenced them?

Ben closed his eyes, and calmed his mind. He tried to will himself into the state he had been in when he started writing this story, a state damned near to automatic writing. Perhaps from there he could connect with Stryker and start documenting again. But after several minutes, he gave up. It wasn't going to be something he could force.

So, try it the other way. He put fingers to keyboard.

Peter Stryker opened his eyes and woke up in an unfamiliar hospital room.

Fells walked down the hallway towards the writer's room. The bartender had been wrong in his guess at the time, but there had been no benefit in admitting that. Anything to get the writer motivated and working.

However, the situation had changed and changed fast. The Pentagon was losing patience with this public relations nightmare. There was now serious contemplation about killing off the writer and Stryker both and seeing if that would somehow alter the situation with the aliens. It was not the majority opinion yet, but Fells had heard enough about it on the conference call that had just concluded to start worrying about it.

And so, another trip to see the writer and try to spur him into action. This time, heavy on the threats. As Fells turned the corner, he saw Val headed towards the writer's room, too. His eyes narrowed; he didn't want her in there. He quickened his stride.

Stryker rubbed at his face, wondering at the bitter taste on his tongue. His fingertips rasped on his stubble.

"Peter, what's happening?"

"I don't know," Peter said. The world they were in—the world built on these strange memories—had become translucent. He couldn't hold onto it. And faintly, he felt like he could hear the ticky-tacky sounds of fingers on a keyboard.

Fells got to the door at the same time as Val. He rested his hand on the doorknob.

"What do you want?" he asked her.

"To see my brother," Val said. "I thought that was ok. The guards didn't object."

"He shouldn't be disturbed," Fells said.

"But you're here."

"I have some important information for Ben," Fells said, pulling himself to full height. "And then we'll all be leaving him alone."

Val's eyes flashed at him as she placed her hands on her hips. "I've just about had it with all of this fascist crap, Colonel."

Letting his arm fall back to his side, he noted the IV tube inserted in it.

"I'm losing control, Harmony. We have to go back," Peter said.

"Are you ok, Peter?"

"I'm fine." It wasn't violent or painful...everything was just washing out, fading away. Mentally, he felt an insistent tug.

"Peter, I think that how you were feeling, what you were thinking about when the gate opened -" Harmony squeezed his hand, hard (although even that felt faint now) and forced him to look at her. "- I think that has something to do with this. I think it was important, somehow."

"OK," said Peter. He was feeling detached, curious. He turned back to watch the clearing and the waterfall fade from view. Everything now was white. Harmony had vanished too.

He looked up, into the white.

"Val, go back to your room," Fells said. He rested his other hand on his belt, near his holster.

"Colonel Fells, I'm going to talk to my brother whether you like it -"

"Colonel!" A new voice, from up the hallway. It was Devon. "Colonel Fells!"

Fells turned away from Val, and her sudden lunge for his gun caught him off-balance.

Peter blinked and looked around the room. No one was with him, but he thought he could hear people close by.

Fells grabbed Val's wrist, and they twisted together in an awkward dance. He snared her other hand a moment before it gripped his throat. Val spit in his face, twice, and Fells closed his eyes against it. He could hear Devon screaming and running down the hallway. With no leverage and rocked back on his heels, he strengthened his grip and hoped Devon would get there. Just then, his groin exploded into pain -

Ben looked up, annoyed. He had finally started writing, and now there was a hullabaloo out there. Better see what was going on.

Fells went down with Val on top of him, still scrambling for his gun. Devon ran towards them, her gun drawn, yelling. Other footsteps were coming this way. But his gun, the gun was out—

A deafening boom.

Chapter Eight

By Crouton Supafreak

"A DEAFENING BOOM."

The words, all blocky caps, stood out in blue against the clean white board, flecked now by a few small drops of red.

Ben had cleaned the room after they left him in solitude to write. They hadn't really left Ben alone. The room was cluttered with notes and timelines and crumpled sheets of paper scribbled with other people's words. Ben was not a tidy guy, but he needed to own the mental space around him. Their words intruded on his ideas. Alone, he gathered up the scattered notes and crumpled scrawls. He piled them in the waste basket at first, but that wasn't enough, so he buried the others' intrusions on his plot under the Styrofoam coffee cups at the bottom of the garbage where they belonged. This was Ben's story, not Colonel Fells' or psychic Devon's or even well-meaning Valerie's. He was determined to own it. He had wiped clean the board, with its too-neat summation of everything he'd written and all that he had left unwritten. He had erased his ideas, seen through the eyes of a military man, which had all been cleanly printed in the Colonel's tidy, precise penmanship.

A blank slate. All he had wanted was a little bit of solitude and a blank slate. He'd stood at the white board after he wiped it down and written the words: "A deafening boom." But they didn't do him any good. They didn't solve the problem of the quarantine, they didn't explain the psychic aliens, they didn't tell him why every word he wrote seemed to foreshadow a moment about to unravel. They just filled the white board: "A DEAFENING BOOM," in blocky caps, not solving any problems. So Ben turned his back on the white board and put his hands to the keyboard. He tried to unravel the mystery. He tried to own the story. He tried to figure out what came next, but nothing came. Nothing made sense. So he decided to summon Peter Stryker at the keyboard. Maybe the mind-reader would tell him what he was really thinking.

Then there was a noise in the hall. Was Stryker there already? Was it something else? Ben got up to look.

A deafening boom—no, a deafening, sickening boom then a thud. He heard it, he saw limbs and a struggle and shocked faces, a sister, the Colonel, and then the world spinning as he somehow flew back and down. He didn't feel anything as he was knocked flat, thrown from the door into the writing room. He thought of the scene he had written when this all began, when

Peter woke up with a sore head and an open door. Peter was on his belly in a bed back then, still drunk. Ben was on his back on the floor right now, his head throbbing. "A DEAFENING BOOM." He looked at the words he'd written, splattered in red. The slate had been clean when he wrote it. Now it was bleeding. Suddenly he understood what had to happen next.

"I need a pen," he said. He moved his lips, but no words came out. Just a wet hiss and a dry breath, and Ben realized what he already knew. He was running out of himself. He might not be able to finish the story.

A deafening boom.

Peter heard it. Stryker heard it. They were the same person. Harmony heard it. She was with them, but she was not part of them. Instead she was at his bedside, still holding his hand, no longer at the waterfall, and she remembered everything, remembered that he had done it again, tweaked her mind, won her over, held her hand. She inhaled sharply. He had done it again and she was angry. Harmony drew her hand back and withdrew her mind, too. "You asshole," she hissed as Peter Stryker opened his eyes.

He smiled. He had lost her, he had lost Harmony, but somehow he had found peace within himself. He was whole again. He was Peter and Stryker and Peter Stryker, all at once, for the first time in as long as he could remember. He meant well, he did bad, and somehow he realized that he could reconcile intention with action and it wouldn't even be that hard. Until he held her hand and stared into the abyss of his subconscious, until he took her to the waterfall and let her influence wash over him, he had been divided. Id against ego. Somehow Harmony had brought him back into himself, and he accepted that she still rejected him and who he was even as she helped him reconcile his divided mind. He was whole again; she was *other*. So be it.

They were drawn back into the hospital, away from the waterfall, away from the mystery and the beings and the unknown possibilities, drawn into awareness, out of the coma for him, out of hypnosis for her, by the sound of a clackity keyboard—and then by a deafening boom.

A deafening boom.

The lonely mind felt the boom as the sound and accompanying shock washed over it and all the other sentient beings within the compound. For a moment the lonely mind had a taste of the familiar as all the lonely foreign human minds around it reacted in unison and seemed to merge: surprise, awe, fear, mingled, one. And then they splintered again, the human minds, into anger, sorrow, fear, determination, joy, resentment, each a different response, a different mind, disjointed, disharmonious. And in its solitude, the lonely mind had an epiphany, its first lonely epiphany, but when it reached out to share what it had learned, to rejoice in a moment of shock and fear and horror, the lonely mind found nothing but walls. Until it found a hole.

A deafening boom.

Moments before she heard the sound, Devon Marsh had been hurrying towards its origin.

She had been trying not to think, not to project, not to involve herself in the writing of fate and history. She was an accomplished Psy Ops officer. She understood mental battles. She had trained with firestarters and telekinetics. She had met oracles who could divine the future. But she had never known anyone who could control it—the future—who could write it down and make it so. And Ben's ability unnerved her understanding of the order of the universe, perhaps as much as her earlier encounter with the alien mind. So when Ben asked to be left alone to write, Marsh was happy to return to a world she understood.

But back in her quarters, in a quarantined compound with no mission but to save the human race from this still-undefined threat, Marsh had a hard time sitting still. She fretted. She obsessed. There was a dangerous alien mind loose contained only by these psionic walls. She knew it was strong, and her military instinct made her worry about who it would attack next. Someone gifted but untrained, she suspected. Stryker had agreed with this assessment, after they mutually repelled its attack.

She called for a list of everyone in the compound. Not Colonel Fells. Stryker was too strong. Aussie bartender Adam? She dismissed the idea. There were any number of grunts serving under Colonel Fells, but nobody drew her attention. And then it came to her, like a bolt of lightning: twins. Ben and Valerie. Twins often shared a psychic connection, a mental bridge limited to the two minds that had developed together *in utero*. They would have a natural psychic

gift, but they would be untrained. They might not even know what it was they shared. If the alien took Valerie, the risks were minimal. But if it possessed Ben, it could write its species' dominance into human history.

Marsh gasped, stood, and quickly left her quarters, mentally reaching out to Ben as she headed for the writing room. He was safe, alone, working—and then alarmed, confused. She felt him react as she rounded the corner, saw the scuffle and shouted out.

"Colonel!" Devon yelled. "Colonel Fells!"

A deafening boom.

**

The Colonel was thinking about his gun and Ben and Peter Stryker and whether it would come to that. He hoped not. He didn't know. As long as the walls of the compound did their job, he hoped humanity would stay safe, even if the residents of the Pearl might soon be doomed. But maybe they weren't doomed. Maybe he could talk some sense into that writer.

"Why doesn't Ben simply write that the aliens went home?" Colonel Fells thought. "Why doesn't he write a happy ending? He's obviously under some stress which could affect to his ability to write clearly right now, but it seems to me that this is the simplest way to end the alien threat." The Colonel's thoughts were focused, internal, clear, crisp, and for a moment, he allowed himself to let down his guard as he contemplated the writer. A rare moment, a rare mistake.

Valerie. Val. She was coming from the other corner. Her eyes met the Colonel's. Both sets of eyes glowed with the glint of determination.

"Why doesn't he just write a happy ending?" Val was thinking. She was trying to broadcast the idea to her brother, but there was something about this place, some kind of invisible buffer, that seemed to cut the connection that thousands of miles between Hawaii and Philadelphia had been unable to sever. And then she saw the Colonel, saw his determination, but could not see behind it or inside it. Suddenly, Val was terrified. She needed to see Ben, and she needed to get to him before the Colonel. She looked down at his gun.

"Val, go back to your room," Colonel Fells ordered.

Ben looked at the clock. It was 4 a.m. On a work night. He went back to the screen. Grumpy dwarves—an army of little green men—lay dead on the ground around him, as did a field of big-eyed alien rogues, bumpy-headed warriors and tentacled wizards. But SnoWhite was still standing. Crafty loomed over the battlefield. Somehow, he'd fallen asleep mid-battle. He congratulated himself on his superior macros.

"That's the work of a Senior IT Guy," Ben thought, and then for some reason he felt nauseous, wheezed a little, as he checked his gear on *Armageddon*. They'd just fought a battle on an alien world. In the background, a multi-colored waterfall cascaded off a semi-translucent space craft. A strange dream seemed to linger on the forefront of his consciousness.

SnoWhite [Dreadlords]: Did we just win a battle while I slept?

CraftyLover [Dreadlords]: Unless there's some deeper meaning to the letter "q" that I haven't figured out. Anyhow, we showed those Lords of Mars.

SnoWhite [Dreadlords]: I need a pen.

CraftyLover [Dreadlords]: A pen, dude? When you've got a sword? You're not making sense.

*SnoWhite [Dreadlords]: *yawns* You're right. I'm up way past my normal log time. I fell into the weirdest dream during that last alien battle. You wouldn't believe it. *wheezes* *tries to breathe**

"Wheezes?" Ben thought. "Tries to breathe? I didn't type that."

CraftyLover [Dreadlords]: Man, I'm in Hawaii and it's past my bed time. You must really be up late. I'm gonna log off. You should get some shuteye, too, so we can really kick some alien ass tomorrow.

SnoWhite [Dreadlords]: Good call, Crafty. See you tomorrow.

There will be no tomorrow.

The thought somehow entered Ben's mind as he typed `"/camp`." It didn't make sense. What was with that dream?

SnoWhite sat cross-legged and faded out, but somehow Armageddon kept on going. Now instead of a pale-skinned white chick, Ben's avatar was a sickly looking black dude in front of the waterfall and the shimmering space craft. Crafty logged off, his avatar shimmered out, but somehow his character stayed visible on the screen.

Ben shivered, ached, hurt, but dismissed it all. It was cold in Philadelphia in February. That was all. He needed to go to sleep. Ben felt his eyelids droop as darkness called, but he wanted to understand what he was looking at.

Lonely Mind: We misunderstood you.

Ben: What?

Lonely Mind: We thought you were like us. We are all as one, but you need words to talk.

Ben: Are you a GM? There's something clearly wrong with this game. I don't even remember creating this avatar.

Lonely Mind: This is a dream, yes. But it is also real. We don't have much time.

Ben: You mean, I've been shot? Then why am I here?

Lonely Mind: Your warriors call it 'confirmation bias.' We—I—don't know that term. You visualize what you can understand when you look upon that which is beyond your experience.

Ben: So I'm talking to you as I die, and this is what I understand, so I'm going to die alone in a video game with a fucking alien? That's just fucking wrong.

Lonely Mind: We don't know 'alone' except when we die. Even on our world we all die alone. But you don't have to die today. You can fix this. Only you can fix this. You can write it better.

Ben: How am I supposed to do that? And why should I do that? I don't understand your motives. You told Stryker that you were bringing something great, but then you scared the shit out of Marsh.

Lonely Mind: We confirm what you want to see or expect to see in our behavior. If you want something great, we confirm that. If you expect evil and battle from us, that is what we bring..

Ben: So what do I have to do with any of this?

Lonely Mind: You wrote us into this world. We didn't understand your minds—how they can be individual, yet subtly connected—when we entered your world. If we spread without direction, we will encounter more warrior minds, minds filled with fear and dread, and we will take on those forms even as we also take on hope and inspiration. It could get messy. Only you can write a clean conclusion.

Ben: What if I don't want to?

...

Lonely mind was silent.

Ben: What if I write this: "Suddenly Ben breathed deeply. He hurt. Only half his body worked. He felt pain, and he saw bright lights, and he knew he would live."

The screen blinked off. Ben shivered. It was cold in Philadelphia in February. He closed his eyes. And then suddenly he was filled with searing pain, worse than what he'd written, and he opened his eyes and saw his sister, felt her there tethered to his soul, Val smiling among the bright lights in the moment before the military medics pushed her away and lifted him onto a stretcher.

"I need a pen," Ben gasped.

Chapter Nine

By robocop is bleeding

The old man sat quietly, letting the sounds and sun envelop him. Sunlight doused the beach in warmth, its rays heating the sand beneath his bare feet, creating a glow behind his closed eyelids. It worked with the ocean breeze to find a way past the loose button-down shirt the missus made him wear whenever company was coming over, caressing covered and uncovered skin alike.

Beneath the noise of houseguests bustling about while getting everything ready for the afternoon's party, the sound of the sea continued its constant swell and fade, swell and fade, just as it had for years. Just as it would continue for many more.

A small hand tugged on the frayed corner of his shorts. The old man cracked an eye, blinking it slowly as it adapted to the blue-tinted world around him. Seeing that it was one of his grandkids, Trini, the old man opened his other eye and yawned exaggeratedly.

"Why are you waking up an old man?" he asked, rubbing his eyes.

"Gramma said to make sure you don't fall asleep, Grampa," Trini said. She looked up at her grandfather with serious brown eyes, wide as the world.

"Why not?"

Trini shrugged. "She says you'll sleep the day away and miss the party."

"Oh?" he leaned forward, elbows to knees. "We're having a party?"

"Gram-pa! That's why I'm here!"

"And who are you? Some little elf come to steal all my pineapples?"

"I am not an elf!"

"But you are going to steal my pineapples."

Trini shrugged and looked down at her feet as she wormed them beneath the fine warm sand. "I like pineapples," she said in a small voice.

"Me too. Why don't you go and get some pineapple for us?"

Trini paused. "I'm not supposed to go into the kitchen. Gramma and Mommy and the others are all cooking."

"And they don't want you to be under foot."

Trini nodded.

"That's fine. You go back and say that either you bring out some pineapple for you and Grampa or he'll come in and start trying to make his famous five alarm chili. That'll get them moving."

Trini grinned and ran off, heading back up to the house. The old man stared out at the ocean, so blue. A few white sails dotted the horizon and a few birds swung in lazy circles overhead, but besides that, it was blue and blue as far as the eye could see. He leaned back in his chair and adjusted his straw hat. He let his left arm dangle off the side of the aluminum beach chair. Instead of finding warm sand beneath his fingertips, he found Trini's small pink backpack, chock full of colored paper and pencils. He smiled and idly poked through the bag. A picture of a bird, based on the silhouette of the 11-year-old's hand. The plane that flew her and her family from San Francisco to Hawaii. A dog. He picked through the pictures, smiling contentedly.

"Are you snooping?" Trini's voice was shocked in that way only little girls could achieve. "Mommy says it's not nice to snoop." She hopped down the last few steps, careful not to spill her bowl of yellow fruit.

"Fair enough," he said, dropping the bag down next to his chair. "I was snooping. I was looking for pictures I could steal so that when you become a famous artist, I can sell them and become a millionaire. Then I'll buy a house on a beach somewhere."

"Gram-pa," Trini scolded, "You already own a house on a beach."

"Well, guess I don't need to steal one of your pictures then. Here, let me hold that bowl of pineapple and you bring that chair over." He waited as she went to work, popping a pineapple chunk or two into his mouth. Trini scowled, dragging another beach chair over. Once she got it in place, she snatched the bowl of fruit out of her grandfather's lap and sat down.

"They still cooking up there?" he asked.

Trini nodded, her mouth full.

"Figured. It was good you could come out this year. We missed you last time."

The girl swallowed and shrugged. "Daddy had to work. He had a big talk to give. I wanted to come, but Mommy says I'm not old enough to fly on a plane by myself yet."

"Well, it's good that you all are here."

"Why?"

"Why? What kind of silly question is that?"

"No, why do we come here?"

"For a big party."

"What's the party for?" Trini asked before scarfing down another piece of fruit. "I know it's not a family reunion. My friend Sandra went to her family reunion and it was all people she is related to. I'm not related to Uncle Peter, I know that."

"Sure you are. He's your Mommy's godfather."

Trini's eyes, already big, grew wider. "He's a gangster?" she gushed.

He laughed. "No, no. He's just a good friend of mine and Gramma's. When your Mom was born, he promised to look out for her if... if anything happened."

"Did anything happen?"

"He's Uncle Peter, not Grampa Peter, so nope. Nothing happened. Everyone kept their promises."

"What promises?"

“My, you are full of questions. Hand me a piece of pineapple, and I’ll tell you.”

Trini handed over a hunk of fruit and he accepted it gratefully. He took a bite, savoring the sweet tartness, before continuing. “Well, the first promise was that every year we’d all get together on February 5th for Visitor’s Day.”

“What’s Visitor’s Day?”

“February 5th.”

“Gram-pa.”

“Sorry, sorry. It’s a special day we celebrate every year.”

“A holiday?”

He nodded. “Sure, but not one everyone knows about. It’s a special holiday.”

“A secret?”

“No, not secret. Special. Visitor’s Day is a special holiday that everyone knows about, but not many people celebrate. That’s why there are no cards or anything. If you know about Visitor’s Day and you want to take the day off, you just say to your boss, ‘Hey, I’m taking the day off for Visitor’s Day’ and your boss says ‘Okay’ just like she would if you were asking for the Fourth of July off, even if they never heard of it before.”

“That’s weird.”

“You’re telling me. Visitor’s Day is a weird day.”

“How do you know about it?”

“I invented it.”

“When?”

“Just now.”

“But we’ve come here to Hawaii before!”

“I know. Weird, right?”

“Super weird.”

He laughed and leaned over to pick another chunk of pineapple. “You’re telling me. I wanted to call it Tourist’s Day, but everyone else said that sounded dumb. Besides, would you rather be a visitor or a tourist?”

“What’s the difference?”

“A tourist is a person who goes to a different place than where they live, pokes around, and just takes stuff. They take pictures, they take souvenirs, they take memories of the place back home. They can be totally nice, but still, they take. A visitor takes all that stuff too, but they also give. They bring stuff, like if you’re going to visit your friends you bring a bottle of pop and some cookies to share. If you were a host, who would you rather dropping by? A tourist or a visitor?”

“Visitor.”

“Me too. So I guess it’s good that I was overruled.”

Trini ate another piece of pineapple and her grandfather joined her. The two sat in silence for a few minutes looking out over the blue water beneath a blue sky.

What the hell, he thought.

“Do you like Hawaii?”

Trini nodded her head. “Sure. I just wish it didn’t take so long to get here.”

He laughed. “When I first came here, it took even longer. Hours and hours. So I decided not to leave. It’s worked out pretty well so far. I think that’s how Hawaii works. People have been coming here for years and years. Most just stop by for a little while. Some of us, though, we decide to stay. It’s nice here, after all. All the pineapple you can eat.”

Trini took the hint and handed the bowl over to her grandfather.

“Thank you,” he said, taking a bite. “See, if you think about it, everyone in Hawaii is either a tourist or a visitor. There are no natives here, just people who have been visiting longer than others. The first visitors came on canoes that they paddled across the ocean. Hawaii is a young place, a new place. It’s still being born, slowly rising up through the water, always growing, always changing.”

He glanced at his granddaughter to make sure he was not completely boring her. As she had not fallen asleep, he continued, “So even if you’re born here and live here all your life and never leave, you’re still just visiting. The Hawaii you’re born into is not the same one that will be there when you leave. More so today. Back when I first came here all those years ago, they didn’t have saline power plants yet. Everything was still gas run and that made some of the bigger areas, like Maui, pretty stinky. So even now, I’m just visiting this Hawaii. Tomorrow, I’ll be visiting tomorrow’s Hawaii.”

“And because you’re a visitor and not a tourist, you have to give back?”

He smiled and nodded. “Right. One way we do that is with this party. We do other things too, like discounting the cost of rooms for those who don’t have money enough to stay or acting like tour guides to help them get oriented. It’s friendly stuff, Trini. Good work too. I’ve met so many people running the hotel over the years. If I knew where I’d end up after my first night in the hotel bar...” He laughed and shook his head, reaching out for another piece of fruit.

“When I’m older, can I come here too? To stay?”

“What’s wrong with San Francisco?”

Trini shrugged. “Nothing. I have friends there and stuff. And it’s fun, too. I guess. But I have chores and stuff and homework..”

“Hah. I have chores here too, dear. Your Gramma only lets me sit around like this when company’s coming. Maybe in a year or two you could come and spend the summer with us. See if you really like it before you make the decision to move in.”

Trini’s face brightened. “Really?”

“Sure. We’ll need to talk about it with your Mom and Dad, make sure it’s okay with them. Knowing your Dad, you’ll have to promise to keep your grades up, I bet.”

Trini smiled and was about to reply when a voice from inside the house called the two up from the beach. More guests had arrived, their families in tow. Adam had arrived the night before to help set things up and the old man could hear him shout his greetings to the new arrivals.

It was a roll call of that day long ago. They were all arriving now. This was the first time they had all, everyone one of them, had been able to get together for years. When was the last time? he wondered. The old man shut his eyes and remembered a funeral, twenty one guns firing to honor the fallen. This time it would be a joyous occasion. They would all get together and tell stories and laugh and remember.

Adam. Devon. Valerie. Peter. Even HP had managed to put down his keyboard and log out to make the trip.

And Ben.

Especially Ben.

The old man held the gate the separated the beach from the deck open for his granddaughter. He smiled as she ran past, eager to see which of the visitors had brought children her own age to play with.

As he watched his grandchild weave her way between familiar figures, their features only slightly the worse for the years gone by, Lon exhaled slowly.

Content.

Happy.

Lonely no more.

* * *

It was after dinner that Ben found Lon sitting by himself on the beach. A few tiki torches cast sputtering golden light about the area. Lon was staring into the dark sea, a half-empty beer forgotten in his hand.

“Knew I’d find you here,” Ben said as he sat down. At his age, he didn’t like to stand much more than he had to. The years had been kind to them all, keeping them free of disease and illness, but not that kind. Everyone, no matter who you were, had to grow old.

Lon looked up from his seat as Ben sat. “Did you, now?”

“Fraid so,” Ben said, taking a swig from his own beer, one of those large 40oz bottles that he liked to work on at parties. Some ironic habits lose their irony over the years. “This is a... it’s a special moment.”

“Seeing you all again, it’s always special, Ben.”

“No, I mean it’s really special. This has already happened. Or at least, it’s already been written.”

Lon turned his head towards Ben. “The story.”

Ben nodded. “The story. This is the last scene. The last that I wrote.”

“What happens when it’s over?”

Ben shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m not even sure what happened to get us to this spot.” He laughed, “It was a pretty tall order, writing back then. I had to do it fast, but I had to do it right.”

“I’ve always wondered about that time. My people, how we were... We couldn’t tell what was going on at your end of things,” Lon said, taking a small sip of beer and looking back out over the black ocean.

“We weren’t much better off. I was, or at least, I am, making it up as we go along. I’m sorry that I picked you to speak with. It’s not fair. If I am writing this now, writing what I am saying and what you’re saying, that means I’ve stolen something from you, taken away your free will.”

“You gave me so much, I’m sure I can forgive you.”

“I hope you can. You don’t know how many times I’ve rewritten this scene.” Ben shook his head, rubbing the bridge of his nose with a steady hand. “How hard it is. I know I could have just written something fast and easy—everyone wins the lottery and the aliens go away, but how could I? How would that be fair? I could have given Peter his girlfriend back, made her love him

again, but that wouldn't be fair to her, would it? So here I am," Ben continued, "Sitting on the beach, talking to you."

"Better than being in some computer game."

"I don't know about that. The... unreality of the game made it easy to talk, easy to get your head around things. This, this I'm sure is going to be a confusing mess. No, I had to simplify things, but not so much as to rob people of free will, like I have with you."

"I don't feel that I've been robbed of anything."

"Of course you wouldn't, because I wrote you like that. Or I'm writing you like this. Tenses are hard, Lon. I hope you like that name."

"It's a fine name, thank you."

"Good. I hope the life you've had to live to get you to this point hasn't been too hard. I've tried to keep the details to a minimum, to give you a chance to grow and develop on your own. The basics—the Hotel, Visitor's Day, and all that, had to be mentioned, put down on paper so as to make them real."

Lon took another sip of his beer and let Ben continue. Ben felt badly for using him like this, reducing him to a foil, a question-asking machine, just as he feels badly for you, reading this now, helping to make it all real.

"I feel like I can only get the gist of things out. If I say too much, then I'm taking over people's lives. So yeah, I wrote that world would be a better place. I wrote, or am I writing now, that the aliens, the other species first met by Peter, could transition their way into this reality through the Hotel. That one of them, you I guess, would become their host and would help them adjust to this world, to this reality."

What do you think Lon should look like? I don't know. Let's say he looks like whatever he wants to look like and leave it at that.

"It's not been a bad job," Lon said. "I collect the reservations the Visitors make, check them in, get them oriented. Those that want to stay, we have methods in place for more permanent integration."

“Have there been any problems?”

“Nothing that we couldn’t handle.”

“Good,” Ben said, taking a swig from his beer. “Good.”

The two men, alien and author, sat together watching the ocean, or rather, where the ocean should have been, hidden in darkness, its waves crashing onto the sandy shore.

“I have to ask you, Ben. I have to ask you about the power you have. I have to ask because you need to decide what to do with it,” Lon’s voice was hushed, almost a whisper, but Ben could hear it clearly above the sound of the tide. He had, after all, written those words so long ago.

Is writing them now.

“I don’t want it, that’s for sure. It’s grown over the past few days. What if it keeps growing? What if it gets so that anything a write, anything I think, comes true? No,” Ben shook his head, “When this story is done, the power’s done in me too.”

“So you’ll just cast it away? Think of all the lives you could save.”

“I am thinking about them, Lon, I am. I’ll always think about them. When I watch the news and I see a story about a car crash, I’ll think *I could have saved them*. If I had the power still, I would rewrite their fate. But what if they were supposed to die? What are the consequences? It’s too much for me. I can’t handle it. I couldn’t handle it. When this story is over, when this conversation ends, and I get up and leave the room I’m in, the power will be gone from me.”

“From you?”

“Just from me. I don’t know how this power works or why it is. Maybe we need it, like some sort of failsafe. If I kept it, I’d squander it on little things. I’d save people because I felt guilty, not because it’s what’s best. I think maybe this power should just be used for the big stuff. For the future of the planet.”

“And we qualify as big stuff?”

“First alien contact? I’d say that’s pretty big.”

“But we’re not the first.”

“Ah. There I go again. See? This is why I can’t be trusted with this responsibility. The urge to throw in a little detail like that, so minor now, could have big consequences. What history did I just change?”

Lon shrugged enigmatically. “Nothing big, I expect. We’re all still here, right?”

Ben sighed and finished his beer. “I can help a little. I feel a bit like the *Wizard of Oz*, but whatever. Everyone involved in the first Visitor’s Day encounter will live long and happy lives, free from disease or tragic misfortune. The helpful and the kind will be rewarded. Obama will be elected president. The Eagles will-“

“Careful now, you’re starting to reach again,” Lon said. It was true. There is so much crossed out on this page.

“Sorry. Big picture. We’ll find a way to turn sea water in cheap, clean energy. There will be no more pandemics and we’ll cure diseases like cancer and AIDS and so on. Humanity will prosper and will welcome other intelligent species from wherever like brothers.”

“That may be going a bit far. There are dangerous beings out there.”

“Then we’ll welcome in kindness those that come in kindness. From the rest, we’ll be safe. Better?”

Lon shrugged. “It’s your story.”

“No. It’s not. It’s *our* story. I’m just the one with the pen right now. When I’m done, the power will move on.”

“To where?”

Ben nestled his empty beer bottle in the sand beside his chair. “Wherever. Whenever. It will go to some else. *Someones* else. Let’s split it up for awhile, until it’s really needed again.”

“A million monkeys?”

“A million monkeys. Let’s see what a handful of people can turn out. Let them hash out their collective story together.” Ben slowly rose to his feet. His knees wobbled a bit, but it was not the beer or his age that made them do so. Here it goes.

“Here it goes,” Ben sighed and he steeled himself to walk up the beach, out of the room, away from the table. “Thank you for everything, Lon.”

“Thank you, Ben. Without you, my people wouldn’t be here, wouldn’t be so welcomed.”

“I don’t know about that,” Ben said as he bent over to pick up the empty bottle. He turned it upside down and let the last few drops of cheap beer spill out onto the sand. “Once you get past their inherent fear of the unknown, people are pretty welcoming.”

From the pocket of his loose cargo shorts, Ben pulled out a small sheaf of old, yellowed papers. Lon watched quietly as Ben slowly rolled them up, carefully twisting the ink-covered and blood-stained sheets into a slim tube. The tube went into the bottle and the bottle was sealed tight with a screw-top cap from Ben’s other pocket.

Slowly, Ben walked towards the sound of the ocean, pausing only to give his goodbyes to Lon, to pass on a message to their friends that still laughed and partied away in the hotel above.

I’m sorry, Val. I can’t be here any more. My story is ending. No, that’s not right. *This* story is ending. We’ll go on, somewhere, somehow.

Ben turned and continued on his way down the beach. The sand grew wet beneath his feet, close packed. Soon he could feel the waves lap over his toes, his ankles, his knees.

The power, the story, the pages, they were all in the bottle that Ben held in his shaking hand. It felt so heavy. How much had he written? Was it enough? Some pages were nothing but ink. Others were blank. I could have filled them.

Ben took a breath and reared back his arm. This is it. Soon he would leave this room, walk off this beach, and rejoin his friends, old a new. But he would be less than he is now. Happy, but diminished. This is the power leaving.

An ending awaits out there in the dark.

The bottle is cold in his hand, cold like the doorknob.

Ben hurls the bottle and opens the door. He stumbles into the dark ocean and well-lit hall. The pain is present but manageable. Something is pulled out from inside him and he feels it go, feels it flutter on the wind and beneath the waves.

He gasps and falls to his knees. In time, others will take up the pen.

Out in the darkness, the bottle lands in the ocean and behind him the door swings shut, deafening booms that only he can hear.

People and water rush around him and he smiles, knowing that everything will be okay.