

Dreamland

Master Sergeant Horowitz pushed through the tunnels, raising his voice over the countless throngs of dirty refugees, “Make a hole, people, make a hole!”

When a person didn’t move, he tapped a shoulder or back, cutting a hole through the crowd to bring the two newcomers in to see the Commander.

Horowitz chanced a look behind, making sure they were still in tow. They looked like heroes. Him, with his dark hair and square jaw, muscles showing under his torn shirt. Her, with the blond hair and lithe frame, breasts bouncing under a black tank top. Even the filth covering their bodies didn’t smear their iconic image; it toughened them. Big damn heroes, even at first sight.

*Well, they had better hope they’re the real McCoy*, Horowitz thought, *For everyone’s sake*. He finished the last few steps up to the command post and opened the heavy door.

“Colonel McFadden,” Horowitz ducked in through the steel portal and took a step forward.

Two men and one woman populated the small chamber. Computers and electronic equipment worked furiously under the care of the crew. They all wore white lab coats, except for one man. A disheveled officer in Air Force blues rubbed at his red eyes. Florescent light shone on top of his balding head.

“Sergeant.”

“Sir, I know you’re busy, but -”

“Commander!” The male hero stepped out from behind the Master Sergeant, waving his arms. “We have information that could turn the tide of this war!”

“You have to listen to us!” His female counterpart asserted herself as well.

Colonel McFadden swiveled his desk chair toward the couple. His brows knit as he leaned forward.

“Go on.”

“Well, it’s a long story.” The man gave his companion a meaningful glance. She smiled in return.

The Colonel rested his elbows on the chair’s armrests and laced his fingers together. “Tell me your names, then give me this important information.”

The hero gave a single nod. "I'm Todd."

"I'm Becca." Becca reached out to grab hold of Todd's hand.

"We found a way to understand how the aliens communicate. We thought of it as we were escaping from them."

A thick silence swept over the room.

"You escaped?" Colonel McFadden leaned forward. "No one has escaped. Not one person."

"Until now." Todd gave the officer a half-smile. Becca giggled once and nuzzled his shoulder.

The lab coated denizens of the room all reached for writing instruments, sound recorders, or opened files on their computers to take notes.

"All right," the Colonel said. "Tell me how they communicate."

"This might get kind of technical, so please bear with me."

Colonel McFadden waved him away. "I have a PhD in electrical engineering, don't dumb it down."

"Great," Todd looked around the room, still wearing his wry half-smile. "We need a military leader and we get a pencil pusher."

A couple of uneasy laughs died quickly. Colonel McFadden rotated his hand toward the couple.

"Okay," Todd gestured while he spoke, "You know how a dog can hear sounds that are too high-pitched for humans, right?"

The Colonel pursed his lips, then nodded slowly.

"The aliens, they hear *and* speak at a pitch that we can't hear, that's why we can't understand them!" Todd raised his hands up at his sides, laughing. "All we need to do, is take a recording of the TV broadcast, and then we can, you know, adapt it so we can hear it!"

"Hear it the way it was meant to be heard!" Becca slapped her hands together in finality.

Another silence took the room. The male scientist with dark hair sitting next to the Colonel started to speak, but the Commander silenced him with a raised hand. The other staff member still wore a hopeful expression.

"And how would we go about doing that?" Colonel McFadden sank back into his chair. "You know, without getting too technical."

“I don’t know, you’re the brain.” Todd and Becca shared a quick laugh. This time, no one else joined them.

“I know.” Colonel McFadden snapped his fingers and pointed to the couple. “We’ll take an audio clip of the alien’s TV broadcast, bring it into a sound editing application, then change the frequency of the sound wave so that it’s all in the range of human hearing!”

“Yes!” Todd and Becca whooped and high-fived each other.

Colonel McFadden looked to the scientist that he had silenced a moment ago. “What do you think, Luis, can we do it?”

Luis pinched the bridge of his nose. “Sure.”

Todd’s eyes widened, “Well, then what are we waiting for, guys?”

Colonel McFadden sucked his teeth, twice. “Well, nothing really. We could start right now, seeing as how we did that three days ago. And, what did we find out, Luis?”

Luis didn’t remove his hand from his face. “Dick.”

“Well, Luis,” Colonel McFadden scoffed, “Let’s be scientific about it, don’t forget the uncertainty in your lab procedures.”

Luis remained still. “Dick. Plus or minus one ball.”

“That’s more like it.” Colonel McFadden smiled broadly. “Now, Todd, about this escape - tell me about the escape.”

Todd stood up straighter. “When this whole mess started, Becca and I had rented a cabin for the weekend-”

“No.” Colonel McFadden shook his head. “Start from the time you were taken captive. What did you hear, see and smell inside their ship.”

“We were never actually taken captive,” Todd explained.

“We managed to escape before they could get to us,” Becca said.

The female scientist started scribbling madly on her pad of paper. “You broke out of the trance? How? What was it like? Do you remember anything?”

“That’s the thing,” Todd said, “We never got tranced.”

Colonel McFadden’s eyes narrowed. “Exactly what danger were you in? That you escaped from?”

“They were in the woods, Colonel!” Becca came forward, smacking her hands down on the Colonel’s desk. “They knew they couldn’t get to us from the TV, there are so many cabins out there without TVs, so they tried to trance us from hiding places in the woods!”

“How?” Colonel McFadden said.

“The sounds,” Todd’s eyes glossed at the memory, “They used this sort of warbling, whinnying sound, like if you crossed a horse with a bird. We knew what they were doing though; we heard reports on the radio, during the last broadcast. So we covered our ears while we ran through the woods, but we could still hear some of it!”

Becca gripped Todd’s hand tighter. “God it was terrible...”

Master Sergeant Horowitz cleared his throat. “Can you try to make the sound?”

Todd tried his best to imitate the bird-horse call, Becca broke into tears. Master Sergeant Horowitz nodded appreciatively.

“Did it sound something like this?” Horowitz pushed his lips into a whistle and let out a call that sounded somewhat like Todd’s, but clearer and more distinct.

“Oh my god, that’s it!” Todd put his hands to his ears, “Cover your ears, Commander, he’s one of them!”

Colonel McFadden clicked his tongue. “Not an alien?”

“No, sir,” Horowitz shook his head. “That would be the song of the Eastern Screech Owl.”

A pad of paper smacked the ground. The lady scientist flopped into her seat. Luis let out an exasperated breath.

Colonel McFadden rested his chin on the heel of his left hand and sighed. “Never had you pegged as a bird watcher, Horowitz.”

“It’s a guilty pleasure,” he said.

Todd still sat on the floor, his fingers firmly stuck in his ears. Becca’s gaze darted from the Colonel to Horowitz, her eyes flashing as she pieced together what was happening.

“Why guilty?” Colonel McFadden said.

“I don’t know...” Horowitz bobbed his head and shrugged. “I guess I thought you guys would think I was a nerd or something.”

“What?” Luis roused himself into the conversation. “We’re scientists, man. You think the kings of Star Trek trivia are going to look down on anyone’s hobbies?”

“Kings?” The female spoke quietly at first. She rubbed one eye with a fist and then smiled. “There can be only one.”

“Katie,” Luis said, “You only won last week because the questions were Deep Space Nine heavy, and you know I refused to watch that show on the grounds that it’s crap.”

“Wait a second!” Becca spread her hands and looked to the scientists and the Colonel. “Aren’t you people going to do anything? When are you going to wake up?”

Two wet drops formed in her eyes, her mouth hung open with incredulity. Colonel McFadden drew his mouth into a thin line. After a few seconds he snapped his fingers.

“Hold the phone.” He waved one finger in front of his face. Luis and Kate paid careful attention to their superior. “We know the pattern of the sound waves from the alien transmission. What if we used a light source that could emit quick bursts of light that could disrupt the alien programming – inside the brains of people who are tranced?”

Todd pumped a fist. “That’s what I’m talking about, Commander! When do we -”

“TNG,” Katie interrupted, pointing at Colonel McFadden. “Episode 506, *The Game* – that’s how Data deprograms the crew of the Enterprise who’ve been brainwashed by the alien game devices.” She finished with a smile.

“Aw, hell!” Luis whined.

Colonel McFadden laughed and clapped his hands, swiveling in his seat.

“Hail to the King!” Katie raised her arms in triumph.

“Can’t you people be serious? Don’t you get it? We’re talking about the fate of humanity!” Todd’s face reddened by second.

Colonel McFadden gave him a level stare, holding it until the air in the room chilled.

“Sure. I can be serious. I can save the entire human race, now that you’re here. Why don’t we get Bruce Willis to drill a hole in the alien’s home planet? Maybe, if Randy Quaid will put down the flask long enough, we can get that plucky crop-duster to fly an F-16 into their mother-ship.”

Todd’s mouth moved, but no words would come out.

“This isn’t the movies, kid. This civilization, that is capable of interstellar travel, has come to our planet. Trust me that if they wanted to talk, we’d all be talking. But they didn’t talk. They flew in, used a technology we can’t even fathom to make over ninety-four percent of

our friends and families just walk right into their ships. Everyone – I mean everyone – has lost somebody. You want to tell me exactly what it is that you think I should be doing to stop them?”

Becca gripped Todd’s arm. “But don’t you have these new space ships that are in like, Area...”

Colonel McFadden sighed, causing Becca’s words to trail off.

“There are no advanced space ships,” he said. “Dreamland – what you call Area Fifty-One – is just a test flight area for experimental aircraft. That’s all. Most of those birds never make it into production, and for good reason. Did you two know that the few people left in India’s military tried to nuke one of the alien ships?”

Todd shook his head, they hadn’t known. “What happened to the ship?”

“Nothing,” Colonel McFadden said. “Nothing at all. The fact is, your government, your military – or what’s left of both – have no tricks up their sleeves. There are no aces in any holes. We can’t possibly beat these... Whatever they are.”

Colonel McFadden coughed a single laugh. “We haven’t even seen one of them.” He nodded to Horowitz, who positioned himself to usher the couple out of the command post.

“I appreciate you wanting to help,” McFadden said, “But we’re very busy, none of us have slept in days. If you want to be useful, go with the Master Sergeant, he’ll find you jobs. If you don’t want to work, then you’re on the surface – on your own. You’ll excuse us, however, we have to figure out how to keep everyone fed and sheltered.”

Horowitz began to sweep Todd and Becca out of the room. As they left, Todd looked over his shoulder at the officer.

“So, that’s it? We have to do something! What can we do?”

Luis and Katie went back to the tasks that occupied them before the disruption. Colonel McFadden stood and walked to the room’s only coffee pot. He spoke without looking at the young man, “We can wait, plan, resist, adapt... We can survive. In the end, that’s how a species wins. I’m sure we’ll see each other around, Todd. Try to get some rest.”

The metal door squealed shut behind Master Sergeant Horowitz. Colonel McFadden sat back down at his desk.

“You’re a real downer, you know that, Sir?” Luis kept his eyes on his computer screen.

“Is that why you never invite me to birthday parties?”

All three managed to show weak smiles before their work once again consumed them. Colonel McFadden didn't break his concentration until he heard the sound of gentle sobbing coming from Katie's desk.

He stepped softly behind her, and patted her back. His eyes flicked to her computer screen, to a report showing that almost half of the alien ships had left, taking their human cargo with them. Katie's fingers trembled, touching a photo of her husband and children at a barbeque. Colonel McFadden fought back tears of his own.