

Superpostapocalypticexpialidocious

Henry374 wasn't sleeping very well. He'd heard a craft landing only once, when he was just little – about 3, Cormorant claimed – and it had stayed with him. Now, sometimes just the wind could remind him of the whirring blades of the alien helioshuttle, and he would be up for hours, unable to catch even a clichéd wink.

Cormorant heard him rustling around, and knocked on the door. The soft clink was loud in the dense, black silence of Henry's room.

"I'm up," said Henry.

"I know that much," Cormorant said, gliding into the darkness of the room. He was a tall, skinny fellow, always wearing that funny hat that looked like a square bowl. "I heard you from the stairwell."

"You don't have to sit there and wait for me to sleep, Cormorant. I'm not a baby anymore."

"I know. I had nothing better to do. And it's a good place to sit and read."

"It's a metal staircase. It's not good for anything but stepping," Henry said.

"Mayhaps, Little Goose. Mayhaps."

"I hate when you call me that. I'm almost ten. I won't be a little goose forever."

"You will to me. And you don't hate it. You love it," Cormorant said. "Shall I sing?"

"If it pleases you," Henry said.

Cormorant sang, and Henry drifted off to sleep. Singing sounded absolutely nothing like the landing of an alien helioshuttle.

## Keith Kennedy

Cormorant rarely removed his hat. Only at dinner time, and when he was gearing up for an expedition. Sometimes, while getting ready, he would even take off the hat, and then put it back on over his hooded gasmask, just to make himself look silly. But he'd never actually take it outside.

"How long are you going to be this time?" Henry asked as Cormorant sealed the legs of his radiation suit.

"Not long," was Cormorant's expected answer. Today, the thin man had a follow up. "Maybe a little longer than usual."

The terror Henry felt was disproportionate, especially in comparison to the casual nature in which the information had been delivered.

"A little longer? Why?" Henry asked. He tried not to sound afraid.

"Gonna be a little longer every time, I imagine. Now that we've cleaned out the supermarket on fifth," Cormorant said.

"Oh. Can't you just find another supermarket?"

"That's the idea or something like that. But they didn't build them too close to each other."

"Why not?"

"Competition. You see, it was different men that owned the supermarkets, and they wanted to get as much money as they could. Putting their stores next to one another could cut into their profits."

"But wasn't the first priority making sure the people had enough food?"

Keith Kennedy

Cormorant thought about this. "I'd like to believe it was. And there was plenty of food in one supermarket for a lot of people. Haven't we been living off of ours for some time?"

"We're just two people. Must've been a lot more eating the food, and more meals a day, if the book's right."

"That's true. Remember I told you about perishables?"

"No."

"That's okay. There's food that used to exist, that they'd grow in the ground every day, and they'd sell that at the supermarket."

"If you could grow it in the ground, why did people buy it? Couldn't they grow it themselves?"

"That's another story, Little Goose."

"There's always another story," Henry said.

"If you're tired of stories, I can stop telling them," Cormorant said.

"No, no. That's okay."

Cormorant smiled and sealed the front of his suit. He reached up and twisted the nozzle of his mask, and a metallic sigh escaped. When he spoke again, he sounded like he was at the far end of a tunnel.

"Stay quiet, no fires," he said, just as he always did when he was on his way out to scavenge.

Henry gave the two fingered salute, the one Cormorant had taught him, and zipped his lips with two pinched fingers.

Cormorant nodded and went out into the cold.

## Keith Kennedy

He was gone a lot longer than last time. Ever since they'd found the supermarket, there had been regular trips, no more than three hours each time. The only difference was how much Cormorant brought back with him, the weight in the cart sometimes forcing him to slow for a grand difference of no more than ten or fifteen minutes.

Twelve hours had passed, and Henry was trying not to worry. He'd gone through his evening ritual, fed the rats, and gotten into bed all by himself.

"I'm almost ten," he said again and again, a mantra to keep the dark thoughts at bay. "I'm almost ten years old. I'm not afraid."

That was a lie. He was terrified. He'd never been alone this long, not since he was a baby, and he couldn't remember that time. Cormorant had been there, his first memory, and part of every memory since. The thought of losing him was too much to bear, and didn't make him feel like a young man of nearly ten; it made him feel like that frightened child, frozen by the sound of the Sky Hoppers coming to collect their crop.

At nearly two in the morning, the hatch opened with a crunching sigh, and Henry – sleeping only lightly – bolted out of bed.

Cormorant wheeled in the cart, full to brimming with cans of yellow-labeled goods. "Jackpot," he said, pulling off the gas mask. He wore a broad smile beneath. Henry ran to him, angry as all hell, hugging him around the waist.

"Where were you?" he asked, his voice not sounding like his own as he sobbed into Cormorant's rad-suit.

"It's okay, Little Goose, it's all right. I'm back now, and I won't have to leave for a whole cartsful of days."

"Okay, that's good," Henry said, and sobbed and sobbed.

"I don't like it," Henry said. He wanted to spit the slimy thing out but knew that nothing made Cormorant angry like wasting food.

"What have I told you?" Cormorant said. "You don't have the luxury."

"I don't even know what that means," Henry sulked, chewing the fruit with his mouth open.

"You eat what food you can find," Cormorant said.

"We don't eat the rats," Henry said.

"The rats aren't food. And the rats are our friends."

"I've never even heard of this. Why would they put something so gross into a can? Why would they save them?"

"Peaches didn't only come in cans. Some people liked their fruit this way, covered in sweet syrup."

"It tastes like the inside of a bug's stomach," Henry said.

Cormorant laughed. "Good, Henry. Good words. Now eat your peaches."

Henry choked the rest down, chewing the peaches until they were nearly a paste, pretending it was thick juice as he swallowed. Cormorant was always right. By the time he was done, he didn't hate the peaches all that much anymore.

"I found something, when I was out. Something special," Cormorant said. His eyes were bright with suppressed excitement. "Shall I show it to you?"

"I know what you're talking about. It's the thing beneath the blanket. Is it one of those old salted pigs again?"

## Keith Kennedy

"No, no. Not food. I'm afraid those old salted pigs are too far gone nowadays, even if I could find one," Cormorant said. He was sad about that. He'd loved old salted pigs.

"Not food? You carried something back that wasn't food?"

"It wasn't heavy," Cormorant said. "The blanket I wrapped it in was heavier."

Cormorant withdrew the bundle from the cart and brought it over. He unveiled it with reverence, laying his hand flat to the air, as if he expected a large reaction.

"What is it?" Henry asked, reaching out.

"Go on, you can touch it. It spins, see?"

The object was blue and round, set into a sickle of plastic with numbers carved into the side. Up close, Henry could see other words, lots of words, and lines going one way and the other.

"Do you know what this is?"

Henry couldn't have explained how he knew. Luckily, Cormorant didn't ask. "It's us," Henry said. "It's our planet."

"Yes, that's right. They called it a globe, back when they needed one. Computers made things like this obsolete. When every piece of knowledge was made digital, we no longer needed to hold things in our hands, to see them as they really were."

"How could you ever replace something like this?" Henry asked. There were so many words, words Henry had never before seen. "Is this all ocean?"

"Oceans, yes. There's more now, of course. This is a Pre-globe, as you probably guessed."

"Are there any Post-globes?"

Keith Kennedy

"Not that I know of. On computers somewhere I'm sure it exists. There must've been someone left to survey the planet," Cormorant said. His voice grew wistful in that way that made Henry sad. It happened whenever he spoke of who was left to accomplish something.

"Where are we, Cormorant?" Henry asked. He'd already picked out a few favorite places. A little island off the coast, a peninsula that struck out boldly into the blue, a white cap on top of the globe.

"Hard to say, now. But probably somewhere in here," Cormorant said. He pointed to a large mass of land. Henry was disappointed.

"Really? Right in the middle?"

"You shouldn't be annoyed with that," Cormorant said. "That's the only reason we're alive, Little Goose, because we aren't too close to the coasts."

"Of course," Henry said, not really understanding. "Do you remember what it was like? Back when the world was like this?"

"A little," Cormorant said. He always lied about how much he remembered.

"You can tell me," Henry said. "It won't make me sad, I promise."

"No, Little Goose. It will make me sad."

Henry loved the globe. And he grew to like peaches. He had to; Cormorant had found quite a supply of canned goods, and had brought back more peaches than anything else, because he was so fond of them. It made him sad that Henry didn't like the same things. So Henry tried hard. Life was a little more sour when Cormorant wasn't his spry, energetic self. And though he seemed tough and strong, Cormorant was sensitive, and things could make him very sad on occasion.

Keith Kennedy

Time passed quickly, as though the days moved at the speed of the spinning globe, not the Earth itself. Before long, Cormorant was standing before the hatch, sealing his rad-suit for another excursion.

"How long this time?" Henry asked.

"Hard to say. Took me a while to find it, but with the cart it was only about three hours to get back. Say two-thirds of that time to get there, and I should be back in about five hours."

"That's going to be regular now? Five hour trips?"

"It is what it is," Cormorant said. "Accept it. Embrace it. Make it your friend. Or you'll hurt your tummy."

"You always say that. Thinking things doesn't hurt your tummy."

Cormorant laughed. "Oh, you'll see. When you're older."

"You always say that, too."

It wasn't so bad without Cormorant this time. On that first excursion to the new store, the problem wasn't so much that he'd been gone so long, it was the fear that he'd never come back. And five hours wasn't the end of the world.

Henry managed to fill his day with drawing and reading, and playing spin the globe. Cormorant returned in a little bit less than five hours, and though Henry had been brave and busy, he was glad the man was back.

"Were you worried?" Cormorant asked, pulling off his gas mask.

"No. Maybe a little."

"I'm on time, right?"

"Early."

"Good. No need to worry at all, then."

## Keith Kennedy

Henry waited impatiently for Cormorant to remove the suit, then embraced the man.

"You didn't bring as much."

"No," Cormorant said. He sat down, careful not to move too quickly.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"What's that?" Henry asked, pointing to a dark patch on Cormorant's sweater.

"Oh. That's funny. Broke the skin," Cormorant said. He rose, again with caution, and scooped up the discarded rad-suit. "Didn't tear the suit."

"What happened?"

Cormorant had a strange look on his face. Henry thought it might be an entirely new look.

"I met some people," Cormorant said.

"People! Are they here? Are they coming? What were they like? Were there any children?"

Cormorant held up his hand to silence him. "It's not like that. People don't know to trust each other anymore."

"What does that mean?" Henry asked. He followed Cormorant into the toilet. The man retrieved the top first aid kit from the stack and sat down.

"It means that people aren't as friendly as they used to be. If they ever were."

"I don't understand," Henry said. He was getting frustrated, now. "In all the stories you've told me, people are always friendly."

"Those are just the best stories, Henry," Cormorant said.

## Keith Kennedy

Henry shuddered. Cormorant only ever said his real name when things were bad. Real bad.

"What do you mean, the best stories?"

"Nobody wants to hear stories where the bad guys win. Nobody wants to believe that it's possible. So the stories we tell are about kindness, virtue, nobility, love...to teach us what's really important."

"You're saying that it's not like that? That it's not real?"

Cormorant lifted his sweater, dabbing at the wound. "Can't believe he broke the skin," he said.

"Cormorant!"

"No, all right? It's not real. Maybe, maybe once, a long time ago, people were good. But...I don't think so, anymore, Little Goose. I don't think there are many good people left."

"Did they hurt you on purpose?"

Cormorant stopped what he was doing, looked into Henry's eyes. "People are hungry, afraid, cold. They don't mean to be...unfriendly. They're just trying to survive."

"But you said surviving isn't enough," Henry said.

"I say a lot of things," Cormorant said. "Hand me that bottle, would you?"

Henry handed over the hydrogen peroxide. Cormorant poured a careful amount into the cap, and then soaked a cotton swab in it. He took the swab and dabbed the wound on his side.

"Does it hurt?" Henry asked.

"No," Cormorant said.

"Looks like it hurts."

"It's fine. Just got hit."

Keith Kennedy

"With what? You sure your suit isn't ripped?"

"Yes. Just an impact wound."

"I didn't know you could burst open a human like that," Henry said.

Cormorant looked at Henry, about to say something. He hesitated, shook his head. "A bat," he said.

"What?"

"He hit me with a bat."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Not a flying bat, a baseball bat. It was a game they used to play. Someone would throw a little ball at you, and you'd hit it as hard as you could with a wooden stick called a bat."

"They'd throw a ball at you?"

"Basically," Cormorant said. "Get me the gauze. And the tape."

"Do you need it? Doesn't look so bad," Henry said.

"You think? I just wanted to be careful."

Henry poked the stack of first aid kits with his foot. "I guess we have lots."

"We won't. Not forever. You're right. Best to save the stuff," Cormorant said with a nod of his head.

Later, Cormorant read Henry his favorite story, even though Henry was old enough to read it himself. It had become a ritual for them, after Cormorant came back from one of his missions.

He was nodding off to sleep when a terrible, horrible thought wormed its way into his mind.

"Cormorant!" he said, scaring both himself and the thin man.

Keith Kennedy

"What? Damnation, Henry, you frightened me!"

"What about those people? You can't go back outside! You can't go get us more food if there are people out there who want to kill you! What'll we do? Will we starve?"

"Calm down, Henry, please. It's okay." Cormorant put his heavy hand on Henry's chest. His face grew still, just as it had before, earlier in the bathroom. The man looked like he wanted to say something, share something.

"What is it? Tell me, Cormorant!"

"Okay, okay. You don't have to worry, is all. Get it?"

"Get it? No, I don't get it."

Henry had grown still, so Cormorant removed his hand. "There might be other people, other dangers, but there's always another direction to search. I can avoid places where more people might end up. If the new supermarket turns out to be one of those places, I'll adapt. And we'll be fine."

"Other people? More people? I'm talking about these people!" Henry said, pointing to Cormorant's side. "They hurt you already."

"They won't hurt me again."

"How can you be so sure?"

Cormorant stood up and walked to the door. "I think it's time for sleep, now."

"No!" Henry said. "I'm almost ten. This is stupid. Just tell me!"

"You sure?" Cormorant asked.

"Yes, I'm sure!" Henry shouted.

Cormorant removed his hat, cradled it in front of his stomach while he looked down into it. "No going back, if I tell you."

## Keith Kennedy

Henry kept his eyes on the man, trying to keep his face defiant.

"I killed them," Cormorant said. "That's why they won't be bothering me."

"You killed them?" Henry said. He felt the air rush out of him, and the tension in his body disappeared. "But killing is wrong."

"Aye, most times, it is that."

"When is it okay?"

"When the ones you find yourself killing were going to kill you first."

"There was no other way?"

"Maybe," Cormorant admitted. "But I don't have the luxury of negotiation. I have to act quickly and decisively. If they take me, they'll find out about us, and I can't let that happen. Can't let them find you."

"I'm old enough. I can make it on my own if I have to. You don't have to kill for me."

"You'd rather I die, and let you live by yourself? You'd rather I let that happen, instead of taking a life?"

"How many people have you killed?"

"Now it's definitely time for bed," Cormorant said. He closed the door and backed out without another word.

Henry had intended to give it a day or two. He failed at breakfast.

"How many people have you killed, Cormorant?"

"That's a difficult question to answer."

"Why?"

"Because I don't know the answer."

Keith Kennedy

"Guess."

"I told you that before...before all this, I was a soldier."

"Yes, I remember."

"I was taught to kill people. That was my primary function. I was created to do only that."

"So you killed a lot in the war. You told me that was different."

"It is different. And it isn't."

"Don't dodge the question."

Cormorant smiled. "Believe it or not, I'm trying not to."

"How many?"

"Perhaps we should split the answer into two categories," Cormorant said. "During the war, and after."

"Why? So the number doesn't sound so big?"

"Something like that. You're sure you want to hear this?"

"Not anymore, no."

"We can stop."

"Don't be stupid. Tell me," said Henry.

"As you command. During the war I killed four thousand three hundred and twelve human beings."

Henry nearly choked on his powdered eggs. "I...I can't even imagine that many people."

He looked over to the globe, hoping for some reference. "How many people used to live here?" he asked, pointing at one of the brown continents.

"About four million."

That made Henry feel a bit better.

Keith Kennedy

"You want me to keep going?" Cormorant asked.

Henry nodded.

"After the war I've only killed nineteen people. And everyone but one was someone that wanted to hurt me first."

"Everyone but one?"

"It can get complicated out there," Cormorant said, as though that explained everything.

"Who was the one? What happened?"

"It was a mistake. It was years after the aliens had been beaten back. They were so badly hurt, after we infected them with the Antigen, that they nearly died out entirely. Once in a while, they'd send a scout ship back down, looking for their own survivors. It was the last helioshuttle I ever saw, that day, and I mistook a man for an alien."

"This was after you changed? After you realized you were killing the wrong people?"

"Yes. I thought I'd never kill another person, not after I learned what the aliens had done, how they'd fooled us into killing people for them. I was so angry that day that when I saw the helioshuttle I shot first, without thinking. I was heartbroken when I saw I'd killed another man."

Henry chewed on that for a minute. "You say you were heartbroken, yet you killed eighteen other people."

"I know it's hard to understand. But the others were different. I was surviving."

"Survival isn't enough."

"Sometimes, it's the only thing. And you have to make choices."

"Does this mean you're a bad guy?"

"For a while, when I was killing for the aliens, I think I was. I don't think I am anymore."

"I don't think you are either."

Keith Kennedy

"Little Goose? Why are you crying?"

"I don't want you to be a bad guy," Henry said, and flung himself into Cormorant's arms.

"Nobody wants anybody to be a bad guy," the thin man said.

Henry cried himself out, and settled back down. He'd kneeled in his eggs, and it made him laugh.

"That enough questions for one day?" Cormorant asked, wiping the egg from Henry's pants.

"Just one more. After you changed, after you learned you had done wrong. How many aliens did you kill?"

"None," Cormorant said without hesitation.

"Why not?"

"I wasn't allowed to."

"Allowed to? What does that mean?"

Cormorant's expression became distant, and he stopped cleaning up Henry's pants. He stood and turned away, looking lost.

"Cormorant, what's going on? Why wouldn't you be allowed to kill aliens?"

"I can't talk about this."

"But you said you learned. You said you found out they'd made you kill for them. That means you were against, them, right?"

"I can't talk about this," he said again.

Cormorant fell to his knees.

"Are you okay?" Henry asked. "Are you sad?"

"Little Goose?" Cormorant said, his voice a whisper.

## Keith Kennedy

"What, what's happening?" Henry ran around to face the thin man. Cormorant's eyes were closed.

"I'll sleep for a while. But I'll wake up. Soon, hopefully."

And Cormorant tipped over, splaying out on his side. His hat slid from his head and tumbled off along the floor.

This had never happened before. Henry thought immediately of the wound in Cormorant's side and ran to get a first aid kit. When he came back he lifted Cormorant's shirt. The wound was undressed, and didn't look angry or red the way Cormorant had described when he taught him about such things. It just looked like a break in the skin. A little deep, but not bleeding badly.

Henry's mind raced, trying to figure out what could have happened. If it wasn't sepsis, what else could make a man pass out? Could it be poison? Did something get through the rad-suit that even Cormorant hadn't noticed? Was there a projectile still in the wound like in the old detective stories?

He tried to shake the man, yelled at him, smacked him in the face. Nothing worked. He wasn't just asleep, he was unconscious.

Henry dug into the first aid kit and brought out the little tweezers. He settled into a comfortable position, butt on feet, and got his face as close to the wound as he could. He didn't expect to find anything, thinking the pain of inspection might jolt Cormorant awake.

He slid the tweezers into the wound and opened them ever so slightly. "Huh?" he said. "How's that? You awake yet?"

Cormorant didn't stir.

"What about this?" Henry asked, spreading the tweezers a little further.

Keith Kennedy

Again, no movement. About to give up, he repositioned the tweezers one last time, and saw something white.

"White blood cells," Henry said. "Pus."

This was bad. Cormorant had told him that pus meant healing, but it might also mean infection. Something like that.

Now, it wasn't a joke, it wasn't a ploy. Henry spread the tweezers wider.

It wasn't pus. It was something else.

Henry grabbed the weird little thing, let go when it occurred to him that it might be a worm, one of those long, white things that could live inside a person. Where had he read that? Why had Cormorant taught him that?

When he grabbed the little white thing, it didn't wiggle, didn't attempt to flee. Henry pulled on it, and it came free. Beneath it was something blue, and green. Henry pulled a little more. It was a rope, or a tube. It felt like plastic. Henry pulled further. The colors alternated, white, blue and green, every few inches, as he pulled the tube out of Cormorant.

"Not right," Henry said. Cormorant had shown him books, medical books, with pictures of what people were made of. And this was plastic; besides not matching the pictures in the book, it was plastic.

People weren't made of plastic.

"Wake up!" he shouted in Cormorant's face. "Wake up, will you?"

Beneath the cords, the tubes, he found a piece of steel. When he wiped the fluids away, it was silvery, clear enough to reflect Henry's image.

There was a story, one he'd read, one that Cormorant had refused to read to him. That had been strange at the time; Cormorant never refused to read anything to him.

Keith Kennedy

In that story, there were men that weren't men.

There were men that were machines.

Henry knew where Cormorant kept his old gun. He knew because Cormorant always brought it with him when he went out foraging. At first, he'd kept it on a high shelf, had told Henry that it wasn't safe.

As time passed, he'd grown complacent.

Henry put the gun – a long metal rod with a handle and a rotating ball – beneath his cot. It took him a long time to get to sleep, and when he did, he dreamed about mechanical men.

When he woke, Cormorant was there, sitting in the corner, his funny hat in his hands.

"You aren't wearing your hat," Henry said, wiping sleep from his eyes.

"It's still there," Cormorant said.

"What?"

"My gun is still under your bed. I left it there."

"You're scaring me."

"You didn't put me back together all that well. I woke up to quite a surprise," Cormorant said.

"Who are you?" Henry asked.

"What am I. Isn't that what you mean?"

"Yes."

"I can't say much. There's something inside me that tries to put me to sleep when I talk about it."

"I don't care about that. Tell me."

Keith Kennedy

"I was made by them, by the aliens. All of us were." Cormorant put his hand to his head.

"Hurts," he said.

"Tell me."

"There wasn't a war, like I said. We were put in society. We killed in secret, important people, smart people. We made the humans weak. Like a virus." Cormorant's hands grew tense and he dropped his hat. It landed on the ground between his feet.

"I didn't change sides. We just didn't get all the smart people. They planted the Antigen, and the aliens were beaten, and we were left behind."

Cormorant slumped forward, barely catching himself.

"C'mere, Little Goose."

"No."

"You want the truth? Get a knife."

Henry did as he was told. When he came back, Cormorant was lying on his stomach. "Behind my left ear. Shouldn't be too deep a cut, but you'll have to twist clockwise and pull when you expose it."

"What am I doing?"

"Inhibitor chip. I didn't have one at first. They gave me one when the Antigen got planted. So I could stay, in secret, in case they came back. To keep us from revealing what we were."

"I just cut?"

"There won't be much blood. I don't have all that much."

Henry dug the knife into Cormorant's flesh, and struck the piece of metal. The knife grated along it and gave him a terrible fright. "Okay. Now pull and twist?"

Keith Kennedy

"Wipe the blood clear first, then grab it with the cloth."

Henry pulled the inhibitor out, and Cormorant kicked his legs once, then twice.

"Cormorant?"

"I'm okay," he said, and lifted himself off the ground. "That hurt."

"Sorry."

"Did I ever tell you the story of why my name is Cormorant?"

"No."

He smiled. "I was saving that one for myself. You couldn't say Commandant. The day they came for me, the day the humans found out that we existed, your father tried to take you from me. I looked at you, told you what my real name was. I asked you if you wanted to come with me. You don't remember that, do you? You just remember the sound of the helioshuttle."

"I don't understand, Cormorant."

"I wasn't just an assassin. There were a group of us that were programmed to do research in different areas. I was your caregiver, your nanny, and I was learning about humans by taking care of you. The aliens thought this research the most valuable, so when we were found out, they tried to send the last of their crafts to pick us up. Only they wanted us to take our charges with us. They wanted me to steal you from your parents."

"You asked me if I wanted to come with you? I was only three!"

"I was never going to take you back to them. I just knew that you would die if I didn't get you away. And your father...he just wouldn't listen."

"You killed him, didn't you?"

"I did. And I took you away from all of them, Little Goose. I am your caregiver. It's what I was programmed to do."

## Keith Kennedy

Henry went for the gun. Cormorant didn't move, just watched as Henry dug it out from under the bed.

"Don't panic, Little Goose. I couldn't hurt you even if I wanted to."

"Stop calling me that!" Henry said. He could feel tears on his face. He hadn't noticed he was crying, his brain was too full of buzzing anger and confusion. He pointed the gun at Cormorant.

"It's okay," Cormorant said. "Everything's okay. I always liked the research more, don't you see? I never liked the assignments, the killing. I was more interested in what we were learning from you. And when I realized how much we were learning, how vulnerable you were, I couldn't tell them. Don't you get it? I chose you, Henry, I chose the humans."

"Enough, just stop it. How can I trust you? How can I know you aren't lying?"

"I don't want to die," Cormorant said. "So I'll tell the truth. I'll tell the truth, and you won't shoot me."

"Okay," Henry said. "I want to go. I want to get away from you. But I'm afraid. Are you able to go outside because you're a robot?"

"No."

"It's just the radiation suit, then? I could go out if I had one?"

"Yes, you could go out if you had one."

"So it's just the radiation suit?" Henry asked again.

"No," Cormorant said.

"Wait, wait. You don't need the suit?"

"No. I fold it up and leave it by the door after I go out. That's how I got hurt, even though the suit was unharmed."

Keith Kennedy

Henry didn't need to hear anymore. He jumped up, ran past Cormorant and headed for the hatch.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Cormorant said. "It's better, here, Henry. Down here I can protect you. I can take care of you."

It took all of Henry's anger to get the door latch moving, but once it budged, he was able to use his weight to pull it all the way around to open. The seal made a belching sound, as it always did, and he pushed through.

The second door, the one keeping them safe, didn't even have a latch. And when he opened it, it didn't make that sucking, gaseous sound.

On the other side was a staircase.

Henry hesitated, gripping the gun tightly. He'd never been outside, had only seen pictures, heard stories. The moment, despite all that had happened, wasn't lost on him.

At the top of the stairs, there was a door that had been built into the ceiling, so that he had to push up through. He pushed with all his strength, squatting on the top step to get leverage, and heaved the door aside.

He nearly fell back down the stairs when the light touched his eyes. He had to hammer them closed, and lean forward to make sure he didn't tumbled backward. The light was so painful, it took him a long time before he was able to see.

With one hand over his eyes, trying to shield the sun, he looked around.

There was nothing, as Cormorant had described.

No, not as Cormorant described. There was grass. Everywhere, for miles, there was green grass. And a building, a house, that was not scorched or destroyed. He'd emerged from some

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hole in the ground, behind someone's house. In the distance, though it was hard to see, Henry thought he could see other buildings, other houses, the tall, metal kind.

It had all been a terrible lie.

Henry ran. He wanted to be far away from Cormorant, the liar, the machine, the thing that had killed his father and taken him away. He didn't get far before he collapsed into a heap, sobbing with such intensity that he could hardly breathe.

"You shouldn't be out here in the day. They'll see us," Cormorant said, approaching with some caution. His hat was in his hands again. He looked like a picture Henry had once seen, of people mourning at a funeral.

"Who's they?" Henry said, levelling the gun at Cormorant.

"People," he said.

"In that house?" Henry asked.

"No, I killed them."

"You are a bad guy, aren't you?" Henry asked.

"Mayhaps," Cormorant said. "Not a guy at all, though. Not really. But I'm not just what they made me, Henry. I'm more than that. I'm something...in between."

"Why did you kill the people in the house?"

"So I could use their shelter."

"That's wrong."

"I needed to isolate you, to protect you. The aliens, if they came back, would want you. And the humans, they want me."

Keith Kennedy

"You said there was never a war. But I still thought, the way the world is now – " Henry couldn't go on, began sobbing again. He was having trouble keeping the gun level.

"They're...all...still...here, aren't they?"

"Yes," Cormorant said. "I only come out at night, normally."

"Do I still have family? Other family? Alive?" Henry asked.

"Maybe," Cormorant said. "Probably."

"You know what you did was wrong, right?"

"I was programmed to do what I did."

"Liar!" Henry shouted, wiping his face with his sleeve. "You keep using that as an excuse, but you're also talking about choice. What you chose to do. You can't have both. It's not an excuse."

"You're right," Cormorant said. "Could you put the gun away now, Little Goose? Please?"

"No."

Cormorant moved toward him.

"Don't," Henry said.

"It's okay," Cormorant said, continuing forward.

Henry raised the gun in the air, and fired. The force pushed him into the ground, snapped his head back. He waited, his neck and head hurting, expecting Cormorant to take the gun from his hands.

It didn't happen. He forced himself up, to look. Cormorant was sitting on the ground, contemplating the hat in his lap.

"They'll come, now," he said.

Keith Kennedy

"You can still go. You can hide," Henry said.

"No. I have to protect you."

"Why? I'm a child. They'll know it's me."

"That depends on who comes," Cormorant said.

Henry stood. "What? I thought the aliens were gone? And you said the others, the robots, they were discovered."

"I managed to escape. Only logical to assume that other robots did as well. And they can't tell what we are by looking at us," Cormorant said. "That's the danger out here, Little Goose. It's not radiation or storms, those were lies. But the danger is real. Because you can't trust anyone anymore. You can't know who's a machine."

"Stop it. You're scaring me," Henry said.

There was noise, now, accompanied by a cloud of dust on the horizon. A vehicle was coming toward them, fast.

"Too late," Cormorant said. "May I have the gun now?"

"No. Stay there. Stay on the ground."

Cormorant sighed. "Sometimes survival isn't enough," he said, flipping his hat this way and that.

The vehicle cut across the field and stopped about a hundred yards away.

"They're human," Henry said.

"They look that way," Cormorant said.

"You're being paranoid. How many of you are there?"

Cormorant laughed. It was a sound Henry had always loved to hear. Now, things had changed, and the laughter split him up the back.

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"I don't know," Cormorant said. "They didn't tell us."

"You're lying."

"I'm not. But if I escaped – "

"Quiet! He's saying something," Henry said.

"He probably wants you to put the gun down," Cormorant said.

"Quiet!"

The man that had gotten out of the vehicle was joined by another man and a woman.

They were walking cautiously toward Henry. When the first man saw Cormorant on the ground, he put his hand to his side, like he'd been shot. A few steps closer, and Henry could see that the man's hand was on his little, black gun.

"That's him," said the woman.

Henry didn't know who they were talking about.

"Jesus, it's just a kid," said the other man. He had his hands up before him, like he was showing surrender, telling Henry he wasn't a threat.

"You can put that down, now," the woman said. "We won't hurt you."

"She's lying," Cormorant said.

"Of course he's a kid," said the first man.

"I just thought, he'd be grown up by now," said the other man. His hand was hovering beside his gun, still in its little leather pocket.

"Shut-up," the woman said.

"Who are you?" Henry asked.

"It's okay. We've come to save you."

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Henry exhaled, letting the gun drop a little. "What are you going to do with him?" he asked, gesturing toward Cormorant.

"Do you know?" the woman asked. She was entirely focused on Henry, crouching down not five feet away. "How could you know?"

"I took out his inhibitor chip," Henry said.

The woman smiled. "You took it out? How did you do that?"

"I just made a cut."

Cormorant put his hat on. "Twist and pull," he said, smiling.

"Is that true?" the woman asked. "You did that? You pulled it out with your hands?"

"Yes," Henry said, feeling a little pride.

The woman's smile evaporated. "He's the one. Put them both down."

Cormorant moved with incredible speed, and Henry nearly dropped the gun trying to point it at him. But Cormorant wasn't after him.

Put them both down, she'd said.

Cormorant grabbed the woman, pulled her around so she was in front of him, held by the neck. Henry raised the gun, pointing it at the man who was fumbling at his little leather pocket.

Cormorant turned, looked at Henry. "Now's a good time, Little Goose."

Henry looked back to the men, saw that the first one, the one who'd looked completely non-threatening, was pulling a gun similar to Cormorant's from his pack. Henry pulled the trigger, and a fuzzy beam of sound and light erupted, carrying with it the black projectile. It struck the man in the chest and opened him up like a can of peaches.

The other man finally got his gun free of his hip, and he aimed it at Henry. Cormorant, with a growl, pushed the woman hard, so she stumbled between the man and Henry. She was hit,

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two, three, four times before the man stopped shooting. Cormorant ran, sprinted at the man, taking one shot in the shoulder. When he hit the man they careened backward, and Cormorant landed on top. After a jerk and a loud snap, the man lay still.

"Why?" Henry was saying, over and again. "Why?"

Cormorant came back, his hat perched jauntily on his head. "It's okay, Henry."

"Why? Why would they want to hurt me?"

Cormorant crouched down before Henry, just the way the woman had. But Cormorant was close enough to reach out, and put his hand on Henry's arm. "I'm not quite sure," he said, and Henry knew he wasn't lying. "I've been taking longer trips, trying to learn what their plans are, but I could only get so close. It has something to do with...what you are, Henry. I think it's that they know all about the aliens' plans, now, and they're trying to rid themselves entirely."

"What do I have to do with their plans?"

Cormorant reached out and took the gun from Henry's hands. "How do I say this?"

"Cormorant?"

Henry was scared.

"It takes a long time to plan an invasion, Henry. The kids that we were sent to look after, they were special kids, like you. They were planted, using...seed grown by the aliens. Does that make sense?"

"I'm an alien?"

"Not at all. But you're a human who is made different. Made without the weakness of the others. You have more compassion, more love. You're hurting right now, because you killed that man, right?"

"Yes."

Keith Kennedy

"You also have more strength. That's how you pulled out my inhibitor. No other human, no regular human, could've done that."

"But it was so easy."

Cormorant reached out and brushed Henry's face. "I know, Little Goose."

"How many?" Henry asked. "Of me?"

"You're all Henry," Cormorant said with a smile. "There are five hundred of you. And hopefully, five hundred of me to take care of you still."

"But the invasion is over, the aliens are gone."

"Maybe, physically gone. But what these people were trying to wipe out, why they wanted to kill you, is because the legacy of the invasion is going to be what you and your four hundred and ninety-nine brothers do on this planet. What you can all change."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I wasn't programmed to," Cormorant said. "And would you have believed me?"

"Mayhaps."

"You had to see it for yourself. You had to see, firsthand, the hatred that lies in the eyes of man. You had to see their desire to kill even a child. Now you understand. Now you'll want things to be better."

"Is that what the aliens wanted all along?" Henry asked.

"Who knows?" Cormorant said. "We'll probably never know. Humans are too good at killing."

Cormorant stood and looked around. "Okay, Little Goose. I think it's time to move."

"We can't stay here anymore?"

Keith Kennedy

"No. We'll find somewhere else. This is why I was trying to keep you hidden; it's too early for you, for all of this. I tried so hard. But you were always going to have to go out, and find your own kind."

"It's not too early. I'm not a child, Cormorant. I'm almost ten years old."

"You're a tough one, Henry374. The both of us are. We were built that way."

Henry smiled and let Cormorant pick him up from the ground.

"Which way?" Cormorant asked.