

## ◇ DECOYS ◇

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For nearly fifty years he had worked at the Embassy; first as a guard and then, as an older man, as a fixer and custodian... The climate had kept him at first, and then his wife...

The country was young and hopeful; consisting of island chains scattered across the borders of a vast oceanic chasm, the deepest on the world.

His country, the continental giant; tacitly ruled that part of the world to the best of its ability – sometimes with trade and influence; at others, through force and subterfuge.

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He had many memories from his time in the Islands. Some of them were related to the visitors. Only in retirement had he realised how strange they had been – those anonymous walkers and idlers – mostly men, and sometimes, old women. He had first encountered them as they passed his guard-post during humid, moth-and-gecko-infested nights.

He could not tell them apart from the locals at first. As time passed by, however, little hints gave them away – the strange, loping gaits; that brief unsynchronised rasp in their voices if they spoke; the faint delay in the reaction-time of their eyes... He had always found them staring towards the embassy, and shooed them on. Obliging, they always walked away...

The timing of their appearance was also strange. He always saw them before the region's violent tropical storms. He had also seen a number of them after that awful earthquake that swept half of the capital's slums away... And - most perplexingly - a few days before that pale green flash over the ocean; that soundless explosion which the Intelligence Chief had warned everyone not to talk too much about...

Whenever he saw them, they were always staring towards the angular, concrete blocks of the Embassy, unmoving until noticed, eyes blank and legs posed at those strange, subtle angles...

Maybe it was an ethnicity thing. Many islands made up the recently amalgamated nation, and most were home to distinct tribes. Some of them were less than a century away from hunter-gatherer lifestyles. Surely, there could have been strange folk in the vibrant mix that made up The Islands? Being a foreign security guard at an embassy, he simply did not know.

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Years passed. He grew more familiar with the country. He met his wife – and one day asked her about the visitors. She quickly shot down his ethnic minority theory. Yes, there were many different nations in The Islands, but no one quite like them. They then considered other explanations. The Islands had a rich, often macabre folkloric fauna of pixies and dream folk; long-fingered men who could turn into toothed birds and flap away; bat-winged hags and snake women; disembodied heads that flew off to eat children; but once more, nothing quite like the visitors... They were new in the land, and unlike the folk-tale phantoms, were seemingly quite real.

Then, a few years later, she had told him how a friend's brother had seen three of them simply walking into the tide at worm-glow, calmly and without return. "Maybe they were spies?" he proposed. It was not impossible. Three other rival states had their eyes on the region – and the Islands War, with all its ferocity and bloodshed, had been fought only decades ago...

Yet even as they had mulled over these explanations, he knew that no spy agency would be stupid enough to recruit agents of the same ethnic type – with that slightly off complexion; that loping stride which strangely reminded him of stick insects; and those idiot-savant stares they aimed towards the Embassy building - intense, as if they could see through concrete.

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Time wore on. New technologies developed and clawed their way around the world. It was funny, he thought, how abruptly they visitors had stopped coming just a few weeks after video cameras had been installed around the Embassy perimeter. They had been filmed only once, and the Intelligence Chief had hastily confiscated the tapes on the next day.

More years passed, and The Islands changed. He remembered the joint nuclear tests in the

oceanic trench; the increasing poverty; his country's great-power reassurance and the local protests; crowds, firebombs and shootings – resulting in a sense of cold enmity that was unimaginable back when he had first started working there.

He had loved The Islands, their people and their easygoing way of life; but he had to accept moving back to the Continent then, taking a large part of his wife's extended family with them... A narrow escape, a happy ending, and then the drudgery of middle-class retirement set in. Not a bad ending, compared to how he had grown up.

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He was watching his favourite documentary, a nature show, when the idea struck. The researchers in the show were hiding cameras in decoy animals, and placing them near actual beasts to film their behaviour in a manner that had never been achieved before. The footage they captured was marvellous...

“What if,” a sudden idea in his head whispered, “someone – some thing, had made human-decoys, human-decoy-cameras, that people could not tell apart – not any more than a hapless sea-bird could tell the fluff-covered decoy from its own parents?” It sounded preposterous - at first. People, after all, were smarter than seabirds or bear cubs.

Yet... even people had a threshold at which they accepted reality. At the simplest level, senses were input. Craft it fine enough, and one could fool any being. It would only take a more sophisticated form of decoy – which, by being human, he – or his wife, or the Intelligence Chief, or anyone else - simply could not conceive...

His dived into his memories again... He remembered the way they looked in the bygone tropical night; silent and cryptic. He imagined them walking into the sea – into the surf and past the reefs, maintaining their strange, mantis walk even while underwater - down, down into the kilometres-deep chasm...

He knew the world was ancient. There was enough space to accommodate anything.

In a spasm of clarity so sudden it felt commonplace, he realised that he had lived through a period of encounters - and possibly covert war - between humanity and an unknown

intelligence. Were parts of a colony, like ants - or did they exist as distinct individuals? Were they natives of the planet, or were they outsiders? Every potential answer spawned a myriad other questions... His head hurt thinking about them.

Had others realised what he had only now grasped? Possibly. But what difference would it have made? It was just another one of the many immense threats and global events that silently ran their course in the background as billions tried to get along with their lives; no different than the Cold War, or this new “global warming” their kids kept talking about.

For once, he felt glad to know no more than he did, and turned back to his day in its blissful banality. The clock ticked by the framed pictures of their grandchildren. The cat left from the flap, he boiled an egg. His wife would soon return with the groceries, and they would sit down to watch their evening telenovela...