

Dear Stranded: A Science Fiction Letter-Writing LARP by Elisa Ford

Themes: Confession, Intimacy, Forgiveness, Loss

Players: Three. Two people **Stranded** on distant islands, and one Facilitator/ Player as **Helper**.

Required Materials: Pen, paper, postage and/or email access. Optional: Video conferencing platform.

Game Overview

Dear Stranded is a letter-writing game set in a science fiction universe. Gameplay focuses on connection, bonding, and support. Two players begin as castaways on different islands, exchanging letters through a mysterious **Helper**. Each player will create a character, then work together to create a framework of experiences and emotions they want during play. Pacing is player-driven. After five rounds of letter writing, the story comes to a conclusion with everyone writing and sharing their epilogue.

About Helper Text Boxes like this: The role of **Helper** is part Facilitator and Player. As a result, **Helper** starts off with expanded insights into this world, contained in boxes like this one. **Stranded** players who wish to avoid spoilers should skip these boxes.

Intro

Two **Stranded** souls, surviving on different islands, separated by a vast sea, send each other letters of confession and care with the help of a mysterious **Helper**. With no hope of rescue, facing an uncertain fate, what secrets would you share with a stranger? What kind words would you long to hear? What would you sacrifice to do the right thing?

Helper Intro: Alien scientists has been taking Humans from various times in history from dire circumstances for scientific observation. "These Humans would have died if we had not intervened," says their **Leader**, "and now they have a second chance at life, even if captive." Each Human, or **Stranded** as the researchers call them, lives in **The Reserve**, a collection of time/space pockets that mimic a well-stocked island in the middle of vast sea. The weather changes, the seasons shift, and the sun rises and sets. It should be paradise for them, but there's a problem. The humans aren't thriving. In fact, there's only two left.

Each solitary island in **The Reserve** has everything that a Human should need, but they are alone. **Leader** says it's for their safety, humans are inherently violent. Yet it's clear that Humans are social at their core and suffer in isolation. You have decided that you cannot stand by. You call yourself **Helper**, and connecting the last two **Stranded** through communication is your first step to rebelling against your **Leader**, your society, and ultimately setting these two free at great cost.

Before The Letters

- 1) **Create your character.** Be as detailed as possible. Use the questions below to help flesh out your character if you get stuck, but do not limit yourself to just these prompts.
 - a. **If you are playing one of the Stranded**
Who are you? What is your name? Where are you from? What is the year?
What terrible thing do you remember right before you blacked out and woke on this island?
What did you do after you woke up, alone, on your island? How did you feel?

What does your island look like? Why is it vaguely unsettling?
What always happens when you try, and fail, to escape?
What secret are you afraid will die with you, unsaid, if you cannot leave?
What is something that you've yearned to see or feel?

b. **If you are playing HELPER**

Who are you? What is your name?
What makes you different from **Stranded**? What makes you the same?
Why were you eager to join **Leader's** team?
What broke your fantasy of what working for **Leader** would be like?
When did you realize that **Stranded** were complicated and felt complicated things?
When did you realize how dangerous isolation was to **Stranded**?
What will you lose helping them? How have you made peace with that?
Your technology (time travel, language translation, and space time pockets) is very advanced. How would you quickly describe it to the Stranded?

c. **Everyone:**

Take a moment to focus on the inner life of your character, and their emotional strengths with others. Are you a good parent? A supportive friend? A nurturing partner? Define that.

2) **Collaborate with others.**

This can be done over email or text, but it may be efficient to discuss things over a video conference call. You can define as many parameters as you want, but here are the basic ones of the game:

- a. **Transparency.** Over the course of the game, the characters will be learning one another's stories and secrets, but how much of this is known to the players beforehand should be negotiated. It may be fun to discover this over the course of the game, or players may wish to write complimentary characters, with all details known at the start. Do what's most comfortable for everyone involved. Successful games of **Dear Stranded** have run with players knowing everything in this document, as well as **Stranded** players knowing next to nothing about the game, with **Helper** taking on a much more responsible Facilitator role.
- b. **Negotiate your character's big confession/ secret/ revelation.** Be very up front about the nature of this, as well as the kind of support you want to experience. If your revelation is steeped in shame, and you want love and acceptance, say so. If your character is in pain and wants blunt validation, say so. **Helper** also gets to join in on this, though you may wish to be vague about the exact nature of your confession. **Helper** players may consider exploring themes like atonement and regret, just from a different angle.
- c. **Content warnings.** If you wish to include subject matters that would need a CW, discuss this up front with everyone in detail. **Dear Stranded** is a game about close bonds, and the story you tell with the other players should draw them in, not push away. ***If anyone gives anything less than an enthusiastic "yes!" to the themes you wish to explore, do not go there.*** If roleplay during game begins to lead your letters towards CW content, get consent before sending that letter.

- d. **Scheduling.** One letter a week is suggested, but do what works best for everyone. Setting a mailing or 'send' day for everyone via an online calendar can help structure the game.
- e. **How will you communicate?** Intended as a paper letter-writing game, players can use alternatives. Any sort of one-way communication works, such as voice recordings, email, or even care packages. Decide how each letter arrives on the island in game. Does it wash up in a crate? Is it a letter in a bottle? A strange puzzle box simply appears in a blink?

Use email for all out of game communication. Whether negotiating moving to the next round or checking in after an intense scene, email is quickest.

- f. **Define each Stranded's relationship to Helper, if playing.** It is likely that as the **Stranded** learn more about **Helper**, strong character emotions will come up. **Helper** is not a villain, but someone trying to find bravery in the face of a very different kind of isolation. Keep this in mind when negotiating how much anger and blame **The Stranded** should potentially put on **Helper**.

Playing the Game/ Writing Letters:

First Round: Introduce Yourself. Goal: Reach out.

Helper Starts: You begin this round by describing how you deliver the pens and paper to the **Stranded** and explaining your intentions. Tell them how you have snuck the tools for letter writing onto their island. Describe what sort of instructions you leave them, if any, to communicate with the other **Stranded**. Include vague hints of who you are, if you wish.

Stranded, Begin after your first letter from Helper: You now, allegedly, have the ability to talk to another. Introduce yourself to the other **Stranded**. You might treat this as a desperate chance to connect, or treat this as a cruel joke, or a last will and testament to be swallowed by the ocean. Include important details of your life in this letter. This is a testament to who you are, perhaps your final one. Remember to send **Helper** any copies or images of anything you send to one another.

Everyone: When you've sent your letter, and read the other **Stranded's** letter, move to Second Round.

Second Round: Get to Know One Another. Goal: Connect.

Stranded Start: With the arrival of the other **Stranded's** letter, you now know you are not alone. How many times did you read the letter? Ask about them while sharing things about you. How long have you been here? Have you tried to escape? Communication may be played chaotically, with crossed letters arriving at various times, or you may wish to negotiate via email a "back and forth" order of who goes next. At some point, **Helper** may contact you. This is a good time to be curious and ask them questions.

Helper: Send letters to both **Stranded**. Focus on your curiosity and disclosing some information as groundwork for your confessions in Third Round. Keep in mind that they do not know anything about you, that they were dying before being transferred to **The Reserve**, or understand its true nature. You may choose to reveal all or some of this info. Keep in mind that neither **Stranded** can recall their abduction either. This round can be hardest on **Helper** as emotions may run high. Don't go to Third Round until you and the **Stranded** process any initial reactions.

Everyone: Proceed to Round Three when you feel ready to hear everyone's heartfelt confessions.

Third Round: Confession. Goal: Getting it all out.

All Characters, anyone can start: The novelty of your connection will wear off. You have somebody to talk to, but they're far away. You will never meet your friend. For **Helper**, this is the first time the **Stranded** have become aware of your nature. This is where your small side comes out, your angry side, the part of you that you may very well hate. The part that you consider bad. Letters at this stage may start off raw. Use email to check in with everyone if your exchanges feel intense. When every character has had a chance to be vulnerable and confess, move to the Fourth Round.

Fourth Round: Compassion. Goal: Uplift the other players.

All Character, anyone can start: Speak to the other characters from the heart of yours. Make it known to the others that you can and do accept them, regardless of their actions. If you share a common confession, now is the time to reveal that they are not alone. Reflect back every positive quality you have picked up from their letters. Recall what the other players have discussed wanting in these scenes, and focus on providing that. That they matter to you, and you have grown to care for them in some way. Avoid statements that minimize the other character's pain.

This is also the point that the **Stranded** need to make peace with **Helper**. What that looks like is up to the players. It could be a truce. It could be atonement. The **Stranded** may forgive **Helper** everything, nothing, or perhaps for some things. The goal of this section is to see **Helper's** efforts, recognize their loneliness, and accept that they are trying with what little power they have. When everyone has had a moment of support and/or understanding, move to the Fifth Round.

Fifth Round: Escape, preferably held over video chat. Goal: Choose your fate.

If players have access to a video conference platform, use that here. Costuming for this meeting and selecting a background that fits is highly encouraged. Give everyone time to see each other, hear each other's voice. This round will be both a hello and a goodbye.

Helper starts: You're going to free them. The **Stranded** have a choice: they may each return to their own time, or they may both escape to one of their times together. Since the illusion of the island is no more, you've made arrangements for the **Stranded** to see and hear you and each other, for the first time. It may be the last as well. If the **Stranded** ask how they can understand each other, make something up. They just can.

Helper must also choose their fate. If **Helper** stays here, they will certainly be locked away, maybe executed for ruining such a large and costly research project. If **Helper** leaves, they will be trapped in a strange, primitive world, a fugitive.

After all is decided, say your final farewells. Give yourselves the time that you need to do this, and when all are ready, have your characters step into the next chapter of their lives and end the call.

Fifth Round: Epilogue. Goal: Write your character's last chapter.

This last scene is both an ending for your character and a debrief for you. Ultimately, you decide what your character's fate is. In an email for everyone to read, preferably no later than three days after the Fifth Round, write out your character's fate based off of your choices.