

Foe

She allowed herself to be drafted, drifting on the warmer rising currents, occasionally gliding somewhat when the need arose.

Behind and above her the sun shone bravely, piercing granite-coloured clouds.

Beneath her the huge structure sprawled, and she floated freely far above it, gazing, her vision magnified, making note of particulars, taking in the sense of it slowly and progressively, as one would eat a large and complex meal.

Metallic, cuboid, many-coloured, irregularly proportioned, electro-magnetically fenced, seemingly lacking guards; these were the things she noted.

Her body: silver, sleek, synthetic, and minute. Instantaneously, it altered form, shifting into streamlined shape. She no longer drifted; she hovered, wings fluttering faster than any biological eye could observe, decisive intent now guiding both her structure and direction.

She began to descend rapidly, insectile body darting through the air, sensing the shifting air currents, dampened heat signals emanating from within her tiny, graceful, and efficient form as it flew.

The invisible barrier surrounding the home had at first proved troublesome, many long hours had she contemplated it, searching for its weakness, probing and testing tentatively. The bubble of energy encircled the entire home; huge and perfectly spherical, a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree orb of insulation.

In the end she had decided on a simple but risky method. She would conceal herself in the folds of the clothing of a trusted aide; many came and went.

Her chosen temporary host had arrived, was exiting a vehicle, and now walked towards the guardhouse. She sped towards him, an arrow in flight, deposited herself discretely in the hood of his robe, and was thus carried across the threshold and into the domain of her would be victim. None would suspect such a tiny interloper as she, now in a different, microscopic slug-like form. Her biology was identical in every observable sense to that of the creature she imitated, such was the nature of her camouflage.

She launched herself off and away from her host, making straight for the nearest wall. She clung to the wall, near the top, and was still.

Scanning the space around her, she noted the room was a sparsely furnished geometric cube, and promptly left the wall to which she clung.

Zippering through the many-roomed house, she gained a quick, yet hazardously askew, perspective of the overall structure. In her tri-hemispherical mind the three-dimensional image of the outer form of the structure, as observed during her reconnaissance flight, mapped itself onto the interior schema, and a complete and mostly accurate map was generated.

Her many, many eyes observed light on all spectrums, her tiny rigid antennae noted the heat signatures present in every room, forming a pattern that, to her mind, evidenced itself as a trail. The unique signatures of the Sensan species, catalogued in the quantum non-sentient chip buried in her miniscule brain, matched one of the dozens of trails she now observed as pulsing and sparkling lines of glimmering dust suspended in air.

Keeping close to the ceiling, she traversed the hallways, tracing the heat signature, following the smoky hyper-fluorescent trail to its, and her, destination. Turning sharply, she entered a large room with a high ceiling. She hovered in the upper reaches of the room, taking in the sum of it.

The room, hexagonal in shape, and decorated in bright, garish, colours, was like the rest of the dwelling; sparingly furnished, but what furnishings there were spoke of incredible wealth and decadent taste. For instance, below and behind her hung a modest-sized engraving depicting the birth of the first sentient machine; an original-copy composite alloy etching, its value easily comparable to a large Habitat©. In reality, she mused, it is probably invaluable, something one would trade rather than purchase with currency. The Sensan; her victim, perched on a length of tubular greyish white substance, which after a moment's analysis, Sol recognized as a portion of the dried intestine of a Troxian Void-Dweller; a fabulously rare and exotic creature. Such a treasure, she thought, may in fact not exist elsewhere in the galaxy; such is its scarcity.

As she mused a pair of cuboid drones moved silently into the room, an exchange ensued, and the Sensan rose from its place, donned a ceremonial headdress, and exited the room. And with its departure her present opportunity to eliminate it expired. She would have to wait for the opportunity to arise again, despite the fact that every moment she spent in this room; this building, increased her potential for discovery exponentially.

From within her came the familiar chuckling. All it ever did was chuckle and mutter and sigh. Barely sentient, the being that dwelt in the dust mote sized yet infinitely complex device deep inside her would, from time to time, produce these bizarre and unwanted responses. Early in their time together

she had considered removal and replacement, but eventually she had become accustomed to the unwanted responses that Chivvy produced.

In her mind she brought forth the 3D map of the sprawling complex and after an exceedingly brief moment recognized that the best, safest course of action was to simply wait for her prey to return. To pass the time she allowed 33 per cent of her processing faculties to review and update the document she had created prior to embarking on this job.

Currently, the document ran thus:

Sensan Species

Avian, artists, performers, academics, semi-nomadic, highly social, exempt from military service, commonly found in administrative roles; education roles; government positions; cannot breed outside of their own species, evolved from reptilian ancestors, certain reptilian traits persist and are present in particular hemispherical regions of the brain and are manifest in certain territorial behaviours and social interactions.

Origin Habitat© is large and almost completely forested. Mating rituals are virtually unknown, extremely private.

Language faculties = exceptional re. Universal Language.

Species language is in two forms, complex and simple. Simple for conversation, complex for artistic purposes, two languages are mutually exclusive.

Strengths:

- Master orators
- Capable of flight
- Talons
- Able to eat and digest almost anything organic.

Weaknesses:

- Prone to freeze or flight in pressure situations
- Deep yet short sleep cycles
- Species employs trances to perform deep thinking tasks.

Target = Glowing Insight Cerebral Governance Instructor

The target is identified as Glowing Insight Cerebral Governance Instructor, a former artist turned political activist turned politician turned elitist. Born in poverty aboard a resource vessel, Glowing Insight survived by creating and selling works of art crafted from scavenged refuse. No information of his familial lineage is extant. There is no record of a name prior to incorporation into the HCAB political sphere. Current info regarding this early stage of life is informal, dubious, and potentially spurious. A dozen Hyperlite© modules scanned the galaxy for genetic information but were unsuccessful. Target is potentially unpredictable and must be treated with the utmost caution.

Methodology

3 methods for erasure are proposed. Each is viable, yet only deemed favourable in certain situations.

1. Contaminate, a poison delivered via consumption. An exotic chemical concoction manufactured specifically for this contract. A.I. calculated viability = 87 per cent.
2. Insertion, delivered directly to the brain from within the cranium. The gland within the Sensan species' brain responsible for arrhythmic regulation is accessed via the bloodstream. Bloodstream to be accessed via the ear canal. A.I. calculated viability = 73 per cent.
3. Immolation, initiated during a deep-thinking trance. A.I. calculated viability = 68 per cent.

The target returned with another Sensan; a smaller, brighter specimen. Upon entering the room, the two creatures turned to face each other, standing approximately a body's length apart. And the two of them launched into the air, hovering, motionless, communicating in subtle ways with each other; a minute flex of chest, a brief ruffle of specific brightly-coloured feathers, angular expressions, a quiet chattering sound; mimicry, flattery, beauty.

The performance continued, becoming rapid and increasingly deliberate and responsive, and she catalogued the entire routine for further analysis at a later date.

Eventually the second, smaller Sensan left, and she continued to observe.

Abruptly, she was addressed by her would-be victim; a chattering chirruping voice that caught her momentarily unaware.

Eschewing a verbal response, she flew gracefully yet rapidly from her position on high and, changing as she travelled; growing, presented herself before her target in her usual, larger-scale, insectile form, eye to eye.

‘How long have you been watching me?’ Sol asked.

‘Since you arrived,’ it replied, flexing its wings slightly and eyeing her sideways, with one eye, intimidatingly, trying to pierce her; to own her.

Her wings fluttered incredibly fast, seemingly stationary, her metallic eyes, colourless and fixed, observed every minute detail of the Sensan, noting its curved and deadly beak, the tiny feathers around its eyes and a mouth that twitched occasionally, the angle of its gaze; and a million other non-descript details that she catalogued at three hundred and fifty meters per second.

‘And do you know why I’m here, in your safe-place, on your wall, watching you?’

‘Yes,’ it replied, simply and without inflection.

She contemplated acting right then, in that instant of acknowledgement, but quelled the impulse, and simply waited for a further response.

‘But you are mistaken, friend,’ it said, still lacking modulation of any kind. ‘I am not the one you seek.’

‘And how is that so?’

‘I am an imposter; I am like you; an eliminator.’

This gave her pause. She contemplated rapidly. Many ideas began to take shape in her mind, one after another, but none taking solid form, nothing, just endless space with ideas unfurling then dissipating; a bubbling soup of confusion.

And then clarity like lightning.

A new form of Synth.

But how did it pass her inspection?

She had scanned every square micrometre of the being to ensure it was her target, hadn’t she?

As she watched the being before her, a portion of her mind continued to process this presumed revelation, searching for confirmation or otherwise,

and within moments a thread dangled before her, she grasped it immediately, and traced it to the source.

New Synths. Suggested but not confirmed. Snippets of unreliable information from unlit corners of the galaxy. Tenuous threads, but threads nonetheless. Threads like tentacles.

A mere instant had passed, and she responded to the imposter, saying, 'And so, who are you, then?'

The reply was slow, measured, somewhat sardonic. 'I am not the one you seek; therefore, you may leave, immediately, lest I destroy you.'

She dwelt on this for a nanosecond, before responding with, 'you're bluffing, and you know I could eliminate you easily and there is nothing anyone or anything can do to prevent it. So, convince me to leave you be.'

'Hmmm,' came another measured response, 'I am not your target, there is absolutely no reason for you to eliminate me. To do so would be an error; an irreversible solution to the equation. A false solution.'

Rattling up from below came Chivvy's response, a whining, high-pitched groaning of metal on metal, the churning of invisible cogs, a feeling of rust flaking and fluttering here and there.

Yes, thought Sol, I agree.

And instantly she activated, propelled forward, bullet-like, shrinking tenfold, closing the distance between them in an instant, piercing the creature's right eye and travelling through its thin yet compact skull, onward through the dense collection of integrated and connected cells that is and was the brain, out the back of the head, and stopping behind the creature as life left it.

The creature, whatever it was, crumpled to the floor unceremoniously, fluid leaking from the hole in its face.

The room around her; in shades of grey and brown, was still and silent as death. For several moments Sol was stationary, thinking of nothing in particular, but processing all that had just taken place. The organic matter that covered her, if truly organic it was, sluiced off of her uniformly in response as she generated an electromagnetic field. As the stuff fell to the floor she drew her thoughts together, plotting a course that proffered no imperfections.

She exited the sprawling complex as she entered; weaving here and there, secreted away, non-visible.

Trickling through her mind as she travelled, a stream of thoughts ran thus: *why did I do that? does this count as contractual fulfilment? do I have another to eliminate? does one replace another? was that whom I eliminated even alive? and if not, then what? who is responsible for the initial elimination?*

should I pursue them? will they pursue me? are they my true target? are we rivals? friends? strangers? where to now???

At full speed she travelled, leaving the PerpetualStability Habitat© in her wake. Her ship a thin strip of light coursing through vast swathes of empty darkness.

Inside the ship Sol rested uneasy.

From deep inside her Chivvy muttered something incomprehensible, finishing her murmured soliloquy with a dramatic sigh that trailed off into eventual, tick tocking silence.

She wondered at her actions and their results, at the relevance of morality in such situations, and such ponderous thoughts possessed her, endlessly churning about in her tripartite brain as her ship raced across dark and empty spaces, the perfect exterior of midnight marred by speckles twinkling here and there.

Sometime later, Sol busied herself in her lair.

As she updated system files and synched data packages across various storage spaces, she noted that the disturbance within her prevailed. Literally and figuratively in the background, HelpScanRetrieveProvidePlus verbalised the process, providing a monotonous monologue of narration that was somewhat calming. It kept Sol simmering.

Earlier, they had discussed what had happened, and her assistant had provided some clarity, and some further confusion, as was often the case.

But some essential part of Sol was not happy. The discontent would not abate; she knew this from past experience.

Restless

Something leftover, unresolved

A part of her mind would not let go

The thread clung

A wispy thing

An irritant

The feeling scraped its fingers across her insides...

And amidst the throes of a deep and unsettling discontent, Sol did what she did best. She planned, she processed, she manufactured munitions, she crafted components, she worked towards the next step, another contract to pursue, another victim to pursue, another pursuit, another, another...

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