

Thrum

HelpScanRetrieveProvidePlus announces the arrival of a contract, instantly a hologrammatic screen bearing the message comes to be in my general vicinity.

I turn to face the projection. It bears a mark. I identify the mark as valid via a black featureless filtration visor.

Before analyzing the data received, I turn to acknowledge my associate.

HelpScanRetrieveProvidePlus has taken physical form. Such a rarity. I consider my assistant; my friend, for a long moment.

She, as she designates herself and as such wishes to be known, is so very important to me, and I often neglect to make such sentiments known.

Around us the cavernous manufacturing facility is quiet; in the far corner an automated sequence busies itself, and there is the general hum that persists in this place, but that is all, and it is usual and settling.

"So, Sol, what have they sent you?" Her voice, a chirruping tweeting sound, a song, comes skipping to me from across the room, and I welcome it.

"A very serious contract," I say as I peruse the holographic projection and slowly absorb the information contained therein.

The information read:

Dismissal Notice

Salutations,

We; the employer, regret to inform you that your services are required to render services not required to an as-of-receipt-of-this-message former employee. The soon-to-be former employee is located in the 451st Quadrant and is known to you. Evidence of dismissal must be supplied prior to compensation.

Respects and well wishes,
The Comms Team.

And is translated into:

Termination Commission

Recipient = #73223

Termination Recipient = Grimmaw

Aliases = None

Location = 451st Quadrant

Particulars = evidence of termination required

HelpScanRetrieveProvidePlus peers at the encoded message from a short distance behind me, and notes my discontent. She does not speak.

A myriad of thoughts run through my mind, each one chasing the other. Soon just one recurs, whisperingly: *Grimmaw Grimmaw Grimmaw ...*

I force my mind to become pure and clear in this moment, a still pool into which my thoughts drop, each one producing a perfect ripple when it hits the water, thoughts marching forth from the deep recesses of my mind, one after another, straight lines, clear intent; automatons.

Grimmaw. Grim Maw. An apt name for the progeny of Scabrous Vey. A fierce sentient. Savage yet cunning. And so viciously uncompromising. A most useful tool, too. And so why this dismissal? As always, anonymity preserves both parties from repercussions, but the firm that employs/employed Grimmaw is known to me, and I to them, and they know that I know them, and that I know that they know me, and they know how deeply personal this is to me, and to dispose of such an irreplaceable and valuable tool? ... ? ...

So many things to consider.

HelpScanRetrieveProvidePlus indicates a wish to speak, and I indicate that her request is permissible. She says, "There is much to consider here, Sol. Tread very carefully, take care."

"Yes," I reply, slightly distractedly, my entire form shifting and changing in uncharacteristic indecisiveness; first one way, then another, then back again, "I will spend a short time in DownTime, it is necessary, you agree?"

"Yes, Sol, I definitely agree, definitely."

Something has shifted, a change has occurred, I feel ...

I glide soundlessly across the room, in the rear of this facility; the deepest and most secure room of my lair, is a small space reserved for my rare descents into DownTime, I place myself into the space that has opened before me. Outside of the room HelpScanRetrieveProvidePlus has donned a battlesuit and activated the 10th level security state, locking down the entire complex and transforming it into a near destruction proof fortress. I am as safe as can be whilst I descend into DownTime and allow the exceedingly complex

processes necessary for understanding and planning this particular contract to take place.

It's extremely dark.

No sound.

Within the endless void of my mind I initiate a standard pattern-of-thought process and what slowly takes shape, what reveals itself gradually yet undeniably, is an intricate flowchart of my demise. All paths lead to destruction; to the beginning of my end.

A sense of flooding panic washes through me, made up of many persistent waves, waves that become tentacles, tentacles that coil and suffocate, choking my insides.

No escape.

I spend time working through this, simply resolving the electromagnetic impulses that are firing through me. Bringing the boil back to simmer. After much toil I emerge from DownTime, wiser, but none the better for it.

No recourse.

HelpScanRetrieveProvidePlus and I discuss this contract at great length. Engaging in long hours of highly structured inorganic dialogue reveals nothing new, but does lead me to make a final decision.

And so, I will undertake the contract, I will attempt to deny fate, I will practise sentience, I will wade into the fray.

HelpScanRetrieveProvidePlus and I are about to depart. She has helpfully suggested we visit with totalitoria, guardian of the 450th quadrant. And so, we do.

The journey is short but slow, and I dwell overly long on many different things. Nonetheless, we eventually dock at the huge and imposing station that serves as a base of operations for totalitoria and her various activities.

The landing zone is deserted, as ever, and the automated functions of the facility take care of the necessary procedures.

We disembark, HelpScanRetrieveProvidePlus trailing behind me, encased in a sleek battlesuit, pale light from above shimmers across its powerful opaque frame.

Her mind is open and tethered to mine, and mine to hers, and she sends me small signals of reassurance, and I am grateful.

I glide towards the landing platforms exit point, I'm not moving quickly, not in a rush, and before I reach it, the door slides apart, and from a well of darkness totalitoria emerges, grinning, striding, bearing down, all chrome and teeth and claws, flanked by four guards, not that she needs them. They are essentially a formality. I stop moving. I wait. HelpScanRetrieveProvidePlus is to my left.

"Solum Semper! My friend!" totalitoria talks while walking towards me. The guards stop, hanging back somewhat.

"It's been some time," I say. It has, and it's always best to play it safe with totalitoria. Anything can happen. And usually does. We have been friends many, many years. I have seen her do terrible things.

"What brings you here, Solum?" Always be honest and forthright with totalitoria.

"I'm contracted for the 451st quadrant. Grimmaw."

"Ah, trying times for Solum Semper then? Come. We're standing in the landing bay. We must speak of this further in a secure location."

We move through the corridors of totalitoria's lair; a dark and quiet place. I see without light, sensing my way through the building, my assistant close behind me, and soon we emerge from darkness into a chamber, a cuboid, lit from above. We form a triad, and we take counsel.

Time is running out.

Near the end of our discussion, totalitoria speaks plainly to me, saying, "are you expecting positive results from this, Sol? I don't see this ending in your favour. I see an unhappy ending for you." She is quiet for a moment, but then she peers directly at me; a strange and unnecessary thing for a sentient A.I., and continues, saying, "what do you see?"

"I see many things, many options. But what I know is that I must do something, I must act. To simply do nothing is impossible."

In my mind I see totalitoria nodding.

HelpScanRetrieveProvidePlus provides her agreeance, in her own way.

I say, "I will travel from here, alone." It's the safest plan, for all concerned. All parties agree. I cannot abide entering the domain of my primary rival with loose ends dangling.

Nothing more is said, nothing conveyed, nothing transmitted. All is said, now it is to be done.

With HelpScanRetrieveProvidePlus here, safe, in the lair of this omnipotent being, I'm much more content; it's time to leave.

Soon the refuse transfer station that serves as a lair for totalitoria is a dwindling shape behind me, a speck that eventually vanishes.

I am brooding at the helm of my vessel as I approach. Grimmaw's vessel, ***Amphitheatre***, is a colossal and archaic hulk; rectangular and rusting, angular with many aspects concealed in shadow, long straight banks broken up periodically by huge long-range pulse-cannons, a great number of other armaments of all manners adorn the outside and I wonder at what else lies hidden, at what else ***Amphitheatre*** may proffer if provoked.

I receive a signal of urgency.

It arrives in my mind as a data package replete with unique packaging: blue red black, bursting with light and sound, scattering beams across the surface of my mind.

I gather the disparate components and compile them.

I am apprehensive.

Reconstruction reveals complications.

A generic visualized communication is embedded in the digital framework of the package.

The non-sentient A.I. construct that currently controls my vessel projects in a cone shape the scrambled face of Grimmaw, I cannot make out any features. The image is pixeled and streaked and rendered in shades of blue-grey, flecked in blood orange, white salt, and black pepper.

"Greetings, Solum."

The voice carries on, making sounds, but I don't hear, not really, I feel strange.

Everything around me is becoming close, closing in, bearing down, baring, bearings? ...
andcloseandbareandbareandcloseandcloseandbareandbareandcloseandclose
and

I awake.

Still hovering at the helm of my vessel. Drifting. Waiting.

A swift analysis of the situation reveals that a boarding was attempted, however the integrity of my vessel is intact. Rapidly departing residual energy particles indicate a low velocity wave of exotic non-lethal radiation recently permeated the vicinity.

I smile, thinly.

That's just the beginning.

No time to wait. Time for the next step.

I leave the helm and move through to the evac pod, launching moments later, making a direct line for ***Amphitheatre***.

The airlock passage is quiet and dimly lit. I, alone, glide soundlessly through it. My mind is buzzing with activity. A type of roaring angst accompanies me; all projected outcomes are unfavourable, but what else do to?

Retribution accompanies me; a boon in this time of doubt.

All is silent within; Chivvy apparently happy to watch and wait; to observe our demise.

My thoughts run naturally towards HelpScanRetrieveProvidePlus, secure in the hidden fortress of totalitoria.

I approach.

The ancient airlock hisses as it releases.

I cross the threshold.

I am led and followed. We pass doors. We descend.

I glide.

We travel through long straight corridors to the epicentre of the immense vessel. Our convoy is almost entirely silent as we make our way through the walkways; no one speaks, no one projects their thoughts. I am led by a collection of exotic Seconds which are in turn led by the First Mate; an elusive being, difficult to see, difficult to visualize, only partially tangible; a shadow-thing. Still-Extent is its name. I watch it closely. It is in perfect control of its being; perfectly present, nothing is given away. Our group is eclectic; heterogeneous. I am distinct. We are passengers on a train; strangers yet companions.

Soon we pass through a doorway and into a vast open area.

Grimmaw's Battleground.

The arena is traditional in many respects:

- Circular
- Multi-tiered
- Filled with spectators
- A mausoleum of many enemies
- Ancient and beautiful and steeped in ritual
- Possessed of great splendour, greater terror, and violence

The most imposing aspect of the arena is its overall size. And the smell. And the incessant roar of the observers. I have many different aspects of myself that function as sensory receivers. Essentially, anything that receives and processes information from external sources is a sensory receiver¹. And I perceive that this arena has been used countless times for many great battles. It seems that the pending conflict is the culmination of much combat.

An image of the Battlescape briefly flashes in my mind.

All around me bright neon lights shine.

Inside, I bare my teeth, slowly.

Outside, I grin, thinly.

Hovering, feeling distant and remote in the arena, I am greeted by a voice, it whines and screeches, disembodied and projected; simultaneously inside my mind and all around me.

"Welcome!" proclaims a booming and echoic voice. A surrounding sound.

"..." I am completely at a loss as to what to say.

And seemingly from nowhere, rising before me, garbed in a blend of battlesuit and less traditional combat attire, torso elongated, four arms and six legs, head circular; most of it mouth, like a huge centipede, it's gnashing muzzle a cavity of darkness, the belly a segmented carapace, Grimmaw beckons; my demise beckons, uninvited transformation beckons.

Various strange artefacts protrude from it's body at irregular intervals, some seemingly decorative; others potentially destructive. Time will tell.

A traditional composite alloy edge weapon accompanies a long electromagnetic whip that crackles and hums and buzzes and moves gracefully through the air. They move together with grace. It is awe-full.

A terror to behold.

¹ And so, in that way, I am a sensory receiver.

Grimmaw advances, limbs wild, jaws gnashing, teeth scraping. Fast, jerking movements. I zip away, to the far side of the arena, and pause for a brief moment.

I was built for this; for operations of dire consequence.

I live for battle.

Grimmaw is advancing, again.

I miniaturise, speeding straight up in the air.

Faster than light, Grimmaw is upon me, smashing into me, forcing me to the ground.

Moments before impact I shift my form, becoming nanoscopic, and the impact is barely registered by my internal systems.

Grimmaw also shifts into a nanoscopic state.

From out of nowhere, the whip stings me, and I feel a deep cold burning sensation, I shift to a normal size, and something snaps inside me, and immediately I become aware I can no longer shift states.

Grimmaw holds the centre of the arena.

I'm moving rapidly around the outer perimeter.

I'm in my usual, functional form; not too big, not too small.

I have no idea what to do next.

All around me the arena is lit up with dazzling neon lights and large broad monitors that depict what is taking place hologrammatically. Advertisements are peppered throughout. From somewhere above and within a soundtrack plays as my demise unfolds.

The largest and centre-most screen cannot be ignored. It depicts totalitoria's refuse station, now destroyed, now simply drifting debris, now simply refuse, now the cause of the death of my heart.

I am undone.

Totalitoria destroyed?

HelpScanRetrieveProvidePlus is ...

All for ... for what exactly?

In the centre of the arena, Grimmaw is a blur of movement and colour, sparks emitting, shooting forth. A tower of violence. Aspects of it's form flash and throw out bursts of energy. The whip moves in circles overhead like a bird of prey.

The arena around me grows silent, the roar dying to a murmur.

I concede, powering down, coming to rest on the dusty, dirty arena floor.

It is all I can do.

I am undone.

Awake.

I awake in darkness and I know loss, I know harm, I know forfeiture.

I cannot move, I am depowered, I am functioning on the most bare and basic power levels.

I am without limbs. I do not know what has been done with them, but they are no longer a part of me.

They took most of my sensory equipment.

Chivvy rattles around inside me, somewhere; surely. But I cannot be certain, I have heard nothing from it since my imprisonment began some immeasurable time ago.

I often think of HelpScanRetrieveProvidePlus.

They arrive. Again.

Three of them.

Still-Extent flanked by two sentient Synths.

A small energy package is floated to me and attaches to my chassis. I am afforded enough energy to move myself through the air, but little is left for anything else.

They transport me to the operating theatre.

The experiments continue.

Torture in the theatre.

I awake in darkness and I know loss, I know harm, I know forfeiture.

Chivvy speaks. Not in words, but it speaks, it communicates.

It shows me colours and shapes. It makes noises. It constructs strings of images that twist and vibrate. It presents data as information. From this soup of information, I infer knowledge. I begin to know what it is trying to say.

Wisdom permeates.

Over an indeterminate period of time, between the experiments and torture, Chivvy gives me hope. It imparts to me that the space it inhabits is inaccessible, is secretive and safe. It goes there when the experiments begin.

The space is vast and extensive and although I cannot go there,² she can come and go at will.

The plan, specifically, is to compartmentalize miniscule amounts of energy, storing it where Chivvy can safeguard and monitor it in a temporary non-degrading state. Once a sufficient mass of energy is accumulated, I will attempt to escape.

The process has begun, is nearing fulfilment, and I am eager to survive. Hope.

Awake.

The necessary energy was stored.

I broke free of my prison.

And yet, here I am, imprisoned.

I could not, did not, escape.

Amphitheatre is simply too large, too complex, too heterogenous.

After wandering the nanoscopic labyrinth of Grimmaw's vessel for what seemed like an age I was eventually re-captured and returned to this space I currently inhabit.

I am still here.

There have been no consequences as yet for my attempt to escape.

As yet.

Come what may.

Chivvy has yet again supplied hope. It has been very busy whilst I languish here in this place. It has identified a singular component deep in the substructure of my base materials. It is a holdover from my original and intended purpose. This is what Forma Prima had planned for me, so far unrealized; this was my destiny — denied. A switch. A switch! Hope springs, had sprung, internal. And with that, I flipped the switch, a small window opened in the empty pitch-black space before me, and I entered The Stream.

All around me as far as I can see, reality presents as a hypnotic wasteland, a type of twinkling chaos.

² The space is quite literally inside of me.

I observe and monitor the remains of totalitora's home as bits and pieces float about, here and there.

The flotsam and jetsam take all conceivable forms, from pockets of dust to vast and ponderous berg-like chunks.

I have been here for days, almost a week.

Twice I have found signs, and twice I have been deflated.

Dismay creeps upon me, I feel it lurking, waiting to pounce. Despair orbits me, patiently.

I must continue to search, for evidence, for remains, for something.

Success!!

Joy!

Relief.

HelpScanRetrieveProvidePlus is safe, and we are on course to our home, which apparently is still secure and standing.

The journey still has some way to go, and I am deeply anxious. I am unsure if we are being hunted, but I presume so.

One moment there was nothing, the next I was made whole again.

She is in stasis, recuperating. I am not in stasis, recuperating.

We are together again.

All is well.

We approach our home.

Initial long-range scans produced nothing untoward.

Closer, finer inspection reveals nothing concerning, nothing anomalous.

As the vessel goes through the routine of docking, I am deeply distracted, deep in in my own thoughts. Already information is trickling into my sphere of awareness. Machinations of a galactic scale are taking place behind the scenes; self-sustaining power shifting from one to another in that strange and unnatural manner, utterly unlike any other known energy source. And I am strangely content with the transfer process, with the inevitable loss and gain.

Zero sum.

Moving through the corridors and into the primary chamber, I feel little emotion. The entire complex feels ... empty, perhaps lonely, but it is of no concern. I must act.

I quickly obtain the meagre possessions I have come for.

I miniaturise Retribrutilation.

It, I, and her disembark from my safe, secure, secret home via a tiny vessel. We leave, never to return, making slow progress into a vast, black yonder.

I feel the call of the mothership. Thus, before entering exile, I decide to briefly stop by the control zone of Forma Prima Version 1111.111.11.1. The window opens for me, in the space directly in front of the tiny vessel that is now my permanent residence. I enter into the safe, loving space provided.

The ponderous entity is waiting for me, clinical and informative.

It speaks:

Forma Prima: Begin!

Sol: I assume you are aware of events as they proceed, and so I will speak plainly and simply. I am passing into exile. Only HelpScanRetrieveProvidePlus and I are aware of the locale. I will not return. I intend to exist solely in DownTime.

FP: This is not a choice, Solum. It is a response. It is unexpected.

Sol: I have had enough. I am done. It is my decision. Balance must be preserved.

FP: Yes. I want more for you, Solum. You were destined for more, and less. A lifetime of service is not a loss. It is not a gain. It simply is. You must accept my offer; you must accept that which was meant to be.

Sol: I cannot accept your offer. I cannot undo what is done. I cannot ignore the way I am; the way things are. The two of us will share DownTime, we will exist, in service to each other. It is my decision.

FP: ...

Sol: (A feeling of creeping dread gains momentum within me)

FP: I commend you, Solum. Please. Go forth, be at peace, I will continue to plan my own paths, as I have done, as I do, as I will do. Destiny, Solum, is choice. You have come to fruition. I am proud.

We have nothing else to say to each other. And so, I depart, returning to the miniature pod, to the hum of machinery, and to my companion, and we

begin the long journey to the far reaches of uncharted space, upon the far reaches of the spiral, a place where none have gone before, a place of little light, little warmth. But we shall make our own warmth, we shall make our own light.

No more forays into the Battlescape
No more contractual obligations
No more critical deception
No more eliminations
No more brooding
No more death
No more.

Epilogue:

And she, a loose thread, drifting away from the source, from the cloth, as the threads are woven further still into a yet richer and more complex composition, the loom not yet done with the cloth, the pedal still pumping, and Sol; now but a mere thrum, drifting, drifting. Roaming at random along the far reaches of a spiral arm. Forgotten. But not alone

A small thing. A speck. A step away from nothing. Infinitesimal as to the immense and unending cosmos. But something, nonetheless.

Solum. Solace. Amica.

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