

A Sheep in Wolf's Clothing

The zig-zag paths between shadow to shadow are the safest. Never amongst the crowds, and never close enough for anyone to see. A precaution that necessitates survival. It is crucial that everyone thinks it is simply an urban legend, the wily musings of doting mothers attempting to scare their children into behaving properly. Of politically motivated pro-extermination useful idiots, spurning the masses to the dangers of predator disease. Even if that turns out to be at least somewhat true... At best, the thought of a lurking predator that had managed to evade immolation would keep their attention drawn while he made his way to another home.

In truth he had employed some rather unscrupulous tactics to that effect in the past, when avoiding the gaze of others had failed miserably. Generally this first involved finding an already dead animal, which proved rather difficult to do reliably. Then, scout out a well used walking trail or road opposite to their current home and desired fleeing direction. Mangle the corpse a little bit, scatter the remains around, then finally add some sinister looking scratch marks all over the place. Even if he could not find a suitable animal corpse in a reasonable amount of time, all it took was to draw enough of his own blood around the area. Add in some tufts of fur, perhaps leave a basket with some fruit scattered around. Instant local monster threat to keep everyone pre-occupied. Honestly, they are predictably easy to fool.

Though he hoped he wouldn't have to do that any more. Not only is it an incredibly risky operation in its own right, but he is currently in a rather comfortable arrangement right now. It would be a shame to have to run from such comfortable accommodations. An old pre-warp building that had been long since abandoned. The locals avoid it simply because it is simply too far out of the way and offers literally nothing of any interest. Though they also say the building is haunted and cursed, though that is likely just to keep children from snooping around and getting injured in a dilapidated building far from home.

But an approaching human is another matter entirely. Now this... this may present a problem.

The ceaseless light of the Venlil Prime perma-day trickled into the room, dodging the blackout curtains hung in front of the room's only window. A female figure on the bed tosses in her sleep, rolling over to the other side of the bed. A beam of light that had made its way inside now lays draped across her closed eyes. Unfortunately, between the involuntary stirring and the oppressive light, consciousness returns to her hazy mind. Inevitable of course, but unfortunate because Ms. Joan is incredibly hungover.

As eyes creak open to greet the burning sun, the mind burns from a self-induced headache. The dust in the room danced in the sunlight, resembling bubbles in a golden glass of beer. From the vague imagery and growing nausea, Joan launches herself into the bathroom to vomit. As it turns out, drinking contests against Venlil are a foolhardy endeavor. They are practically built to metabolize alcohol.

Not without lack of trying on her part. Though to add insult to injury, they had been drinking a local liquor, while she was just drinking an import beer. Merely a matter of being outclassed.

After alternating for a while, between the sink for water and the toilet for puking, she finally returns to bed and places a cold cloth on her forehead. She lays there for quite some time contemplating life choices while mouth breathing rather deeply, the occasional groan being the only other noises made. A light knock on the door interrupts her mediation of suffering.

Joan calls out in a raspy voice. "Dear God, ugh... Yes, what is it?"

There is silence, followed closely by a set of two more light knocks.

"Fuuuuck, just open the door!"

A fumbling behind the door can be heard as the lock clicks. The door creeps open as one of the timid Venlil staff peeks his head into her den. The sight of the half naked woman on the bed causes the poor thing to recoil a bit, both in fear and embarrassment. To which he begins to profusely apologize.

"OH!.. Gods, I-I'm sorry, Miss... Joan was it?"

"Yes yes, that's me. Don't be so nervous, it's not very flattering you know?" Joan shifts herself to an upright seating position on the bed, stretching and yawning. A yawning human isn't a very flattering look to a Venlil either, which was clearly written across the staff member's face. "So, what brings you here? Not just gonna sit there in the doorway looking all cute and defenseless are you?"

"N-no, of course not! This is j-just your wake up call Miss. W-well, the second attempt, I should say."

"Ugh... Shit... I should get ready then. Hey, listen. You got any pain meds, and a tall glass of juice or something?" She animates her two hands as an exaggeration of how tall the glass should be, which was almost a full arm's length. "I'll leave an extra nice tip for you if you can help me out here."

"Yes of course Miss! I-I'll be right back!"

With that the little Venlil vanishes away, shutting the door in his haste a little too loudly for Joan's taste. She groans while hauling herself out of bed to give herself a quick 'tops and tails' wash in the sink with a cloth, back home there is a more derogatory term for that. She makes herself decent by dressing in her travel worn hiking attire and packs up her belongings, just in time for her hangover cure to arrive. After paying for her room for the night, and a healthy tip to her little nervous room service helper, she heads out into the quiet town for some food and supplies before heading out on her trek.

Her target was an old pre-warp building, a rather large accommodation complex resembling the old sanatoriums of slavic countries back home on Earth. Joan suspects that it had once shared a similar purpose, though the locals don't know much about it. In fact the only thing they ever said about it was to steer clear of it, as it had harbored predatory nests in the past. She studies the sat-map of the area over breakfast, the concrete top and courtyard barely visible through the overgrowth of the forest attempting to reclaim it.

Joan, or rather Joan Laurent, is something of a social archeologist. Though perhaps a little more focused on the sociological and cultural side of things. Her time back on Earth was spent in far flung towns and villages, uncovering the bigger picture of a culture, their history and place in that little spot of the world. She practically lived off grant money, writing papers on her discoveries and insights so that they may someday be transcribed into history books. Following the onset of warp technology, the call of the greater galactic community was an opportunity too good to pass up.

Now she finds herself in a rather backwater alien village, a hearty trek from her first xeno-cultural history outing. A rough road lay ahead, a road she'd likely have to carve herself. She wouldn't have it any other way.

The giant concrete and stone structure lay ahead beyond the tree line. It had become nearly swallowed by nature, creeping vines hugged many of the walls from ground to ceiling, shrubbery grew out of the windows and atop its ceiling. The inky blackness of the light starved interior contrasted against the bleached outer stone walls. There is a certain beauty in the decay of the old, a facade of once held modernity long forgotten.

Joan finds herself standing in what used to be a courtyard, the brickwork she stands on is broken and twisted, large humps and other irregularities caused by roots growing just beneath the surface. The complex before her, about three storeys tall with a mostly flat roof, looks to be about 90 or 100 meters long. Dozens of windows run the length of the building, through some of them, light can be seen shining through. Probably due to a collapsed wall or ceiling further inside. Though something had caught her eye, it was something like a silhouette of movement against the dimly lit interior of one of those windows. Her eyes train on the window while she mutters to herself.

"Hmm... could've sworn... Maybe some of the locals actually do snoop around here, kids probably messing around or something. Best if I announce myself, wouldn't wanna scare them right out of their fur if I stumble upon them in the darkness."

"HELLOOOO? JUST HERE TO TAKE A LOOK AROUND!"

Nothing but the sound of wind rustling leaves greets Joan's ears, while she takes this moment to wait for some sort of response, she begins to study the site for suitable entry points. The main doorway is completely impassable due to the rubble debris, not counting the foliage growing in and around it. However a large tree growing alongside the building runs directly adjacent to one of the first floor windows. The climb in through there is at present significantly easier than any other

way. Once she has convinced herself that she is in fact alone, the obstacle of gaining entry to the facility begins.

She hoists herself up the trunk and throws her backpack inside before climbing through herself. The acoustics of this mostly stone building reverberate every noise she makes. As she moves to retrieve her backpack the crunch of her boots against the soiled floor bounce sound down the hallway and back again. Joan fumbles through her pockets for her flashlight to survey the room. It is part of a much larger area, boxed in by a long counter and a singular dividing wall. It resembles a reception front desk, with a little extra attached office space. Joan walks past the counter and into the greater reception area. A long corridor runs the length of the complex from east to west, just around the corner a mangled staircase facing perpendicular to the hallway leads upwards. Joan creeps her way upwards trying not to trip and fall on the scattered debris.

The upper floors more closely resemble the look of a hospital. The walls that are still intact have a sort of homogenous, ceramic-like cladding. Wiping away the dust and grime reveals that it still retains a sheen of its former glory, at least in areas where it hasn't been utterly destroyed. Joan begins to suspect that this really is like an old sanatorium, acting as both resort and long-term care.

After some aimless walking she enters a room with what looks like a bed or operating table, with restraints along where arms and legs would be. There are two straps of metal, where the head looks like it belongs. One is formed into a cup shape, clearly made to clasp a head. The other was a little further down at mouth level, it is deformed and twisted as if it had been chewed upon many years ago.

"Failed attempts to find a cure."

The meek voice from behind Joan causes her to nearly jump out of her skin. Swinging both her body and flashlight towards the direction of the speaker revealed it to be a rather dirty and emaciated male Venilil a few meters away. Wearing some sort of cloth around his face, in what appears to be a shemagh, leaving only eyes and upper head exposed.

"Jesus fucking Christ! Couldn't you have announced yourself earlier instead of sneaking up on me like that?!" Joan grips her chest as she manages out her exacerbated reply.

"I... apologize. I had to make sure you were not here with any others... May I ask what you are doing here, in a place like this?"

Joan continues to catch her breath, a wild and slightly angry look still lingers in her eyes. She eventually responds pointedly. "I am a sort of historian. I heard about this interesting pre-warp building and came to try and hopefully uncover any cultural and societal relevance it has."

"I see. There is certainly a lot of history here. Though after the onset of warp technology and the subsequent integration with the Federation, this place became something horrible. What happened after was even worse."

"What do you mean, what happened here?" The surprise and anger in her eyes are quickly replaced with a burgeoning interest.

"Come. There is a sealed records room you can look over. Over time I've had a chance to read much of what isn't destroyed or illegible."

The scraggly Venlil turns to head down the eastern corridor in what is obviously practiced stealthy movements, flicking his tail in a beckoning manner. He barely makes a sound traversing the auditory minefield that is the floor. After taking a moment, Joan follows suit almost reluctantly. There is clearly something not quite right, so she decides to try and fish for information from this mysterious Venlil.

"So tell me, what is your name, and what are you doing all the way out here?"

There is a palpable pause before he offers a response. "I... don't have a name. And this is my home, for now at least."

"You... don't have a name? I've never heard of much in the way of homelessness here, I'm sure there's a social program here that can take you in and-"

"NO!" He blurts out rather loudly, the sudden aggressive tone completely surprises Joan. The normal meekness in his voice soon returns. "I...No, I wouldn't be welcome there, or anywhere for that matter. They would kill me if they found me. So this is my home, until I need to find another. Always moving, always running."

"Wait, what? Are you supposed to be dangerous, or a criminal of some kind?"

"I am neither, and somehow both. My crimes are birth and my continued existence."

"I don't really understand..."

The duo turn a corner and through the opening of a large metal door. The numerous cylindrical latches resemble those of a bank vault, though not quite as heavy duty. The lack of dust on the operating handle, and shine on the latches indicates that someone is still using this door frequently. As opposed to the rest of the building, this room is rather clean. In one corner there is a pile of grass or straw, like a makeshift bedding, with some books laying next to it. Nearby there are some baskets with what looks to be fruit and other edible plants. The far wall has a number of large and heavy looking filing cabinets.

The nameless Venlil saunters over towards the bedding and plops himself down, gesturing a tail towards the filing cabinets.

"Feel free to browse, the cabinets to the left are the oldest records, and to the right are the newest. The newest are the most incomplete though, which isn't exactly surprising. Unless you want to hear about it all from me, if you wish."

Joan makes her way over towards the cabinets, only to stop a few short paces away from them. She instead turns towards her mysterious companion, shooting him with a penetrating glare.

"Look... I don't mean to pry, but it's obvious you are trying to hide something. What did you mean by your continued existence being a crime, and what's with the face covering anyway?"

"I...always keep this on, have to keep it on. I don't want to scare anyone."

"Oh please, you are still Venlil aren't you? Unless you are one of those freakish Tilfish. I realize that sounds insensitive but I do have my limits... Honestly, I am sure you must be more afraid of me than I am of you."

The male Venlil steps up from the bedding he had been sitting on and begins to remove the cloth that is wrapped across his face. At first glance, and from the other side of the room, he looks to be entirely normal by Venlil standards. As the flashlight falls upon his face from certain angles there is a slight glint from around his mouth, though it is mostly unnoticed by Joan.

"Am I missing something here? You look entirely normal to me."

He sighs and approaches within arms reach of Joan. The glint that she saw from around his mouth became much more apparent as he opened up his jaw for her, and tapped his paw against two rather large and pointed maxillary canine-like teeth on either side of his mouth. A veritable set of fangs on an obligate herbivore. Joan is initially taken aback with bewilderment. She had heard of the supposed and likely farcical 'predator disease' time and time again, but had no idea that an actual physical manifestation for it existed. Her next words are rather tactless.

"Oh my GOD, you are ADORABLE!" At that moment the sharp-toothed Venlil looked absolutely mortified until she quickly composed herself. "Shit, I'm sorry! That's incredibly insensitive given the position you are in."

"A-Are you insane, how in the stars is this adorable to you?! I am a monster, an abomination. There is no reason for you to not treat me as such! Though... I suppose that is the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me. But It doesn't change my nature, who I am."

Joan makes a few slow steps towards to lay a hand upon the dirty shoulder of her newfound companion, to speak in a more comforting tone. "I can understand why you've had such a hard time. But on Earth how you look does not define who you are. Speaking of which, how about I give you a proper name? Something other than 'monster' or 'abomination', as a show of faith from us backwards humans."

"You humans are certainly odd...I... I suppose that would be alright. It would make it easier to communicate with me I will admit."

Joan offers no more than a closed mouth smile as a response before kinking her head to one side in an animated thinking gesture. She internally laughs at the absurdity of a cliché name like

'Nosferatu', or 'Smiley' before getting her mind set straight, leaning towards both a practical definition and stylish moniker.

"Umm... Oh! How about... Saber?"

The male Venlil gives an uncharacteristic quizzical look before responding. "Saber... It has a certain ring to it. The word doesn't exactly translate though, does it mean anything in particular?"

"It comes from a group of animals on earth, saber-toothed animals, with teeth just like yours. Though many are long extinct, a few species are still prominent."

His quizzical mannerism drops as well as his timbre, as if he is slightly disappointed. Or rather, in a way of coming to terms with your own preconceived fate. "So, that's why you gave me that name, they are all predators then?"

"Oh no, not at all. One species for example is Musk Deer, adorable critters. Complete herbivores with side-facing eyes and all! Another species is warthogs, they primarily eat grass and roots, though they are technically omnivores."

His keenness returns in the form of a more bewildered flavor, and with at least a hint of credulity. "That is... Earth biology is very confusing, but interesting to say the least. If one of those 'Musk Deer' were here on Venlil Prime, I am sure it would be burned on the spot."

"Like I said before, how you look doesn't define you."

"Saber..." As the alien word slips from his mouth he ponders on the meaning of his identity. To be nameless was to be an animal. Never taking a name for himself was a sort of self-penance for his living, waking sin. There was no point in believing he would be accepted as anything other than an animal, as such there was no point in believing he WAS anything but an animal. Though now there exists identities outside of the 'normal' framework, new possibilities, potential peace. He snaps back from his lingering thoughts, a shy meekness fills his voice as he finally responds to Joan.

"I suppose it does fit me, T-thank you... I guess now we can properly introduce ourselves. What is your name human?"

"Joan, Joan Laurent. Pleased to meet you, Saber."

The two are sat side by side, with a large set of papers and other bound documents scattered around the bedding. Joan is busy taking photographs and notes, transcribing some key elements from the various records of the facility's past. Saber occasionally interjects with specific details in between mouthfuls of fruit and greenery.

Saber finishes swallowing a mouthful, then starts speaking as he grabs some more food from a nearby basket "This place, and others like me, we share a history with this place. Though it's all well before my time."

"What do you mean by that?" Joan doesn't even look up from her notebook while she asks this. Almost as if ready to take notes on the subject.

"Pre-warp times, this complex was a recuperation center for a common communicable disease, a kind of whole-body skin infection. Most would survive, but the recovery process was long and painful. When the warp era began and the Federation came, the medical advancements they brought with them wiped out a great many common diseases. The doors to this place were closed, that was the first time it was abandoned." Upon finishing his last sentence, Saber takes a big bite from a juicy ball of fruit.

"Ah! So my initial suspicions were correct. We have places just like that back on Earth. In some parts of the word, we referred to those as sanatoriums. In old times, people would go there for things like tuberculosis. Later, many of these would become abandoned, but some still exist as a kind of resort."

Once Saber finishes eating his fruit, he responds with his own brand of vested interest. "Indeed? Well, the story definitely takes a turn from examples of your own world. The Federation came along, brought stability and much needed support, which allowed the Venlil people to focus on a still lingering problem; Predation control. That eventually grew into full predation extermination. The Federation also gifted our people the knowledge of predator disease, which is generally of a mental nature. But rarely there are physical symptoms as well, such as with my case."

"The doors to this facility were then reopened under a new mission directive. To treat and hopefully cure those suffering from both the mental and physical manifestations of the disease. The ones who were allowed to eventually leave were... drained of their minds, others were disfigured. Either way, they left as fractions of themselves, but ultimately safe to the public."

Joan looks towards her Venlil companion somewhat dejectedly, but doesn't say a word in interruption. Instead turning herself back to her notes, allowing Saber to continue.

"Towards the end, a large portion of the patients had banded together and took over the facility by force. There were hostages, demands, violence. In the end, the entire place was firebombed with everyone still inside. Many innocent staff died to protect the outside world, for the 'greater good'."

Joan's composure finally crashes as she blurts out her thoughts in response to the insanity she just heard. "Jesus Christ, and they call you a monster... you weren't kidding about what you said earlier."

"Yes, quite ironic then that I tend to call this place home isn't it?"

Joan snorts back a sarcastic chuckle. She clicks her tongue before adopting a more concerned tone once again. "Look, you shouldn't have to live like this, you CAN'T keep living like this. Why...why don't you come with me, to Earth? You can be accepted there for who you are, not what you appear to be."

"I'm sure it won't be as easy as that. You need some form of ID to travel off-world, and I am a living, walking and talking ghost."

Her eyes shift towards the blank wall directly ahead, lost in a train of thought. "There has to be a way. Hell, I'd stow you away in my luggage if I have to."

"I appreciate your determination. I think it would be best if we plan something out carefully over a longer period. It only has to work once, because it HAS to work once. You must understand, there will not be any second chances if I get caught."

"Yes, you are right. I'm sorry Saber, I don't wanna rush you into something like that. But you can't stay here forever either..." Joan yawns just as she finishes her sentence. It has been many hours since she left her room back in the village. Having been running on a short stint of broken and hungover sleep from the evening prior.

"It's just going to take some preparation. Speaking of which, it is clear you are tired... Let's get some sleep, we can continue all this when we are well rested."

"Yeah... you are right." Joan takes a quick look at the size of the bedding before continuing her response. "So do you want to be the big spoon or the little spoon?"

"Come again?"

Their slumber is disturbed long before the chance to get a full rest. Joan is the first to awaken, sharp human ears pick up on the sounds of what seems like barking orders and chatter from the outside. Still groggy from sleep, attempting to discern the specifics of what is being said proves to be fruitlessly vain. She jostles her companion, Saber quickly awakes to darting eyes, as if mere survival is his default mindset. When his wild eyes finally meet hers, they soften significantly, but not for long as his own ears soon pick up on the reason why she woke him up.

Joan is the first to speak with a hushed emphasis. "There is a group outside, I can't pick out exactly what they are saying but-"

"There is only one reason a group would be here." Saber quietly rises from the bedding and begins making his way through the room's only door. "Come, but be quiet. I need to see how many there are."

They move to the room across the hall in silent fashion. Staying back from the window a few paces, well clear of any intrusive lighting that would make them a silhouette, the two slowly raise

their posture to gain a vantage over the courtyard below. A converging tight formation line of six Venlil apparent figures, dressed in dark clothing, slowly make their way towards the building's outer wall.

"H-hey... are those...?-"

"Exterminators. The guild knows I exist, and that's enough for them to never stop. Surprised it took them this long, but they got the drop on me this time." Saber starts to back away towards the hallway. "We need to leave here. Now."

"Let me distract them OK? You head on out the back somewhere and get out of here, I can meet you somewhere safe later!"

"T-thank you Joan... Follow the sun out of the village and you will find a field nearby. I'll find you there, be careful."

Saber slips through the doorway and down the western hall silently. Joan immediately follows suit, only instead heading down the stairwell to the ground floor. She makes enough noise heading down that anyone in or around the area would be drawn towards her and not to Saber. As she makes her way over to the window in which she first accessed the building, one of the exterminators yelling into the building makes it apparent that her plan was a success.

"Who is in there?! Show yourself or we will start torching the whole building!"

"I'm a human! I'm a human!" Bringing herself in full view from just inside the window frame, Joan raises her hands in the air, what will hopefully be a clear sign of submissive compliance. Though she cannot help but to have a little contempt, if nothing but to waste their time. "Jeez, you didn't come out all this way just for me did you?"

"W-What in the stars are you doing here human? This is not a good place to be, we are tracking a dangerous monster in this area!" Now get down out of there!"

With that Joan fluidly vaults out of the window frame and skillfully sticks the landing several feet below. An impressive feat of agility for her age is all the more surprise to the rather timid exterminator squad. Even with their flamethrowers, it is clear that they are wary of even a single human. The one who had been speaking earlier maintains enough of his composure before continuing with his spiel.

"The monster is insidious. It looks like us, but it is not like us. Do you understand, have you seen any strange looking Venlil around here?"

"Looks like you... but is a monster, huh? Well, how exactly do I know you aren't the monsters then?"

There is a long moment while the lead exterminator lets those words marinate in his mind, it soon becomes very apparent that he is beginning to lose patience with Joan's diversionary tactics. "...What? Listen Human, did you hit your head in there or were you just born that wa-"

Before the lead exterminator can finish that last personal attack, a shrill shriek bellows forth from just beyond the building somewhere, it is hard to tell exactly where the sound is coming from. It is quickly followed by a commotion of yelling. The entourage of exterminators in the main courtyard tense up as the lead barks out a report.

"Second team got something!"

Joan's heart falls out of her chest as the weight of those words and the shriek she heard crush her from all sides. "S-second... team?"

A cluster of figures round the corner from the western side of the building, the tightly packed group make their way into the courtyard proper. As they get closer, the sense of absolute desperation increases. Saber is violently marshaled into the courtyard center by four exterminators, flailing madly and screaming intensely. As they near closer, it is apparent that his arms and legs are bound tightly. His twisting and convulsing mass is dragged forward across the ground.

"NO! PLEASE! TELL THEM JOAN! TELL THEM YOU'LL TAKE ME WITH YOU, TELL THEM I'LL LEAVE FOREVER! NOT LIKE THIS, I DON'T WANT TO DIE LIKE THIS, PLEASE!"

Joan turns to the lead exterminator with a look of absolute pleading dread, tears stream down her face as she can barely formulate her words.

"P-please no! You can't! It's true, he is going to come with me back to Earth, OK?! He'll leave here for good, it will be no different than if he died right here!"

The lead exterminator shoots Joan with a cold derisive look before casting his sickening gaze back towards the helplessly bound Saber. A crooked look materializes across his features as his tail snaps in the air near her face.

"Oh but it would be different. That thing isn't going anywhere. We are going to make sure he is good and dead this time around. Nice and clean."

Several of the first group of exterminators step forward with flamethrowers held in hand. With practiced movements their weapons are readied, pilot flames lit, tank pressure regulated. In a fluid movement, the two that are holding onto Saber's arms from either side abruptly toss him onto the ragged brickwork of the courtyard. There isn't even enough time to suffer the impact of falling before a deluge of fire blankets the area from nearly every angle. The twisting inferno whips into a frenzy blasting intense heat in every direction. The only thing drowning out the sound of the hissing fuel flow and the roaring flames is Joan's raving. The smell in the air burns into her memory as Saber is reduced to smoke and ash, blown and dispersed by the wind. His remains scattered to a world that would neither accept him, nor let him go. The candle of life, burning thrice as fast.

