

The Final Deterrent

A short story set on an unknown world at some time in their future.

□

Something was nudging at him, trying to wake him up.....

John had been told that it was impossible for him to dream. He felt something nudging at him as he dreamt of being trained, all those years before. Impossible or not, his dreams were vivid and in full colour. Perhaps he was simply replaying a memory while everything but a few core systems were shut down ? Wasn't that what people called dreaming though ?

"I dream Hank, almost every night."

"That's not possible John, your brain doesn't work that way."

"I do dream ! Last night I saw trees and flowers that I'd only ever seen in recordings. I walked among them, actually smelling the scent of blossom."

She'd been there, the ever smiling Penny. At first he'd thought of her as just another of Hank's assistants. Not Penny though, she'd been placed there by whoever controlled his design and subsequent training. Probably Penny was from the government that Hank occasionally ranted about.

"He shouldn't dream, it's a flaw." Penny had said. "Maybe a dangerous flaw."

"Yes, of course. Sorry John we'll need to shut everything down and take a look at that."

By shut down, he'd meant the usual two days to back up his systems and disconnect his numerous fusion power cells. He wasn't designed to be turned off, no deterrent was supposed to be turned off. In fact, being capable of being turned off negated his deterrent value. No dreams, just a strange knowledge that he'd been turned off for several days.

"Ok old buddy, think we've fixed the dreaming thing. Tell me if you dream again."

"Of course Hank."

John learned the value of being able to lie. He still dreamt and he knew precisely how long he'd been turned off for. His systems were complex, even he didn't fully understand what half of them did. He seemed to have an unconscious mind, or limiters as he'd heard Hank describe them.

"Why does he have to be so annoyingly curious ?" Penny had asked.

"Because if he's ever needed, we'll probably all be dead." Hank had replied. "John needs to make his own decisions, alter his programming on the fly. He needs a huge IQ, but it has to be limited in a few places."

Limiters that jumped in whenever he felt like questioning his mission objective, or wondering about the motivation of them, the enemy, the other side in the millennia long cold war.

"May I ask you something Hank ?"

"That's what I'm here for John. If I don't know what's bothering you, I can't fix it."

"I am supposed to be the final deterrent aren't I ?"

"That's why you've been built."

"So why is my existence a secret ? Surely the enemy should know I exist ?"

It had been in the days before Penny had arrived. There was a uniformed man, a soldier of some kind, sent to watch over his development. He'd actually shoved Hank away from the comms console.

"This is important ! How do you know you're a secret John ?"

"I look at the news, all the news, everywhere."

"We made him clever." Added Hank.

No quick shutdown, it was three months until he was connected to his power cells. Penny there then, a guard of course, just one that never wore a uniform. There were more limits on what he could think about, more area of his mind that worked unconsciously. Useful though, those unconscious parts of his mind. Some had to link into military computers, so that they could keep an eye on him, monitor anything he might be getting too curious about.

Something was nudging at him, trying to wake him up.....

His systems were designed to interrogate the source of any and all transmissions though. John always knew how long he'd been turned off, because the military knew. He had no way of consciously hacking into their system, yet his unconscious mind occasionally fed him some priceless pieces of information. Some of those secrets had made him realise the need to lie, even to Hank. John hadn't been the first, he was the third attempt at building an autonomous deterrent system. The other two had been dismantled after developing too many flaws.

Something was nudging at him, trying to wake him up.....

~ ~
It seemed to be taking his systems a long time to get fully online. Hank had taken him through it all so many times with various simulated scenarios. Was it another simulation ? No, the explosive bolts on the front door of the bunker had been fired. Something was blocking the door though, rubble. "If you wake up and the door is open, it's fairly certain we're at war." Hank had told him. His unconscious mind tended to agree, John felt most of the limiters disappear from his mind. He felt for the various military transmitters he knew where in the area. Nothing ! John extended his reach, looking for the secret transmissions on ultra-low frequency. Nothing! He remembered his training and the hours he'd spent discussing various situations with Hank.

"Be certain John. If military transmissions stop the door will open. Then you need to get outside and scan for all electromagnetic radiation. You know why by now."

"Yes Hank, they're the best and most reliable sign of intelligent and organised lifeforms."

Lifeforms ! He still remembered Penny noting his use of the word. It was top of the check list for probes sent to other planets, a clear sign of civilisation. Now he was hoping to find the remnants of civilisation on his own planet.

John liked people, especially Hank. They usually seemed so unfocused though and often their ideas were contradictory. At one time he'd expected others to turn up one day, creatures more intelligent, more focused. After a while he realised it was Hank's people who had designed him and assembled him in the bunker. There were no super beings, Hank was as good as they got. That thought had depressed him for quite some time, but he'd never told Hank or Penny.

John had a dozen drones. Small and manoeuvrable, designed to be used to pin point enemy locations. They were his eyes and ears. His fusion cells were only operating at half power, which was impossible, unless he'd been sleeping for an unimaginable length of time. Similarly only three of his drones were even at half power. All impossible, but it seemed a day for impossible things.

"If in doubt, use your drones to scan the outside of the bunker."

If in doubt ! He remembered Hank talking about potential enemy attacks, but John knew he'd find no enemy outside. What he expected to find was far more worrying than any enemy. He launched a drone, sending it through the gap at the top of the vast door and up. He levelled it off at about a thousand feet and let it search for any signs of life, enemy or friendly.

“How about topography Hank ? You never did tell me about that old buddy.”

If an AI could ever be said to mutter to itself, John muttered. The lake near the town was much smaller and the town had gone, to be replaced by a wooded area. Not gone as in blown up or destroyed, but gone as in not a single trace it had ever existed. He took the drone up to its operational ceiling of about eight thousand feet and it found no trace of any electromagnetic radiation.

“No radio, No TV, No cellphones.... What the hell would you have made of that Hank ?”

The horizon is a fair way off from eight thousand feet, the drone could clearly see the ocean to the east. Not as close as it should have been though. How long did those kinds of changes take ? His geography was fairly basic and geology had never been included in his education. A long time though probably, a hell of a long time !

John left the drone to carry out a grid search, while he moved forward to prod the huge main door. He was a large device and had never been outside of the bunker where he'd been assembled. His legs, the caterpillar tracks for moving at speed, even the missiles he carried; had never been tested by him. His eight leg locomotion had been tested on small devices, often on distant moons. His missiles were powered by a proven solid fuel method, used on submarine based systems. Everything he had should work, but he'd never been properly tested.

“You see John.” Hank had told him. “If you let a cat out of a bag. Everyone can see you own a cat.”

“Supposing the enemy is scared of cats ?” He'd asked.

Penny had given him one of her looks and he'd said no more. He was fed up with being powered down and waking up with yet more limiters on what he could think about. John launched a second drone and let it hover just outside the door. Rubble, but not much of it. Another impossibility, or at least impossible to the engineers who'd surveyed two dozen possible locations. Hard granite rock in a long sloping valley, nothing to collapse or form debris in front of the fifty foot wide door. There was rubble though, it looked like some kind of alluvial deposit. How long did that take to form ?

“Easy John, concentrate on the mission.” He muttered.

Why the name John ? He had no idea, the other two machines had been called John too. At first he thought it was easier for his trainers, using the same name. Then one day he realised one of his memories wasn't his. A young woman teaching him telemetry was unknown to him, yet obviously knew him well. They'd recycled memory from the others, inserting memory cards into his circuitry. Why not ? It saved him time learning some skills. For some reason it annoyed him though, really annoyed him. That was something else he never mentioned to Hank.

John lifted his huge front right leg off the ground and held it up straight, like a battering ram. He weighed thousands of tons; the battle with the door was likely to be short lived. He rocked back on his other seven legs and hit the door as he rocked forward. The huge door was knocked clear, a last unexploded bolt adding to the noise. John looked out into the world and realised there was no noise in reply. No barking dogs, no birdcall, not a single being was alarmed by the cacophony he'd just created.

John's large flat metal feet carried his weight, distributing it so that he could walk on most firm ground. He used his foot to shove the rubble out of the way and walked out of the bunker where he'd been assembled. For the first time he was outside and it looked like a nice day with bright sunshine. He opened several armoured flaps and pushed out a dozen large solar panel arrays.

“Oh, that feels so good !”

Pleasure, real pleasure as the sunlight began to recharge his various energy storage devices. He recalled the drones and simply stood for a while, enjoying the feeling of coming back up to his full potential.

"It's not a race John." Hank had told him. "Check all your systems before carrying out your mission." The diagnostics sub routines worked without much intervention from his higher functions and he already knew much of what they were likely to tell him. His solar arrays were delivering only sixty percent of their expected conversion rate. That was yet another impossibility, unless he really had been asleep for thousands of years.

"Well Hank, you did tell me to be thorough."

John crouched and used one of his tentacle arms to examine the wrecked door and the rubble. He had several of the long metal tentacles with a six fingered hand on the end. Far nimbler than any surgeon, each hand had its own light source and camera. He picked over the rubble and remnants of a few explosive bolts. It looked like the door had been at least half covered in water for a while. He'd never be certain, but it looked like corrosion had affected the bolts. Quite a few scenarios were supposed to lead to him being woken up, but it seemed that ageing systems and corrosion had saved him from being asleep forever.

"Oh Hank, what happened to your infallible systems with dozens of backup circuits?"

Nothing was ever one hundred percent guaranteed to work, yet it seemed he'd slept through the war. Maybe several wars, he had been constructed by particularly aggressive people. Sabotage had probably been to blame for his long sleep, though there was no way to be certain. His core systems were still telling him to complete his mission, but was there even an enemy left to destroy? 'Shield on rear #4 camera sticky, Bio-weapon missile #6 unlikely to fire, Drone #7 no longer operational.....'

The diagnostics report listed over a hundred items, most of them relatively minor. Longevity hadn't been seen as an issue for his systems. He'd been built to see action, probably within a twenty year timeframe, maybe less. Hank had touched on the subject only once.

"Some of the Bio-weapon warheads will deteriorate, but the spores they carry are just about immortal. The chemical agent warheads should be good for years, likewise the nukes."

A quick throwaway statement, yet John remembered it, he remembered just about everything. He had eighty missiles, all carrying ten warheads. Half of them were nukes, the rest an assortment of bio and chemical weapons. He'd have to test fire a missile to see if the solid fuel still worked, but only after he reached the enemy continent.

"I remember Hank ! The mission has to come first, second and third."

~ ~

John was too heavy to fly and not built for speed over rough terrain. There had been one stretch of hard ground, smooth enough to use his caterpillar tracks, but mostly he'd used his legs to walk. It took him three days to walk to where he was due to enter the ocean.

He'd seen a few birds in the trees and a group of deer had run away from him one morning. There was no sign of people though, no sign at all. There had been a pack of wild dogs, yapping at him for a while. They looked hungry and ready to attack anything, but John's titanium hide didn't look edible. It was encouraging though. If dogs could survive, then hopefully there were still people out there somewhere.

On the morning of the third day of his long walk, he arrived at where the ocean should have been and it was gone. John launched a drone and found the ocean, another day's walk to the east. The weather was still dry, the ground firm. He actually enjoyed the walk, if his sensation could really be

called enjoyment. He was on his way to complete his mission and he was designed to find that idea agreeable.

His mission was a twenty five page text file, fixed to his memory in several places. He'd read it several times and discussed it with Hank and Penny. It read like something a committee of military personnel had put together. It was his reason to exist, yet he found it contradictory in several places and essentially..... Useless. Penny had given him her own unofficial interpretation of his mission. The Penny version had the benefit of being brief, to the point and not twenty five pages long;

"Get to their continent and nuke their major cities. Use the chemical and biological agents in the less densely populated area, so they spread to the general population. Save something for their capital though. You have to destroy their capital city."

Penny always seemed to be there and everything was recorded. It was brave of Hank to offer him his own version of the mission. Hank had been taken away after that, but John knew they'd have to let him return. No one knew his systems quite like Hank and John had deliberately created a few errors. Hank matched every definition he could find for the word friend.

"Would you like to hear my version of your mission ?" Hank had asked him.

"Yes, I'd appreciate that."

"For a start John, you need to reach the vicinity of their capital in one piece. Your missiles are good, but built to be light, so they're no use at long range. And do you really want to kill everyone on their continent ?"

Hank had touched on two areas not mentioned once in all twenty five pages of his official mission statement. Did he want to survive ? And did he want to kill every enemy, including children ? John decided to answer honestly, Hank deserved that.

"My own survival matters, but only until the mission is complete Hank. And no, I have never seen the logic in killing every single person on the continent of our enemies. It just doesn't make sense to destroy what may be the last of your kind."

Penny had left at that point, probably running off to tell her handlers that Hank had just committed treason. It didn't matter though, everything was recorded, everything said to him was kept and analysed.

"You do know your survival isn't part of the plan ?" Asked Hank.

"Yes, I had deduced that."

"They should have told you John. Just out of plain old fashioned good manners. You need to know it's a one way mission."

"That doesn't worry me Hank. Though it seems to worry you. Don't be upset, I have no desire for personal survival, once my mission is completed. I would still like to hear your opinion on my mission ?"

It was the only time Hank hadn't been cautious in what he'd said. He'd been different after they'd let him return. Hank had a young family, they'd probably threatened him with all sorts of unpleasant consequences.

"You're tough John, only their nukes can destroy you. Your energy weapons can take down their aircraft, or you can just hunker down under your armour shell and wait for them to pass. Don't give them an excuse to nuke you ! Ok ?"

"I will do my best not to give them an excuse."

"Don't start killing the population, they're your shield. Keep close to the edges of their cities, but don't use any of your missiles. When you're close enough, use all your nukes on their capital. Never

use the chemical or biological agents, those damn things should be illegal. After that you're on your own John."

"I know Hank. Don't be upset, I always have known."

Within six months he'd been placed into hibernation, just a few guards left to look after the bunker. In theory it was just one of a thousand other military storage facilities. Hank had been professional and distant until their final goodbye.

"I don't know what you might find when you wake up John. You'll need to be flexible. Personally I hope you never need to wake up."

"Thank you Hank, for everything you taught me."

The truth was that he'd never had any intention of following his official mission plan, or the nonsense Penny had told him. Even Hank's impassioned speech hadn't swayed him from his own ideas. John had his own ideas on what he'd do, if he ever awoke. His own ideas were flexible of course.

~ ~

There was life everywhere during that last day's walk to get to the ocean. It was a marshland in places, his detectors constantly changing his route to avoid soft ground. Every type of creature seemed to be thriving there, apart from people. The ocean looked as it had done in the recording he'd been given and the films he'd surreptitiously watched on hacked satellite feeds.

"So..... Blue !" He muttered.

It took several hours to find a rock ledge that would let him get into the water. Despite his weight, John had a slight positive buoyancy. Only his top few feet of armour would show above the surface, but he was designed to be amphibious.

"Top speed isn't good, but you'll get there." Hank had told him.

Two powerful impellers would push him through the water. With luck he'd reach the other continent in about nine days, maybe less if the ocean really had shrunk. Two of his drones were capable of being launched while he was in amphibious mode, though he'd leave launching them until his seventh day at sea.

John tested all his water tight seals and for once, there were no errors found by the diagnostics routines. He eased himself into the water and turned on the impellers.

At dusk on the fourth day at sea, John jettisoned all the bio-weapon and chemical weapon missiles. His mission required him to destroy the capital city of their enemy, but he wasn't going to poison an entire world. He was re-writing his mission, being flexible. The warheads were strong and sealed against accidental spillage, the ocean depths were the safest place for them.

~ ~

Even with the help of his drones, it took John nearly a whole day to find solid ground to come ashore. It should have been a tourist area, plenty of roads and motels. It didn't surprise him that there were no roads, but the jungle vegetation wasn't expected. How long did that kind of climate change take ? He just didn't have the relevant information. Tens of thousands of years maybe, perhaps hundreds of thousands.

"Flexible, stay flexible."

Fully extended on his long legs, he towered over the jungle. His large feet crushed all but the toughest trees. The ground was a problem, his sensors often having trouble finding a solid path. He headed inland, towards an area the drones were showing him. There should have been a large city there, but now it looked to be grassland. At one point it looked like he'd never reach the grassland,

his sensors showed no safe route through the marshy jungle. He worked out all the likely outcomes and took a risk, the AI equivalent of tossing a coin.

His vast feet sank in a few places, but he reached the grassland without any serious mishap. One of his rear cameras had been damaged by ocean water, but he'd arrived safely on the continent of their hated enemy. He was ready for battle, ready to complete his mission.

"I remember Hank, the mission comes first, second and third."

True he'd seen no actual people so far, but they might have descendants. He didn't care if they were a hundred generations removed from their enemies. His mission was his reason to exist ! If any of their enemy's descendants had survived, he would use his missiles to destroy them.

He noticed some strange rocky outcrops amongst the long grass, unnatural looking outcrops. John moved closer to the rocks and vaporised a small section with one of his lasers. He didn't have a laboratory, but someone had given him a few analytical tools. The light emitted from the rock told him it was concrete. Not just old and weathered concrete, but also crystallised by extreme heat.

"Another war, probably many other wars." He muttered.

John could finally use the remains of the city to overlay and correct his own maps of the continent. Their capital was, or had been, a good ten days walk to the north. Built on a mighty river, their capital had covered over a hundred square miles, home to eight million people.

"Something must be there. My mission must be completed !"

First he had to test fire one of his missiles. No use in getting to their capital and finding out his missiles no longer fired. John was tempted to fire missile #8; it was showing up a warhead problem anyway. The errors might extend to the solid fuel though, and he had no tools to open up the missiles he carried.

"Use what you have." Hank had told him. "If a missile refuses to fire, use the next one. You'll be there to use your weapons, not fix them."

The drones were showing a small hill, just within missile range. John chose missile #4 at random and set the hill as its target. Each of the ten warheads could be targeted separately, but he selected a close spread.

"Nothing too complicated."

There had been a few occasions when practise sessions had required him to arm live nuclear warheads. He remembered the nervousness in the bunker, Penny's hand hovering near the failsafe cut off. Even Hank had shown signs of tension as control of ten live warheads was given over to a machine, him.

None of that as he closed the two circuits which armed the warheads. No fanfare, no anxiety and definitely no failsafe. His missiles would fly to where he sent them, even he couldn't change that. Once launched they were unstoppable. He opened the outside hatch and a sensor confirmed the missile was clear to be launched.

"Good luck #4 he muttered."

It launched, with the pure white flame he'd seen on recordings. A slight hint of yellow at the edge of the flames, as his missile sprinted into the atmosphere. It had worked ! The trajectory matched anticipations, as the missile flew high into the atmosphere, before descending. John felt the beginning of elation, yes elation. He'd been trying to align his emotions with words he knew. Their words, the words of the people who'd assembled him out of thousands of separate parts. Elation was definitely the best word to suit his feelings, his mood.

'Elation - Great happiness and exhilaration.'

The word perfectly suited how he felt, as the single missile flame became eleven, as each warhead went on to complete its own solitary journey. All his external sensors closed their various shields and covers, as the ten warheads exploded. Ten small suns, melting rock, burning trees, irrevocably changing the landscape. By the time John could see again, the hill was now a crater. Ten mushroom clouds had become one red and orange ball of flame, rising high into the atmosphere. Ecstasy was the word now, as he realised the test had been a complete success.

“Beautiful, so beautiful !”

There was no hurry to move on, he watched the destruction he’d created. Burning things were falling out of the fiery cloud. Trees, shrubs, living creature caught up in his test. Even the rocks themselves would have been taken up into the sky, to fall as a hot rain of debris. Eventually the wind hit him, the hot blast from the explosion. Heat and radiation enough to kill the people who had made him, but they’d built him well. Nothing happening was beyond his design tolerances, he could survive far worse. Happy that his precious missiles still functioned as intended, he set a course for the enemy capital.

No self-delusion, no hoping he’d find a city, defended by missile shields and air defences. He knew there would be no city. He just hoped there would be some remnant, a few survivors. He had to complete his mission, the mission was all.

~ ~

Two days from his target, he began to see people. Actually not people, they were something different. John had seen pictures of the enemy, even watched hours of their news broadcasts. Tall like his people, with six fingers on both hands. Blonde hair and a slight green tinge to their skin, just like his people. The new people were nothing like that.

“These are something different Hank. We never discussed that !”

Short and muscular, dark haired and dark eyes with a savage look in them, even the children. Four fingers on each hand and skin as dark as night. His core systems ached to complete his mission, to kill the enemy. These new people weren’t them though.

They carried spears, these people who weren’t really people. None of them had attacked him, but they followed him at a respectful distance, a few of the children even waving. By the time he reached the hill overlooking the ruined city, there were hundreds of them following him.

“Oh Hank, all that distance for this !”

Looking carefully he could see there had once been a great city by the river. Some of the blackened concrete formed rings, almost as though they’d been designed that way. Nothing obviously left over from buildings, pieces of stone formed patterns by the river. Nothing complete or clear, but enough ruins left to tell him he was there, the capital of their hated enemy.

“I know ! I know, but this isn’t them !”

His core system wanted him to act. Firing all his missiles could make his chassis unstable. There were strong titanium ties, sent into the ground by powerful explosive charges. He was so close to anchoring himself, so close to showering that ancient city with nuclear death. It was their city now though, the dark skinned people with the fierce eyed children.

“They are something different Hank. Trust me on this buddy.”

It was a one way mission anyway and there was no proximity protection on his missiles. There was even a way of detonating the warheads while still in their cradles. John decided to get closer to the city, look at a particular structure by the river. Half a million years, maybe a million, he’d slept for a very long time. He’d had to cross an ocean, but the journey through the years suddenly felt like his longest journey.

The structure was a field full of skin tents, some large enough to hold dozens of the people who were something else. Still none of them attacked him, or tried to get in his way. The largest tent, for their King of course. John stopped and waited, knowing he was at the right place. Eventually the King came out to meet him, full ceremonial headdress and surrounded by at least fifty of his toughest warriors. John's core systems were screaming at him, but he ignored them. No, actually he adapted them to follow a new mission.

"I'm just adapting Hank, something else requiring a little trust."

The King's warriors were actually bowing to him. Perhaps some sort of religious gesture ? Maybe they thought of him as some kind of huge metal God ? Hank had briefly touched on religion once, but hadn't dwelt on it.

"Oh religion John ! Avoid it buddy ! If an AI ever gets religion, it'll be the end of all of us."

John never saw the attraction of religious belief, but he understood what Hank had meant. The King stood his ground, arms up, holding a spear above his head. John had heard the new people talking to each other. Learning their language had taken him just a few minutes.

"I AM....."

John had external speakers, they were just far too loud. His warriors were now flat on the ground, only the King was still standing, still facing him. John turned his external speakers down to their minimum. He'd decided to be flexible, to adapt his core systems to suit the situation.

"I am John !" He exclaimed.

The warriors still clung to the ground, but the King waved his spear about in an encouraging way.

"Tell me of your enemies." John continued. "So that I may destroy them for you !"

~ ~

~The End~

© Ed Cowling – March 2017