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Opening extract from

Operation Sting

Written by

Simon Cheshire

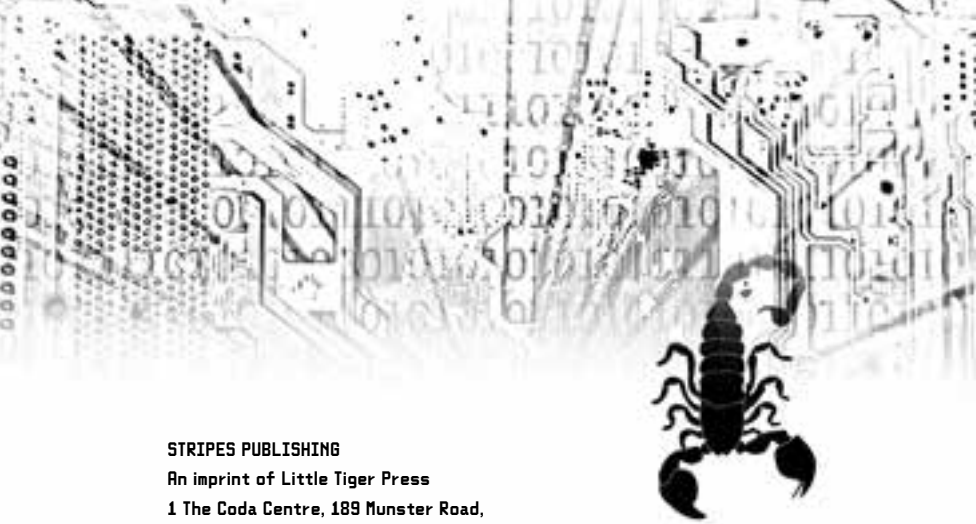
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SWARM

DEPARTMENT OF MICRO-ROBOTIC INTELLIGENCE

SPECIALISTS IN NANOTECHNOLOGY AMD BIOMIMICRY

HEAD OF DEPARTMENT

Beatrice Maynard: Code name QUEEN BEE

HUMAN OPERATIVES

Prof. Thomas Miller: TECHNICIAN
Alfred Berners: PROGRAMMER
Simon Turing: DATA ANALYST

SWARM OPERATIVES

WIDOW

DIVISION: Spider
LENGTH: 1.5 cm
WEIGHT: 1 gram
FEATURES:

- 360° vision and recording function
- Produces silk threads and webs stronger than steel
- Extremely venomous bite
- Can walk on any surface – horizontal, vertical or upside down

CHOPPER

DIVISION: Dragonfly
LENGTH: 12 cm
WEIGHT: 0.8 grams
FEATURES:

- Telescopic vision with zoom, scanning and recording functions
- Night vision and thermal imaging abilities
- High-speed flight with super control and rapid directional change

NERO

DIVISION: Scorpion
LENGTH: 12 cm
WEIGHT: 30 grams
FEATURES:

- Strong, impact-resistant exoskeleton
- Pincers to grab and hold, with high dexterity
- Venomous sting in tail
- Capable of high-speed attack movements

SABRE

DIVISION: Mosquito
LENGTH: 2 cm
WEIGHT: 2.5 milligrams
FEATURES:

- Long proboscis (mouthparts) for extracting DNA and injecting tracking technology and liquids to cause paralysis or memory loss
- Specialist in stealth movement without detection
- Capable of recording low frequency, low-volume sound

HERCULES

DIVISION: Stag beetle
LENGTH: 5 cm
WEIGHT: 50 grams
FEATURES:

- Extra-tough membrane on wing shells to withstand extreme force and pressure
- Serrated claw for sawing through any material
- Can lay surveillance 'eggs' for tracking and data analysis

MORPH

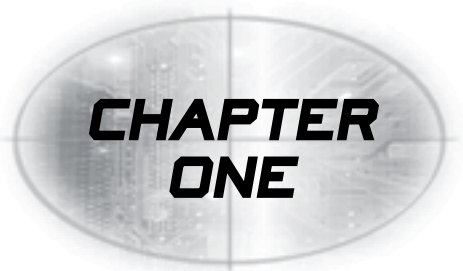
DIVISION: Centipede
LENGTH: 5 cm (10 cm when fully extended)
WEIGHT: 100 milligrams
FEATURES:

- Flexible, gelatinous body with super-strong grip
- Ability to dig and burrow
- Laser-mapping sensory functions

SIRENA

DIVISION: Butterfly
LENGTH: 7 cm
WEIGHT: 0.3 grams
FEATURES:

- Uses beauty rather than stealth for protection
- Expert in reconnaissance missions – can gather environmental data through high-sensitivity antennae



"Queen Bee to agents! Prepare to move out!"

Two electronic voices replied, one after the other. "I'm live, Queen Bee."

Queen Bee sat in a high-backed black leather chair, in front of a wide bank of brightly lit screens and readouts. She was a tall woman with a shock of blonde hair and a smartly cut suit. She wore a pair of glasses with small, circular lenses that reflected the rapidly shifting light from the screens. Behind the lenses, her steely grey eyes darted from one readout to another, soaking up information. Her age was difficult to work out from

her looks, but her slightly pursed lips, and the way her long fingers tapped slowly on the arms of her chair, showed that she meant business.

One of the screens in front of her showed a man coming out of an office block. Numbers and graphs danced across the lower part of the image, sensor readings of everything from the air temperature at his location to his current heart rate.

Queen Bee leaned forward and spoke into a microphone, which jutted out on a long, flexible stalk. "Chopper, begin data recording."

"Logged, Queen Bee," said one of the electronic voices. It had a slightly lower tone than the other one.



Outside the office block, Marcus Oliphant sniffed at the morning breeze for a moment. He was a tall, stringy man with bushy eyebrows and a loping walk. His nose wrinkled. The smell of vehicle exhaust seemed stronger than usual today. He took a tighter grip of the small metal case he was

carrying, then set off along the street. The traffic of central London rumbled and roared past.

A long set of black-painted railings ran alongside him. He didn't notice two insects perched on top. One was a tiny mosquito, the other a large, iridescent dragonfly. At least, that's what they appeared to be. They didn't jump and flit like insects usually do. Instead, they seemed to be watching him.

As he walked off down the road, the insects' wings buzzed into life, and they rose into the air, following him at a short distance.



As the insects rose, so the image on the screen in front of Queen Bee shifted and moved.

Queen Bee swung around in her chair. Sitting behind her were half a dozen people with serious, quizzical expressions on their faces. Among them were the Home Secretary, the head of MI5 and Queen Bee's boss, the leader of the UK's Secret Intelligence Agency.

"As you can see, ladies and gentlemen," said

Queen Bee, "the subject has no idea that he's being tailed. Our micro-robots are much more effective than normal secret service agents, with their blindingly obvious dark glasses and their suspiciously unmarked fast cars."

The head of MI5 shuffled grumpily in his seat. "And much more expensive. How much are these technological toy soldiers costing, Home Secretary? You gave the SIA the go-ahead for this programme."

The Home Secretary looked slightly uncomfortable. "A lot. I'm afraid I don't have the figures to hand," she muttered.

"The latest technology is never cheap," said Queen Bee. "But my section, the Department of Micro-robotic Intelligence, has capabilities that make it priceless. The existence of SWARM is known only to my staff, and to the people in this room. However, nanotechnology is the future. Micro-robots will soon dominate the worlds of spying and crime investigation. These SWARM operatives are the most advanced robots on Earth. On the outside, they are almost indistinguishable from real insects, yet each has equipment and

capabilities that make the average undercover agent look like a caveman."

The Home Secretary pointed to the screen. "Who is that man? What's this demonstration supposed to prove?"

"He's Marcus Oliphant, leader of the team that's developed the new Whiplash weapon," said Queen Bee. "It has been created by a private company, Techna-Stik International, and is being sold to the British government. The prototype is in that metal case there – it's only the size of a matchbox. He's on his way to meet with your own officials, Home Secretary, and show them the progress that's been made. I've asked for my robots to shadow him today, to show their effectiveness. Normally, an MI5 operative would be assigned, but since Whiplash is every bit as secret as SWARM, this man's visit has been judged low risk. No unauthorized person could possibly know what he's carrying."

"Whiplash?" said the Home Secretary. "Have I been briefed on that?" She turned to the man beside her.

"It's an EMP device," said the head of MI5.

"Extremely dangerous in the wrong hands."

"Extremely dangerous even in the right hands," muttered Queen Bee.

"EMP?" frowned the Home Secretary.

"Electro-magnetic pulse," explained Queen Bee. "It emits an invisible wave of energy which knocks out all electrical circuits. Fries them beyond repair. It does almost no physical damage, but destroys electronics – everything from air-traffic control to TV remotes. Vehicles, computers, the lot, all made useless."

"Whiplash shoots a narrow EMP beam across a few kilometres," said the head of MI5. "It's designed to target and disable enemy systems."

Suddenly, the high electronic voice of the mosquito cut across the air. "Sabre to Queen Bee. Suspicious activity detected."

Queen Bee leaned forward and spoke into the microphone. "Specify."



Out on the street, Chopper the robotic dragonfly whipped around in mid-air to direct his high-

definition cameras towards a vehicle approaching from behind. His eyes zoomed in to reveal a powerful, dark blue BMW that was slowing down, causing cars behind it to overtake.

Chopper transmitted the data back to Queen Bee at SWARM headquarters. “The registration number does not match the car type listed on the national database,” he said. “Stolen car, I think. Or stolen licence plates.”

“Can you get a look at the driver?” radioed Queen Bee.

Chopper adjusted the thermal imaging in his eyes. “Negative, Queen Bee, too many reflections off the glass.”

“Sabre,” said Queen Bee, “stay close to the target.”

“Logged,” replied the mosquito. He buzzed closer to Oliphant, the man with the metal case, who took a casual swat at his shoulder.

Suddenly, the BMW roared ahead. Swerving violently, it bounced up on to the pavement in front of Oliphant, its brakes squealing. The doors were flung open and four men wearing balaclavas jumped out.

Oliphant stood open-mouthed, too alarmed to run. The man who'd been driving grabbed the metal case and knocked Oliphant flying with a sharp punch.

"Attack mode," said Chopper calmly. "Target compromised."

A tiny, needle-like proboscis flicked forward from Sabre's head. He dived swiftly towards the driver and stabbed at the man's neck in a lightning movement.

"Oww!" yelled the driver. "What was—?" Then he twitched, wide-eyed, dropped the metal case and toppled forward on to the pavement.

"Freezer sting delivered," said Sabre.

The other three men hauled the driver to his feet, grabbed the case and quickly got back into the BMW. Chopper circled, recording every detail of the attackers and their car. Oliphant sat on the pavement, dazed and rubbing his jaw.

The car lurched into life, roared around in a U-turn and sprang back on to the road. An approaching bus braked hard to avoid a collision and blasted its horn at the BMW. A small group of pedestrians were gathering around Oliphant,

offering help. One was already calling the police on his mobile.

"The human is receiving assistance," said Chopper. "Pursue the weapon."

Chopper and Sabre swung round and darted off down the street after the BMW.

Queen Bee's voice buzzed in the insects' receivers. "Get to that car! Sabre, inject a tracker into one of those men!"

"Logged," said Sabre.

Chopper's vision zoomed in on the car as it raced ahead. "Windows closed. No entry. We may be able to gain access through an air vent."

Both insect robots flew at maximum speed. Chopper the dragonfly was larger and faster through the air than Sabre the mosquito, but even he struggled to keep up with the BMW. The car was weaving through the traffic, honking other vehicles out of the way and shifting up a gear.

"Personal speed limits reached," said Chopper. "The car's too fast for us. We will lose it in 19.4 seconds."

"Suggestion," piped up Sabre. "I can inject a

micro-explosive into one of the car's tyres. That will force it to stop."

Chopper paused, his miniature circuits making complex calculations. "Chance of success on a moving vehicle is only nine per cent. That action is not advised."

Sabre computed the information. "Your advice is ignored. I'm going to attempt it. The mission comes first. Our orders were to safeguard Whiplash, so now we must recover it."

The BMW sped on, shooting through a red light and turning left into a smaller road lined with parked cars.

Sabre angled his wings for a sharp descent, and swooped low alongside the car. He could feel the mechanisms inside his robot body overloading. He wasn't designed to move at this kind of speed!

He flew lower still, level with the car's wheels. The roar of the BMW's engine was deafening. The sound reverberated off the road and the parked cars.

Sabre's computer brain concentrated on flying steady. If he swung just a few centimetres to

either side, he'd end up a smear on the tarmac.

Inside his narrow mouthparts, a tiny explosive bolt clicked into place. He aimed himself at the spinning tyre beside him. He didn't have the programming to work out exactly how fast the tyre was going, but it was a blur of movement.

With a decisive swoop, like a real mosquito moving in for a bite, Sabre dived at the tyre.

The wheel's speed was too much for his tiny frame. Instantly, he was bounced violently into the air before he could even attempt to inject the explosive,. He shot upwards, spinning out of control. The BMW revved and sped out of range.

For a few seconds, Sabre's systems were badly scrambled. He couldn't tell which way he was spinning, or where he was heading.

Miniature clamps suddenly caught hold of him. Chopper matched Sabre's wild mid-air spin, gripping the mosquito tightly. The two of them careered high over the road.

Gradually, Chopper's more powerful wings brought their flight under control and Sabre began to regain coordination of his sensors. Chopper stopped in mid-air, transmitted a stream of data

back to base, and spun round. He headed for HQ, Sabre dangling limply beneath him.



Back at SWARM headquarters, Queen Bee switched off the screens and angrily squeezed her hands into fists. She swung her chair around. The people behind her were all looking shocked.

Finally, the silence was broken. “Well, well, well,” said the head of MI5 with a sneer. “Better than normal agents, are they? I’m pretty sure my clumsy, obvious humans could have handled that rather more efficiently! Looks like your robots have let a dangerous weapon get into the wrong hands.”