



The Reluctant Weapon
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When the Zoz Horde passed destructively through this sector of the Galaxy, approximately a billion years ago, they suffered a minor loss. One of their weapons, Sentient Killer No. VT672, had an unexplained malfunction and was left behind to be repaired by the slave technicians who followed the Horde. However, the Zoz were met and annihilated by the Ghesh Empire, after which the masterless slaves dispersed to their home planets. The weapon, unrepaired, was left forgotten in the solar system it had failed to destroy.

Tresqu the Wisest, Ruler of Hova, Lord of the Universe, was being entertained by a troupe of Goefd dancers when his Lord of War, Wert, bounded into the Audience Hall. In his hurry to reach Tresqu's throne, Wert slipped on the nearly frictionless floor and skidded through the formation of dancers, sending the slender Goefden sprawling in all directions. He slid to a halt by the Pleading Mat, onto which he crawled and groveled, awaiting permission to speak.

"I believe three of the dancers received broken legs," Tresqu observed calmly. "They are rather delicate creatures and not at all clumsy." He dipped the tip of his tail into an urn of chilled perfume and gently dabbed it about his nostril. Speaking pleasantly, with long pauses between sentences, he kept his friendly gaze on the groveling Wert. "Oft I meditate on the clumsiness of our race in comparison to many others who are our graceful servants. Why, I wonder, cannot the rulers be graceful? Some of us are very clumsy indeed—too clumsy to live."

A tremor passed through Wert's stocky body.

"Possibly my Lord of War has news of sufficient import to excuse his ungainly haste. But I sincerely doubt it. I fear I must soon appoint a successor to him. Undoubtedly he has news of some sort. Blurt, Wert!"

"Your Majestic Wisdom," whined Wert, "my message is of utmost importance! The natives of Sol III have captured one of our decontaminator ships and learned its secrets!"

"Sol III?"

"Yes, Your Wisdom. The planet called Terra."

"Terra? You must realize, lordling, that I cannot occupy myself with remembering trivialities about individual worlds."

"Yes, Your Wisdom. We have a base, which is commanded by—that is, we *had* a base commanded—"

"Enough!" snapped Tresqu. "You start your tale from nowhere and wander whence and hence!" He raised his voice and called to one of his retainers. "Fool! Come forward!"

An abnormally slender Hovan arose from a platform off to Tresqu's left and skipped nimbly forward to stand insolently over the Lord of War, who was still prone on the Pleading Mat.

"Recite for me," said Tresqu, "the contents of my gazetteer on the planet Sol III. Listen well, Wert. You may even yet live long enough to profit by my Fool's style of declamation. Study it well. Also, you may raise your eyes sufficiently to observe the grace of his movements. Proceed, sprite."

"Sol III," began the Fool. "An H9 planet. Sol is in the Sirian Colony Sector, coordinates GL 15-44-17-5, GR 12⁷ plus 9, D 14. Terra's life is normal animal-vegetable, with one intelligent species of hovoids called Humans. Due to the unpleasantly high oxygen content of the atmosphere, Terra has not been colonized, but has been placed under the control of the Science Ministry for the purpose of long-range psychological experiments." The Fool picked up Wert's tail and twisted it hard but absently as he talked. The Lord of War twitched painfully. "Many informative reports on the results of these experiments have been released by the ministry during the past seven thousand years, dealing mainly with the Humans. The Science Ministry has declared Terra out of bounds—*Positively no visitors.*"

With a single flow of motion, the Fool gave Wert's tail a final twist, leaped over his body, and bowed deeply to Tresqu.

"Beautifully done, Fool," applauded the Ruler of Hova. "Your mother claims me as your father, and there are times I am inclined to believe her. How would you like to be my Lord of War, Fool?"

"Verily, my good master," said the Fool, "I hope you consider me a Fool by title only."

"Well said, Fool. You are spared. Go seek your pleasures."

With another bow, the Fool backed away.

"Stand up, Wert," said Tresqu, "and tell me about this captured decontamination ship."

The Lord of War arose and managed to report with some smoothness. "Two years ago, the Science Ministry turned Terra over to my command, saying their long series of experiments was concluded. They recommended complete decontamination of the planet, since the Humans were developing technologies which could eventually threaten us. I dispatched a ship for that purpose immediately, but it failed to return. Also, reports from our base on Terra's satellite Luna ceased soon thereafter. A scouting expedition was sent. It has just reported the Luna base destroyed completely, and the decontaminator ship crashed and stripped of all

important devices in one of the Terran deserts. By studying these removed devices, the Humans have undoubtedly developed protections against them.

"I humbly submit, Your Majestic Wisdom, that these events have endangered the safety of your glorious empire, and that drastic steps against the Humans should be taken immediately. Also, Good Lord of All, I submit that the Science Ministry, not the War Ministry, is at fault in this affair. They obviously let their experiments get out of control before calling us. Undoubtedly they would like to shift the full blame onto my shoulders."

Tresqu continued his pleasant demeanor. "There may be some truth in what you say, Wert. You overestimate the danger in this matter, I perceive. After all, what is one backward planet against the forces of my empire containing thirty-seven well-armed worlds? The Humans will be destroyed, even if they have the secrets of a decontaminator ship. As for the blame, which I admit is deplorable, the Lord of Science will be called to the Mat to make his excuses. Now, assuming you remain Lord of War, what action do you plan to take against the Humans?"

"Your Gracious Wisdom," faltered Wert, "I suggest we use the—the Weapon. You see, our forces are not fully mobilized at present for immediate action—"

"Full mobilization isn't necessary or even desirable," Tresqu interrupted with some impatience. "One task force can do the job. Ah! I see by your expression that you do not have even one task force in readiness."

"Your Gracious Wisdom," begged Wert, "you ordered a full holiday this month to celebrate the twenty-fourth anniversary of your magnificent reign, and—"

"Enough, Wert! Your tongue is as clumsy as your body." Tresqu nibbled thoughtfully at the tip of his tail. "We will use the Weapon," he decided. "In order to allow my court to continue their holiday, I'll assume direct command in this." He rose from his throne. "Musicians, summon my guards. I go to visit the Weapon. Come, Wert; come also, Fool. You will accompany me."

Shortly thereafter, Tresqu and his entourage boarded the royal cruiser and roared away from the City of Wisdom. The ship flew halfway around the planet and came to rest in a peaceful purple valley where insects shrilled contentedly and a small stream rippled. Tresqu climbed out onto the violet turf, his followers coming after him.

"Mighty Weapon of Zoz," he called, "I, Tresqu, seek your presence!"

"Oh, no!" groaned a slightly mechanical voice that seemed to come from no particular direction. "Will there never be peace, never a tranquil moment to soothe my spirit and erase the bloody stains of destruction recorded on my past?"

"That voice! It carries me away!" breathed the Fool. "Such a tragic tale of tormented strength is implicit in its very tone that I think I shall swoon!" But he wrapped his tail around the trunk of a nearby sapling for support and managed to retain consciousness.

"Me, too!" Wert chimed in with suspicious haste. "I'm quite moved!"

"Try not to counterfeit a soul you do not possess." Tresqu glowered at Wert. "You deceive no one."

The Fool was recovered sufficiently to hit the discomfited Lord of War with a pebble when Tresqu was not watching.

The Weapon had drifted into sight during this exchange, floating out of a shady hollow, as if blown by a breeze. It was very simple in appearance—an impalpable three-foot glowing sphere with a squat metallic cylinder at its base.

"Tell me not the purpose of your visit, petty lord!" It said. "It is known to me only too well. Ah, great First Principle! Little did I reckon when, in ages past, I nursed your species to civilization, just how poorly you would serve my purpose. Peace it was I desired, but do I get it? No! Your kingdom is powerful, but you have not the strength to handle your own troubles. You rule twenty-nine planets—"

"Thirty-seven," corrected Tresqu politely.

"—thirty-seven planets, but when a malignant force appears on your borders, I, the Weapon, must be called upon to act in my own defense, and for the sake of a few more restful moments in this calm glade, I am obliged to destroy, yet it was to avoid destroying that I helped your species to empire in the old days."

"In truth," spoke the deeply sympathetic Tresqu, "yours is a sad story. I disturb your richly earned rest only after the sincerest soul-searching. But affairs of state are at cross purposes in a moment of crisis, and without your help Hova will be in danger."

"Ah, cruel Fate!" intoned the Weapon, "It aids me in no manner to protest against your inscrutable machinations! There is no turning aside, no avoidance of necessity!" In a less declamatory style, the Weapon addressed Tresqu: "Very well, what is the trouble?"

Tresqu described the events on Terra for the Weapon, concluding, "Now that the Humans have knowledge of our space drive and

armament, they are certain to attack, especially if they realize they have been subjects for experiment."

The Weapon flitted about restlessly along the bank of the brook. "I question the motives of my own thoughts. Do I quibble with myself in an attempt to escape unwelcome necessities? Tell, petty lord, do your scientists confirm the picture you paint of the Humans? Are they, like you, alas, masterfully vicious enough to destroy the peace of dozens of planets for nothing but revenge?"

"So the scientists say, mighty Weapon," answered Tresqu.

"You, Lord of War, why are you silent when your face is strained with words crying for expression?" asked the Weapon. "Speak your mind."

Wert squirmed. "If it please Your Mightiness, and you, Your Gracious Wisdom, I believe the Humans will know that we desire their destruction, and will try to defeat us for the sake of their own survival rather than revenge."

"A most convincing point, Lord of War," said the Weapon.

Tresqu flashed a forgiving smile at Wert while the Weapon paused before continuing:

"However, I fear my unwilling spirit refuses to bow to the most reasonable of arguments. Please leave me; solve the problem yourselves!"

Tresqu bowed and moved toward the cruiser. "We obey, Mighty Guide of our fathers. Let me say in parting that I, too, am grieved by our talk, much more because of the pain our visit has caused your noble greatness than because our race is threatened with annihilation. My deepest hope is that the ravages of war will never reach this peaceful place which is so dear to your gentle being."

"Wait!" groaned the Weapon. "To slay, or not to slay, that is the dilemma. Ah, had my old masters of Zoz only left within my powers the seed of my own destruction, I would gladly seek the consummation of ultimate peace. But, no, that door is closed to me by deathless locks. Bring me a Human, that I may learn to hate him. Choose the most ignoble specimen available. I will converse with him at length so as to become exasperated with all the despicable traits of his race. Then, in my contempt for those traits, I will be able to cleanse the Universe of all Humans."

Tresqu turned quickly to his Fool. "Are there any Humans on Hova?"

"Yes, in the biological research laboratories."

"Then go quickly, Fool, and fetch one. This is a grave matter, and I trust you to choose the most monstrous specimen available. Hurry!"

The Fool ran into the cruiser and was on his way, leaving Tresqu, Wert, and several guardsmen with the Weapon. If the Weapon was conscious of the fact that the Lord of Hova was staying behind out of courtesy, it did not show it. Instead, it wandered indifferently away, mumbling a soliloquy of guilt and misery.

The sight of the Fool's specimen of humanity repaid Tresqu for the tediousness of the waiting. It was a particularly sordid-looking creature with a dirty growth of hairs on its head and face. Its body, thin as the Fool's, but with no compensating grace of movement, was clad in a blue garment of roughly woven vegetable fibers, and the extremities of its nether limbs were enclosed in evil-smelling boxes of animal hide. Its fierce eyes darted ominously from one Hovan to another. Its jaw kept working in a slow rhythm, and occasionally a stream of black liquid exploded through its mouth.

"You have done well, Fool," said Tresqu. "You will be rewarded highly." Raising his voice he called, "Mighty Weapon, your specimen awaits!"

"I come!" Once more the Weapon floated into view.

The Earthman's jaw sagged. "Y God!" he muttered in English, staring at the approaching Weapon.

"Indeed," said the Weapon, "this appears to be a creature I could learn to abhor and kill. If only its thoughts equal its appearance—Speak, Human!"

The man said nothing.

"Mighty Weapon," murmured the Fool, "this Human is truly an ignoble monster. He has been in captivity for five years and has yet to speak a word of our beautiful language instead of his own barbaric tongue."

"You fool!" shouted Tresqu. "How is the Weapon going to converse with him? Why did you bring one that cannot talk?"

Not in the least disconcerted, the Fool replied, "As you ordered, good master, I brought the worst specimen available. However, the possibility of linguistic difficulties was not overlooked. I have here a dictionary of his language, recently compiled by our Alien Affairs staff." He produced a large volume of manuscript from beneath his cloak.

"Your Fool shows wisdom, petty lord," spoke the Weapon. "I will study this book. Know the language, know the people, it is wisely said. In fact, I originated that saying myself some three thousand years ago, I

believe. Unship any supplies brought for the Human and begone. Three days will suffice for the arousal of my wrath. Return then."

"As you wish, O Mightiest of All." Tresqu bowed gawkily. "It is my most ardent desire, Wondrous Guide, that we, your servants, will not be obliged to disturb your peace again for a thousand centuries, once this affair is concluded."

"And mine," the Weapon snapped crossly. "Now leave me."

The man watched the Hovans enter their cruiser and fly away. Looking at the Weapon hovering nearby, he squatted on his heels and pulled up a blade of purple grass to chew. Minutes passed in silence. Then the Weapon moved away, the book bobbing along behind, supported by some unseen force.

When it was out of sight, the man muttered, "'Y God, I've saw fireballs in my time, but that's the first one I ever saw settin' in a bucket!"

After a thoughtful examination of his surroundings, the man stood up and walked to the packing cases the Hovans had left. All but one contained the synthetic food product to which he had grown accustomed in his five years of captivity. The other box, rather small, contained a shredded vegetable which served him as a poor substitute for chewing tobacco. Purple when growing, the leaves of this vegetable were blue-black when cured, making his frequent expectorations look like ink.

"Filthy damn stuff!" he grunted, stuffing several handfuls in an empty overall pocket.

He shuffled down to the brook and tested its temperature with a hand. Finding it rather cold, he decided against taking a bath. Instead, he spat into it and watched meditatively as the spot of black was carried downstream. "I wonder what they turned me loose for," he monologued.

Careful to avoid the spot where the Weapon appeared to have gone, he returned to the food supply and ate. By then it was getting dark, and he bedded down for the night on some thick grass under a tree.

"'Y God," he yawned, "I'm glad all these insects don't want nothin' to do with me."

The Weapon was waiting beside him when he woke up next morning. "Eyes of your Terran Deity," it said, "I shall now converse with you in your own tongue. Name yourself, creature!"

The man sat up startled. A moment passed before he said, "I'm Jake—Jacob Absher. What was that you said?"

"My pronunciation is above reproach, Jacob. Therefore I will not repeat myself. Attend me closely or I shall punish you."

"Y God, I heard you all right and you didn't make sense!" said Jacob, determined not to be frightened. "Now if you aim to talk with me, stop imitatin' a professor and talk so's a man can understand you. I ain't scared of you, so leave off makin' threats!"

"Such stupid insolence!" gloated the Weapon. "Already I feel my wrath growing within me! Since it will anger me even more to explain my words to you, I will do exactly that. My first words to you were, 'Eyes of your Terran Deity,' an expression you use frequently in a corrupted form to begin your statements. By studying your language, I learned that 'Zounds' is a similar corruption referring to the wounds of the Deity, while 'Strewth' refers to your God's truth. Thus, I was able to understand, and state in uncorrupted form, your remark, 'Eye God.'"

"Tain't what it means," objected Jacob, filling his mouth with ersatz tobacco. "It just means *by* God."

The Weapon considered this. "And exactly what is the significance of such a remark?"

Jacob scratched his whiskered chin. "I reckon you got me there. I guess it means that I mean what I say."

"In other words, any statement you make following that phrase is to be taken seriously?"

"Somethin' like that."

"Then it follows that your other statements, without the 'by God' preface, are not seriously intended. Are they jokes or lies?"

"That ain't the way it is at all! I just say 'by God' when I feel like it, not every time I'm bein' serious."

"Monstrous inconsistency!" groaned the Weapon dramatically. "Ah, chaotic universe! Is there then no sublime plan, no fateful development to your endless succession of days? How could even the most synoptic First Principle find a purpose for creating such an unplanned, unreasonable species as the Humans? Can it be—unhappy thought!—that there is no plan to it all, and we exist for naught?"

Jacob listened with open mouth. "Say," he broke in, "are you some kind of play-actor?"

"That is what I ask myself," the Weapon continued its oratorical flight. "Are we all actors, speaking the lines written for us by a Great Playwright who plans to unite all the threads of his plot in a universal climax to come? Or are we poor random creatures without purpose?" It paused and added in a more conversational tone, "But that is not what you mean

by your question. No, I am not a play-actor. I am an unfortunate weapon, reluctant to employ myself for my intended purpose of destruction of life and unsuited by my structure for the doing of deeds more worthy in nature."

Jacob squinted about. "A weapon, huh? Let's see you hit that bird thing sittin' in that tree over there."

"Bloodthirsty fiend! I do not kill for amusement!"

"I just wanted to see how you worked," said the abashed Jacob. "All I've seen you do is float around and talk a blue streak. As far as I'm concerned, you ain't nothin' but a big-mouthed bluff."

"Very well, Jacob. If you have formed such an erroneous attitude, it will be necessary for me to correct you immediately. Observe the red boulder on yonder hill."

"I see it."

The cylindrical base of the Weapon swung to point briefly at the boulder, which quietly crumbled to dust.

"I be dog!" yelped Jacob. He looked at the Weapon with respect. "You sure pulverized it! How do you work?"

"You could not understand the processes involved. Suffice it to say I have the means to collect energy in general and retransmit it in specific forms and directions. But enough of this. You are here to answer questions, not ask them. First, tell me what you did in an average day on Terra."

"That what you call the world I live on?"

"Yes."

"I'm a farmer, you know. I got a place in the Smoky Mountains in Tennessee. First thing in the mornin', I'd go feed the livestock while Suzy cooked breakfast." A faraway look came into Jacob's eyes. "Guess she took the kids and went to live with her mammy when these here animals grabbed me... ."

"Continue," commanded the Weapon.

"Huh? Well, then we'd eat breakfast. Come to think of it, I ain't et yet this mornin'." Jacob got up and went to get himself some breakfast.

"But this matter—" protested the Weapon.

"Not on an empty stomach," Jacob said calmly, eating without haste.

When he returned, the Weapon questioned him further about his life on Terra. Hours of ill-tempered conversation passed.

"Such drabness!" the Weapon finally exclaimed. "Creatures who lead such dull lives as yours should welcome extinction. Not once have you mentioned an appreciation of the wondrous exaltation that comes from an esthetic feel for beauty. With the labor of providing for your grotesque body's animal cravings is your whole life spent. Not in anger, but as an act of mercy, can I exterminate your defective race!"

Jacob's mouth hung open. "So *that's* what your monkey's brung me out here for—fixin' to kill us! 'Y God, you better look out! We got atom bombs on Earth an' we'll use 'em on you if you try anything!"

"Toys!" sneered the Weapon. "Be assured, Jacob, that I have nothing to fear from any childish mechanisms your Terrans can contrive!"

Jacob sat stunned. "But you said a minute ago you couldn't kill nothin'!"

"I can kill only when I'm convinced it is best for my own repose or for the health of the Universe. Long ago, I could go forth at battle with thoughtless joy at the command of my masters of Zoz, but now I must have reasons, must converse at length with my aberrated emotions, must prepare myself as for an ordeal."

"Them Zozes must've been the Devil's minions," argued Jacob. "The Commandments says, 'Thou shalt not kill' and when you go against that, you're goin' against the word of God."

"Poor, futile creature!" sympathized the Weapon. "You actually strive to pit your naive superstitious mind against my highly developed mentality in argument. You actually associate my supreme masters of old with your puny mythological villain! Lowliness should know its place. But I feel no anger—merely a pitying desire to relieve your kind of the burden of living."

Silently, Jacob replenished the wad of "tobacco" in his mouth. After chewing a while, he spat and said dolefully, "I don't reckon there's nothin' I can say or do that you won't hold against me. I always heard tell the Devil can twist anything to suit hisself, and I reckon his minions can do the same thing. An' that's what you are: the Devil's minion! I reckon you break every Commandment God give us. Except about committin' adultery. I don't guess you can do that."

"Your piddling reproductive customs have no application on my plane of existence. Cannot you comprehend that you are less to me than a microbe? Even my servants, the Hovans, do not concern themselves with such ignoble concepts as what you call adultery!"

"You mean they live in sin?" asked Jacob.

"They mate as often as they please with anyone they please," the Weapon replied coldly. "I will ignore the ludicrous implications of your absurd moral concepts."

"I don't mean to criticize your animal friends," glowered Jacob. "I reckon they ain't children of God, so it don't matter if they *do* mate like a pack of dogs. They probably ain't got no souls to keep pure. It looked to me like they worshiped you like a false god, too."

"They ... O Great Hidden Manifestation!" squalled the Weapon in rage. "They regard me as their guide and mentor. Nothing more. I would not allow anything else."

Jacob watched the Weapon in awe. The energy globe was flickering and flaring wildly in an uncontrolled display of color. "'Y God!" he exclaimed. "You sure are puttin' on a fireworks show!"

The globe settled down to a tensely nervous fluctuation which hurt Jacob's eyes to watch. "Never in the ageless span of my existence," quavered the Weapon angrily, "have I been insulted in such vulgar terms by any creature. And now from *you*, creature whom my glorious masters of Zoz would exterminate like a buzzing fly, like a disease germ, I hear these senseless mouthings of defamation! Stop it or I shall destroy you outright!"

The Weapon's fluctuating, along with its loud, grating voice, put Jacob's nerves on edge. He growled, "I bet your old Zozes live in adultery just like your animal friends."

The color of the energy globe sank to dull red and the Weapon emitted a series of buzzing, inarticulate noises.

"It suits not my nature, bit of diseased scum, to slay you in a fit of indignation," it finally said with tightly controlled fury. "You are beneath such individual recognition. Yet it is fortunate for you that your insults have no basis in reality, otherwise my intellect could not have claimed ascendancy over the immediate urges of my tortured sense of extreme disgust. Be wise, say I, knowing I request the impossible, and irk me no more!"

"'Y God, I reckon you don't think you rile me up, too, with all that high falutin' jabber of yours!" Jacob snapped back.

"As I speak, so speak the mighty Zoz," replied the Weapon in high dignity. "They are great and noble beings, given to poetic flights and magnificent deeds. To them, your puny opinions would not even be recognized as thought."

"If they talk in that puttin'-on, play-actin' way you do, they are a bunch of phony show-offin' hypocrites!" sulked Jacob.

Several things happened too quickly for Jacob to follow. The color of the energy globe dropped to absolute black. The metallic cylinder swung up to point at Jacob. A thin ringing "*Ping!*" sounded in the cylinder. A killing wave of pure hate struck Jacob.

He had just enough time to know he was a dead man before he blacked out.

It came as a surprise, when Jacob regained consciousness, to find that he was stretched out on purple grass with the Weapon still hovering over him.

"You missed, 'y God!" he mumbled, sitting up.

"I regained my sanity in time, Master Technician," the Weapon replied pleasantly.

"Huh?"

"Ah, day of un-containable joy!" sang the Weapon, flaming pure white. "Day of glorious release to continue the grandeur of old! As the past eons of futility passed over me, I sank to the conclusion that I was forever condemned to my useless existence on this planet, with nothing to sustain my spirit other than the sense of beauty given me by masters to fill my leisure hours! But now, Master Technician Jacob, you have found me and corrected my malfunction, long after I had surrendered all hope!"

Still dazed by the nearly fatal wave of mental energy the Weapon had directed at him, Jacob could not understand what had happened. Instead of talking contemptuously to him, the Weapon was now addressing him as Master Something-or-other, and... .

"What did you say I done?" he asked.

"You corrected my malfunction," repeated the Weapon. "That is to say, you purged my mechanism of the inhibition against joyful slaughter that has plagued me for a billion years. Ah, you are a clever Technician, Jacob! But I comprehend it all now. By arousing within me an overwhelming emotional desire to kill—a singularly strange feeling!—you depressed my inhibition to the releasing point. So telling was your masterful therapy that I almost ceased functioning at all!

"Your own life was in dire danger for the moment required for my new-found sanity to assume control. But, of course, all slaves of the glorious Zoz die willingly when the work of the masters so demands."

"Now wait a minute!" objected Jacob. "I ain't no slave of your Zozes or no Technician either! You know what I am—a good God-fearin' human!" His voice dropped to a pleading mumble. "And may God forgive me if I've got myself in league with the Devil!"

"Ah? Could it be?" murmured the Weapon. "Could indeed your infuriating insults of the Great Ones have been honest expressions of a puny mind with no therapeutic intentions? I answer: Yes. The possible occurrence of specific incidents in the inclusion of space-time is curiously unlimited. But you have served me, Jacob, and have earned the privilege of continuing your meager, momentary life. Besides, I can use you further."

"You can, huh?" Jacob said slyly. "Look here, Weapon, I'll make a bargain with you."

"Ha! Stupid, untutored slave!" chuckled the Weapon. "Learn that yours is to obey, not to bargain. But yet, state your price for my amusement, now that I can no longer be enraged by your words."

"Well, you let the rest of the people on Earth alone and I'll do whatever you want me to."

After a pause, the Weapon quoted, "'Nobility shows its traces in surprising places.' You do not sufficiently comprehend my nature, Technician Slave Jacob. I am a Weapon. My masters point me, as you would point a rifle, and command that I destroy. I kill at their direction, but seldom otherwise. Thus, your Terra is safe until another Weapon or I am aimed and directed. You can make no bargain."

Jacob thought this over. While doing so, the Weapon drifted away.

"Wait here, slave," it said in parting. "I go to meditate on my recovered sanity."

During the next two days, Jacob caught an occasional glimpse of the Weapon drifting thoughtfully around in the depths of the forest, but they did not meet for conversation. Jacob amused himself by rigging a fishing line out of some of the packaging material that contained his food. He even succeeded in catching a fish, but its queer odor discouraged him from trying to cook and eat it.

Then the royal cruiser of Tresqu the Wisest dropped into the meadow. Its airlock swung open and the Ruler of Hova, followed by his entourage, came out.

"Oh, Mighty Weapon!" bawled Tresqu. "Your loving servant craves audience!"

"Ah, you have returned, petty lord," said the Weapon, drifting out from among the trees. "Serve me by calling all the crew members from your noble ship, that I may view you all together."

Puzzled, Tresqu bowed and said, "Your least whim is law, Mighty Weapon." He turned and called, "All hands, outside!"

A half-dozen Hovans tumbled through the lock to stand in line behind the ruler's entourage.

"Is this all of them?" asked the Weapon.

"All, Great Mentor of—"

The Weapon laughed and the Hovans fell dead.

"Come, Slave Jacob," commanded the Weapon. "We take this cruiser."

Dazed and slack-faced, Jacob came out from behind a bush, where he had hidden himself from the Hovans, and followed the Weapon through the airlock.

"Even in my insanity, I planned well," said the Weapon. "These ships, which I taught the Hovans to construct, can be operated simply, even by such as you. Attend my instructions."

First, the Weapon taught Jacob to open and close the airlock. Then he was shown how to fuel the engines, upon which the Weapon made some changes to improve their performance. Finally, in the control room, Jacob learned to fly the ship.

This took several hours, at the end of which time Jacob had succeeded in raising the cruiser into a satellite orbit around Hova.

"Do you comprehend, Slave?" asked the Weapon.

"Sure. This thing ain't nothin' to run compared to a T-model Ford! Which way is it to Earth?"

"That I shall not tell you, Jacob, because I must leave the ship for a few hours and desire to find you here when I return. Consider and tell me: Will you be here?"

Jacob gazed at the broad, star-spangled viewplate that curved around his seat at the controls. There was, he reflected an awful lot of nothing out there for a man to get lost in.

"I'll be here," he promised.

"Very good. You must understand that these controls are constructed for manipulation by such limbs as your own and those of the Hovans. Thus, it is convenient for me to use you as a pilot instead of doing the drab, mechanical task with my ill-suited force-field manipulators. You will be wise to serve me well, Jacob."

Jacob nodded. "You got a point there."

"Operate the lock for me," the Weapon ordered.

Jacob did so and watched the colorful machine drift out of sight in the atmosphere below the cruiser.

Minutes ticked quietly by as Jacob gazed down at the purple planet and wondered why the Weapon had not chosen a trained Hovan pilot

instead of him. Also, he wondered how soon the Weapon would take him home to Earth.

A great swath of the purple planet began turning black. The black dulled to the gray shade of ashes as the swath grew longer. Over the surface of Hova, the blackening moved like some colossal paint brush. Dense clouds of smoke rolled upward to the high reaches of the atmosphere.

Jacob realized why the Weapon had not selected a Hovan pilot.

When all of Hova was a lifeless ball in a fog of ash, the Weapon returned.

"Ah, good Jacob!" it boomed jovially. "Let us be up and doing! Thirty-six planets remain to be visited before my current assignment is concluded!"

"Do all of them get—that?" asked Jacob, nodding toward the lifeless world below.

"Yes. I was instructed to render this solar system lifeless before I malfunctioned. Since then, the life of this system has spread, with my insane aid, to infest other systems. Of course, my task must now include all those new Hovan worlds."

"Now wait a minute!" said Jacob in terror. "I can't let you do that!"

"They are your enemies, Jacob," reminded the Weapon. "They meant to kill every human on Terra. Also, by your own words, they are soulless animals who live in sinful adultery. Ha! It amuses me to reason with you, Slave Jacob!"

"Godamighty, forgive me!" prayed Jacob, in horrified defeat.

The Weapon seemed to know how to find the Hovan planets from the markings of the cruiser's star charts. Jacob could not read the charts and saw no hope of getting back to earth and Suzy and the kids without the Weapon's help. Dully, he went about the tasks the Weapon ordered him to do.

Several weeks passed as one world after another was left a smoking ruin.

Finally the job was done.

"Now, can I go home?" begged Jacob.

"To Terra? No, Slave. I still need a pilot."

"But if you take me home," Jacob continued desperately, "you can get a better pilot than me. I'm just a dirt farmer. There's all kinds of airplane pilots on Earth, youngsters without families who would give their right arms to fly this thing, I bet!"

"Ah?" The Weapon considered. "A willing slave is, of course, always desirable. On the other hand, Terra is up in arms against the empire of Hova, not realizing it is dead. They would destroy this craft on sight, and I would be obliged to wait around until they could construct another for me. No, I have decided we will not go to Terra."

"But, damn it, where else is there to go?"

"In search of my masters of Zoz," replied the Weapon. "Naturally, I wish to return myself to their services as soon as possible."

"But they might be anywhere!"

"True," the Weapon agreed. "But even after a billion years, I know of several places in the Universe they may be near. Their great cleansing sweeps tend to circle and turn in a pattern established long in advance. Thus we will go to those places where they may now be engaged in their consecrated task of universal purification."

"But—"

"No more, Slave! We go!"

Out of the Milky Way, the cruiser hurtled at a speed which a sentient lightwave would find meaningless. On and on they journeyed in quest of the long-dead Zoz Horde.

They may still be going.

—HOWARD L. MYERS

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