

A Relic of War

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The old war machine sat in the village square, its impotent guns pointing aimlessly along the dusty street.

Shoulder-high weeds grew rankly about it, poking up through the gaps in the two-yard-wide treads; vines crawled over the high, rust-and guano-streaked flanks. A row of tarnished enameled battle honors gleamed dully across the prow, reflecting the late sun.

A group of men lounged near the machine; they were dressed in heavy work clothes and boots; their hands were large and calloused, their faces weather-burned. They passed a jug from hand to hand, drinking deep. It was the end of a long workday and they were relaxed, good-humored.

“Hey, we’re forgetting old Bobby,” one said. He strolled over and sloshed a little of the raw whiskey over the soot-blackened muzzle of the blast cannon slanting sharply down from the forward turret. The other men laughed.

“How’s it going, Bobby?” the man called.

Deep inside the machine there was a soft chirring sound.

“Very well thank you,” a faint, whispery voice scraped from a grill below the turret.

“You keeping an eye on things, Bobby?” another man called.

“All clear,” the answer came: a bird-chirp from a dinosaur.

“Bobby, you ever get tired just setting here?”

“Hell, Bobby don’t get tired,” the man with the jug said. “He’s got a job to do, old Bobby has.”

“Hey, Bobby, what kind o’boy are you?” a plump, lazy-eyed man called.

“I am a good boy,” Bobby replied obediently.

“Sure Bobby’s a good boy.” The man with the jug reached up to pat the age-darkened curve of chromalloy above him. “Bobby’s looking out

for us.”

Heads turned at a sound from across the square: the distant whine of a turbocar, approaching along the forest road.

“Huh! Ain’t the day for the mail,” a man said. They stood in silence, watching as a small, dusty cushion-car emerged from deep shadow into the yellow light of the street. It came slowly along to the plaza, swung left, pulled to a stop beside the boardwalk before a corrugated metal store front lettered **BLAUVELT PROVISION COMPANY**. The canopy popped open and a man stepped down. He was of medium height, dressed in a plain city-type black coverall.

He studied the store front, the street, then turned to look across at the men. He came across toward them.

“Which of you men is Blauvelt?” he asked as he came up. His voice was unhurried, cool. His eyes flicked over the men.

A big, youngish man with a square face and sun-bleached hair lifted his chin.

“Right here,” he said. “Who’re you?”

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“Crewe is the name. Disposal Officer, War Materiel Commission.” The newcomer looked up at the great machine looming over them. “Bolo Stupendous, Mark XXV,” he said. He glanced at the men’s faces, fixed on Blauvelt. “We had a report that there was a live Bolo out here. I wonder if you realize what you’re playing with?”

“Hell, that’s just Bobby,” a man said.

“He’s town mascot,” someone else said.

“This machine could blow your town off the map,” Crewe said. “And a good-sized piece of jungle along with it.”

Blauvelt grinned; the squint lines around his eyes gave him a quizzical look.

“Don’t go getting upset, Mr. Crewe,” he said. “Bobby’s harmless—”

“A Bolo’s never harmless, Mr. Blauvelt. They’re fighting machines, nothing else.”

Blauvelt sauntered over and kicked at a corroded treadplate. “Eighty-five years out in this jungle is kind of tough on machinery, Crewe. The sap and stuff from the trees eats chromalloy like it was sugar candy. The rains are acid, eat up equipment damn near as fast as we can ship it in here. Bobby can still talk a little, but that’s about all.”

“Certainly it’s deteriorated; that’s what makes it dangerous. Anything could trigger its battle reflex circuitry. Now, if you’ll clear everyone out of the area, I’ll take care of it.”

“You move kind of fast for a man that just hit town,” Blauvelt said, frowning. “Just what you got in mind doing?”

“I’m going to fire a pulse at it that will neutralize what’s left of its computing center. Don’t worry; there’s no danger—”

“Hey,” a man in the rear rank blurted. “That mean he can’t talk any more?”

“That’s right,” Crewe said. “Also, he can’t open fire on you.”

“Not so fast, Crewe,” Blauvelt said. “You’re not messing with Bobby. We like him like he is.” The other men were moving forward, forming up in a threatening circle around Crewe.

“Don’t talk like a fool,” Crewe said. “What do you think a salvo from a Continental Siege Unit would do to your town?”

Blauvelt chuckled and took a long cigar from his vest pocket. He sniffed it, called out: “All right, Bobby—fire one!”

There was a muted clatter, a sharp click! from deep inside the vast bulk of the machine. A tongue of pale flame licked from the cannon’s soot-rimmed bore. The big man leaned quickly forward, puffed the cigar alight. The audience whooped with laughter.

“Bobby does what he’s told, that’s all,” Blauvelt said. “And not much of that.” He showed white teeth in a humorless smile.

Crewe flipped over the lapel of his jacket; a small, highly polished badge glinted there. “You know better than to interfere with a Concordiat officer,” he said.

“Not so fast, Crewe,” a dark-haired, narrow-faced fellow spoke up. “You’re out of line. I heard about you Disposal men. Your job is locating old ammo dumps, abandoned equipment, stuff like that. Bobby’s not abandoned. He’s town property. Has been for near thirty years.”

“Nonsense. This is battle equipment, the property of the Space Arm —”

Blauvelt was smiling lopsidedly. “Uh-uh. We’ve got salvage rights. No title, but we can make one up in a hurry.

Official. I’m the Mayor here, and District Governor.”

“This thing is a menace to every man, woman, and child in the settlement,” Crewe snapped. “My job is to prevent tragedy—”

“Forget Bobby,” Blauvelt cut in. He waved a hand at the jungle wall beyond the tilled fields. “There’s a hundred million square miles of virgin

territory out there,” he said. “You can do what you like out there. I’ll even sell you provisions. But just leave our mascot be, understand?”

Crewe looked at him, looked around at the other men.

“You’re a fool,” he said. “You’re all fools.” He turned and walked away, stiff-backed.

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In the room he had rented in the town’s lone boardinghouse, Crewe opened his baggage and took out a small, gray-plastic-cased instrument. The three children of the landlord who were watching from the latchless door edged closer.

“Gee, is that a real star radio?” the eldest, a skinny, long-necked lad of twelve asked.

“No,” Crewe said shortly. The boy blushed and hung his head.

“It’s a command transmitter,” Crewe said, relenting. “It’s designed for talking to fighting machines, giving them orders. They’ll only respond to the special shaped-wave signal this puts out.” He flicked a switch, and an indicator light glowed on the side of the case.

“You mean like Bobby?” the boy asked.

“Like Bobby used to be.” Crewe switched off the transmitter.

“Bobby’s swell,” another child said. “He tells us stories about when he was in the war.”

“He’s got medals,” the first boy said. “Were you in the war, mister?”

“I’m not quite that old,” Crewe said.

“Bobby’s older’n grandad.”

“You boys had better run along,” Crewe said. “I have to . . . ” He broke off, cocked his head, listening. There were shouts outside; someone was calling his name.

Crewe pushed through the boys and went quickly along the hall, stepped through the door onto the boardwalk. He felt rather than heard a slow, heavy thudding, a chorus of shrill squeaks, a metallic groaning. A red-faced man was running toward him from the square.

“It’s Bobby!” he shouted. “He’s moving! What’d you do to him, Crewe?”

Crewe brushed past the man, ran toward the plaza. The Bolo appeared at the end of the street, moving ponderously forward, trailing uprooted weeds and vines.

“He’s headed straight for Spivac’s warehouse!” someone yelled.

“Bobby! Stop there!” Blauvelt came into view, running in the machine’s wake. The big machine rumbled onward, executed a half-left as Crewe reached the plaza, clearing the corner of a building by inches. It crushed a section of boardwalk to splinters, advanced across a storage yard. A stack of rough-cut lumber toppled, spilled across the dusty ground. The Bolo trampled a board fence, headed out across a tilled field. Blauvelt whirled on Crewe.

“This is your doing! We never had trouble before—”

“Never mind that! Have you got a field car?”

“We—” Blauvelt checked himself. “What if we have?”

“I can stop it—but I have to be close. It will be into the jungle in another minute. My car can’t navigate there.”

“Let him go,” a man said, breathing hard from his run. “He can’t do no harm out there.”

“Who’d of thought it?” another man said. “Setting there all them years—who’d of thought he could travel like that?”

“Your so-called mascot might have more surprises in store for you,” Crewe snapped. “Get me a car, fast! This is an official requisition, Blauvelt!”

There was a silence, broken only by the distant crashing of timber as the Bolo moved into the edge of the forest.

Hundred-foot trees leaned and went down before its advance.

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“Let him go,” Blauvelt said. “Like Stinzi says, he can’t hurt anything.”

“What if he turns back?”

“Hell,” a man muttered. “Old Bobby wouldn’t hurt us . . .”

“That car,” Crewe snarled. “You’re wasting valuable time.”

Blauvelt frowned. “All right—but you don’t make a move unless it looks like he’s going to come back and hit the town. Clear?”

“Let’s go.”

Blauvelt led the way at a trot toward the town garage.

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The Bolo’s trail was a twenty-five foot wide swath cut through the virgin jungle; the tread-prints were pressed eighteen inches into the black loam, where it showed among the jumble of fallen branches.

“It’s moving at about twenty miles an hour, faster than we can go,” Crewe said. “If it holds its present track, the curve will bring it back to your town in about five hours.”

“He’ll sheer off,” Blauvelt said.

“Maybe. But we won’t risk it. Pick up a heading of 270°, Blauvelt. We’ll try an intercept by cutting across the circle.”

Blauvelt complied wordlessly. The car moved ahead in the deep green gloom under the huge shaggy-barked trees.

Oversized insects buzzed and thumped against the canopy. Small and medium lizards hopped, darted, flapped. Fern leaves as big as awnings scraped along the car as it clambered over loops and coils of tough root, leaving streaks of plant juice across the clear plastic. Once they grated against an exposed ridge of crumbling brown rock; flakes as big as saucers scaled off, exposing dull metal.

“Dorsal fin of a scout-boat,” Crewe said. “That’s what’s left of what was supposed to be a corrosion resistant alloy.”

They passed more evidences of a long-ago battle: the massive, shattered breech mechanism of a platform-mounted Hellbore, the gutted chassis of what might have been a bomb car, portions of a downed aircraft, fragments of shattered armor. Many of the relics were of Terran design, but often it was the curiously curved, spidery lines of a rusted Axorc microgun or implosion projector that poked through the greenery.

“It must have been a heavy action,” Crewe said. “One of the ones toward the end that didn’t get much notice at the time. There’s stuff here I’ve never seen before, experimental types, I imagine, rushed in by the enemy for a last-ditch stand.”

Blauvelt grunted.

“Contact in another minute or so,” Crewe said.

As Blauvelt opened his mouth to reply, there was a blinding flash, a violent impact, and the jungle erupted in their faces.

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The seat webbing was cutting into Crewe’s ribs. His ears were filled with a high, steady ringing; there was a taste of brass in his mouth. His head throbbed in time with the thudding of his heart.

The car was on its side, the interior a jumble of loose objects, torn wiring, broken plastic. Blauvelt was half under him, groaning. He slid off him, saw that he was groggy but conscious.

“Changed your mind yet about your harmless pet?” he asked, wiping a trickle of blood from his right eye. “Let’s get clear before he fires those empty guns again. Can you walk?”

Blauvelt mumbled, crawled out through the broken canopy. Crewe groped through debris for the command transmitter—

“Good God,” Blauvelt croaked. Crewe twisted, saw the high, narrow, iodine-dark shape of the alien machine perched on jointed crawler-legs fifty feet away, framed by blast-scorched foliage. Its multiple-barreled micro-gun battery was aimed dead at the overturned car.

“Don’t move a muscle,” Crewe whispered. Sweat trickled down his face. An insect, like a stub-winged four-inch dragonfly, came and buzzed about them, moved on. Hot metal pinged, contracting. Instantly, the alien hunter-killer moved forward another six feet, depressing its gun muzzles.

“Run for it!” Blauvelt cried. He came to his feet in a scrabbling lunge; the enemy machine swung to track him . . .

A giant tree leaned, snapped, was tossed aside. The great green-streaked prow of the Bolo forged into view, interposing itself between the smaller machine and the men. It turned to face the enemy; fire flashed, reflecting against the surrounding trees; the ground jumped once, twice, to hard, racking shocks. Sound boomed dully in Crewe’s blast-numbered ears. Bright sparks fountained above the Bolo as it advanced, Crewe felt the massive impact as the two fighting machines came together; he saw the Bolo hesitate, then forge ahead, rearing up, pushing the lighter machine aside, grinding over it, passing on, to leave a crumpled mass of wreckage in its wake.

“Did you see that, Crewe?” Blauvelt shouted in his ear. “Did you see what Bobby did? He walked right into its guns and smashed it flatter’n crock-brewed beer!”

The Bolo halted, turned ponderously, sat facing the men. Bright streaks of molten metal ran down its armored flanks, fell spattering and smoking into crushed greenery.

“He saved our necks,” Blauvelt said. He staggered to his feet, picked his way past the Bolo to stare at the smoking ruins of the smashed adversary.

“Unit Nine Five Four of the tine, reporting contact with hostile force.” the mechanical voice of the Bolo spoke suddenly. “Enemy unit destroyed. I have sustained extensive damage, but am still operational at nine point six per centbase capability, awaiting further orders.”

“Hey,” Blauvelt said. “That doesn’t sound like . . .”

“Now maybe you understand that this is a Bolo combat unit, not the village idiot,” Crewe snapped. He picked his way across the churned-up ground, stood before the great machine.

“Mission accomplished, Unit Nine five four,” he called. “Enemy forces neutralized. Close out Battle Reflex and revert to low alert status.” He turned to Blauvelt.

“Let’s go back to town,” he said, “and tell them what their mascot just did.”

Blauvelt stared up at the grim and ancient machine; his square, tanned face looked yellowish and drawn. “Let’s do that,” he said.

* * *

The ten-piece town band was drawn up in a double rank before the newly mown village square. The entire population of the settlement—some three hundred and forty-two men, women and children—were present, dressed in their best. Pennants fluttered from strung wires. The sun glistened from the armored sides of the newly-cleaned and polished Bolo. A vast bouquet of wild flowers poked from the no-longer-sooty muzzle of the Hellbore.

Crewe stepped forward.

“As a representative of the Concordiat government I’ve been asked to make this presentation,” he said. “You people have seen fit to design a medal and award it to Unit Nine five four in appreciation for services rendered in defense of the community above and beyond the call of duty.” He paused, looked across the faces of his audience.

“Many more elaborate honors have been awarded for a great deal less,” he said. He turned to the machine; two men came forward, one with a stepladder, the other with a portable welding rig. Crewe climbed up, fixed the newly struck decoration in place beside the row of century-old battle honors. The technician quickly spotted it in position. The crowd cheered, then dispersed, chattering, to the picnic tables set up in the village street.

* * *

It was late twilight. The last of the sandwiches and stuffed eggs had been eaten, the last speeches declaimed, the last keg broached. Crewe sat with a few of the men in the town’s lone public house.

"To Bobby," a man raised his glass.

"Correction," Crewe said. "To Unit Nine five four of the Line." The men laughed and drank.

"Well, time to go, I guess," a man said. The others chimed in, rose, clattering chairs. As the last of them left, Blauvelt came in. He sat down across from Crewe.

"You, ah, staying the night?" he asked.

"I thought I'd drive back," Crewe said. "My business here is finished."

"Is it?" Blauvelt said tensely.

Crewe looked at him, waiting.

"You know what you've got to do, Crewe."

"Do I?" Crewe took a sip from his glass.

"Damn it, have I got to spell it out? As long as that machine was just an oversized half-wit, it was all right. Kind of a monument to the war, and all. But now I've seen what it can do . . . Crewe, we can't have a live killer sitting in the middle of our town—never knowing when it might take a notion to start shooting again!"

"Finished?" Crewe asked.

"It's not that we're not grateful—"

"Get out," Crewe said.

"Now, look here, Crewe—"

"Get out. And keep everyone away from Bobby, understand?"

"Does that mean—?"

"I'll take care of it."

Blauvelt got to his feet. "Yeah," he said. "Sure."

* * *

After Blauvelt left, Crewe rose and dropped a bill on the table; he picked the command transmitter from the floor, went out into the street. Faint cries came from the far end of the town, where the crowd had gathered for fireworks. A yellow rocket arced up, burst in a spray of golden light, falling, fading . . .

Crewe walked toward the plaza. The Bolo loomed up, a vast, black shadow against the star-thick sky. Crewe stood before it, looking up at the already draggled pennants, the wilted nosegay drooping from the gun muzzle.

"Unit Nine five four, you know why I'm here?" he said softly.

"I compute that my usefulness as an engine of war is ended," the soft

rasping voice said.

“That’s right,” Crewe said. “I checked the area in a thousand-mile radius with sensitive instruments. There’s no enemy machine left alive. The one you killed was the last.”

“It was true to its duty,” the machine said.

“It was my fault,” Crewe said. “It was designed to detect our command carrier and home on it. When I switched on my transmitter, it went into action. Naturally, you sensed that, and went to meet it.”

The machine sat silent.

“You could still save yourself,” Crewe said. “If you trampled me under and made for the jungle it might be centuries before . . .”

“Before another man comes to do what must be done? Better that I cease now, at the hands of a friend.”

“Good-bye, Bobby.”

“Correction: Unit Nine five four of the Line.”

Crewe pressed the key. A sense of darkness fell across the machine.

At the edge of the square, Crewe looked back. He raised a hand in a ghostly salute; then he walked away along the dusty street, white in the light of the rising moon.