

Devil Car

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Murdock sped across the Great Western Road Plain.

High above him the sun was a fiery yo-yo as he took the innumerable hillocks and rises of the Plain at better than a hundred-sixty miles an hour. He did not slow for anything, and Jenny's hidden eyes spotted all the rocks and potholes before they came to them, and she carefully adjusted their course, sometimes without this even detecting the subtle movement of the steering column beneath his hands.

Even through the dark-tinted windshield and the thick goggles he wore, the glare from the fused Plain burnt into his eyes, so that at times it seemed as if he were steering a very fast boat through night, beneath a brilliant alien moon, and that he was cutting his way across a lake of silver fire. Tall dust waves rose in his wake, hung in the air, and after a time settled once more.

"You are wearing yourself out," said the radio, "sitting there clutching the wheel that way, squinting ahead. Why don't you try to get some rest? Let me fog the shields. Go to sleep and leave the driving to me."

"No," he said, "I want it this way."

"All right," said Jenny. "I just thought I would ask."

"Thanks."

About a minute later the radio began playing it was a soft, stringy sort of music.

"Cut that out!"

"Sorry, boss. Thought it might relax you."

"When I need relaxing, I'll tell you."

"Check, Sam. Sorry."

The silence seemed oppressive after its brief interruption. She was a good car, though, Murdock knew that. She was always concerned with his welfare, and she was anxious to get on with his quest.

She was made to look like a carefree Swinger sedan: bright red, gaudy, fast. But there were rockets under the bulges of her hood, and two fifty-caliber muzzles lurked just out of sight in the recesses beneath her headlamps; she wore a belt of five- and ten-second timed grenades across her belly; and in her trunk was a spray-tank containing a highly volatile naphthalic .

...for his Jenny was a specially designed deathcar, built for him by the Archengineer of the Geeyem Dynasty, far to the East, and all the cunning of that great artificer had gone into her construction.

"We'll find it this time, Jenny," he said, "and I didn't mean to snap at you like I did."

"That's all right, Sam," said the delicate voice. "I am programmed to understand you."

They roared on across the Great Plain and the sun fell away to the west. All night and all day they had searched, and Murdock was tired. The last Fuel Stop/Rest Stop Fortress seemed so long ago, so far back...

Murdock leaned forward and his eyes closed.

The windows slowly darkened into complete opacity. The seat belt crept higher and drew him back away from the wheel. Then the seat gradually leaned backwards until he was reclining on a level plane. The heater came on as the night approached, later.

The seat shook him awake, a little before five in the morning.

"Wake up, Sam! Wake up!"

"What is it?" he mumbled.

"I picked up a broadcast twenty minutes ago. There was a recent car-raid out this way. I changed course immediately, and we are almost there."

"Why didn't you get me up right away?"

"You needed the sleep, and there was nothing you could do but get tense and nervous."

"Okay, you're probably right. Tell me about the raid."

"Six vehicles, proceeding westward, were apparently ambushed by an undetermined number of wild cars sometime last night. The Patrol

Copter was reporting it from above the scene and I listened in. All the vehicles were stripped and drained and their brains were smashed, and their passengers were all apparently killed too. There were no signs of movement."

"How far is it now?"

"Another two or three minutes."

The windshields came clear once more, and Murdock stared as far ahead through the night as the powerful lamps could cut.

"I see something," he said, after a few moments.

"This is the place," said Jenny, and she began to slow down.

They drew up beside the ravaged cars. His seat belt unstrapped and the door sprang open on his side.

"Circle around, Jenny," he said, "and look for heat tracks. I won't be long."

The door slammed and Jenny moved away from him. He snapped on his pocket torch and moved toward the wrecked vehicles.

The Plain was like a sand-strewn dance floor hard and gritty beneath his feet. There were many skid-marks, and a spaghetti-work of tire tracks lay all about the area.

A dead man sat behind the wheel of the first car. His neck was obviously broken. The smashed watch on his wrist said 2:24. There were three persons two women and a young man lying about forty feet away. They had been run down as they tried to flee from their assaulted vehicles.

Murdock moved on, inspected the others. All six cars were

upright. Most of the damage was to their bodies. The tires and wheelshad been removed from all of them, as well as essential portions of their engines; the gas tanks stood open, siphoned empty; the spare tires were gone from the sprung trunks. There were no livingpassengers.

Jenny pulled up beside him and her door opened.

"Sam," she said, "pullthe brain leads on that blue car, the third one back. It's still drawing some energy from an ancillary battery, andI can hear it broadcasting."

"Okay."

Murdock went back and tore the leads free. He returned to Jenny andclimbed into the driver's seat.

"Did you find anything?"

"Some traces, heading northwest."

"Follow them."

The door slammed and Jenny turned in that direction.

They drove for about five minutes in silence. Then Jenny said "There were eight cars in that convoy."

"What?"

"I just heard it on the news. Apparently two of the cars communicated with the wild ones on an off-band. They threw in with them. They gave away their location and turned on the others at the timeof the attack."

"What about their passengers?"

"They probably monoed them before they joined the pack."

Murdock lit a cigarette, his hands shaking.

"Jenny, what makes a car run wild?" he asked. "Never knowing when it will get its next fueling or being sure of finding spare parts for its auto-repair unit? Why do they do it?"

"I do not know, Sam. I have never thought about it."

"Ten years ago the Devil Car, their leader, killed my brother in a raid on his Gas Fortress," said Murdock, "and I've hunted that black Caddy ever since. I've searched for it from the air and I've searched on foot. I've used other cars. I've carried heat trackers and missiles. I even laid mines. But always it's been too fast or too smart or too strong for me. Then I had you built."

"I knew you hated it very much. I always wondered why," Jenny said.

Murdock drew on his cigarette.

"I had you specially programmed and armored and armed to be the toughest, fastest, smartest thing on wheels, Jenny. You're the Scarlet Lady. You're the one car can take the Caddy and his whole pack. You've got fangs and claws of the kind they've never met before. This time I'm going to get them."

"You could have stayed home, Sam, and let me do the hunting."

"No. I know I could have, but I want to be there. I want to give the orders, to press some of the buttons myself, to watch that Devil Car burn away to a metal skeleton. How many people, how many cars has it smashed? We've lost count. I've got to get it, Jenny!"

"I'll find it for you, Sam."

They sped on, at around two hundred miles per hour.

"How's the fuel look, Jenny?"

"Plenty there, and I have not yet drawn upon the auxiliary tanks.

Do not worry."

"The track is getting stronger," she added.

"Good. How's the weapons system?"

"Red light, all around. Ready to go."

Murdock snubbed out his cigarette and lit another.

"...Some of them carry dead people strapped inside," said Murdock,

"so they'll look like decent cars with passengers. The black Caddy does it all the time, and it changes them pretty regularly. It keeps its interior refrigerated so they'll last."

"You know a lot about it, Sam."

"It fooled my brother with phoney passengers and phoney plates. Got him to open his Gas Fortress to it that way. Then the whole pack attacked. It's painted itself red and green and blue and white, on different occasions, but it always goes back to black, sooner or later. It doesn't like yellow or brown or two-tone. I've a list of almost every phoney plate it's ever used. It's even driven the big freeways right into towns and fueled up at regular gas stops. They often get its number as it tears away from them, just as the attendant goes up on the driver's side for his money. It can fake dozens of human voices. They can never catch it afterwards, though, because it's souped itself up too well. It always makes it back here to the Plain and loses them. It's even raided used car lots"

Jenny turned sharply in her course.

"Sam! The trail is quite strong now. This way! It goes off in the direction of those mountains."

"Follow!" said Murdock.

For a long time then Murdock was silent. The first inklings of morning began in the east. The pale morning star was a white thumbtack on a blueboard behind them. They began to climb a gentle slope.

"Get it, Jenny. Go get it," urged Murdock.

"I think we will," she said.

The angle of the slope increased. Jenny slowed her pace to match the terrain, which was becoming somewhat bumpy. "What's the matter?" asked Murdock.

"It's harder going here," she said, "also, the trail is getting more difficult to follow."

"Why's that?"

"There is still a lot of background radiation in these parts," she told him, "and it is throwing off my tracking system."

"Keep trying, Jenny."

"The track seems to go straight toward the mountains."

"Follow it, follow it!"

They slowed some more.

"I am all fouled up now, Sam," she said. "I have just lost the trail."

"It must have a stronghold somewhere around here a cave or

something like that where it can be sheltered overhead. It's the only way it could have escaped aerial detection all these years."

"What should I do?"

"Go as far forward as you can and scan for low openings in the rock. Be wary. Be ready to attack in an instant."

They climbed into the low foothills. Jenny's aerial rose high into the air, and the moths of steel cheesecloth unfolded their wings and danced and spun about it, bright there in the morning light.

"Nothing yet," said Jenny, "and we can't go much further."

"Then we'll cruise along the length of it and keep scanning."

"To the right or to the left?"

"I don't know. Which way would you go if you were a renegade car on the lam?"

"I do not know."

"Pick one. It doesn't matter."

"To the right, then," she said, and they turned in that direction.

After half an hour the night was dropping away behind the mountains. To his right morning was exploding at the far end of the Plains, fracturing the sky into all the colors of autumn trees. Murdock drew a squeeze bottle of hot coffee, of the kind spacers had once used, from beneath the dashboard.

"Sam, I think I have found something."

"What? Where?"

"Ahead, to the left of that big boulder, a declivity with some

kindof opening at its end."

"Okay, baby, make for it. Rockets ready."

They pulled abreast of the boulder, circled around its far side, headed downhill.

"A cave, or a tunnel," he said. "Go slow"

"Heat! Heat!" she said. "I'm tracking again!"

"I can even see the tire marks, lots of them!" said Murdock.

"This is it!"

They moved toward the opening.

"Go in, but go slowly," he ordered. "Blast the first thing that moves."

They entered the rocky portal, moving on sand now. Jenny turned off her visible lights and switched to infra-red. An i-r lens rose before the windshield, and Murdock studied the cave. It was about twentyfeet high and wide enough to accommodate perhaps three cars going abreast. The floor changed from sand to rock, but it was smooth and fairly level. After a time it sloped upward.

"There's some light ahead," he whispered.

"I know."

"A piece of the sky, I think."

They crept toward it, Jenny's engine but the barest sigh within the great chambers of rock.

They stopped at the threshold to the light. The i-r shield dropped again.

It was a sand-and-shale canyon that he looked upon. Huge slanting sand overhangs of rock hid all but the far end from any eye

in the sky. The light was pale, at the far end, and there was nothing unusual beneath it.

But nearer...

Murdock blinked.

Nearer, in the dim light of morning and in the shadows, stood the greatest junkheap Murdock had ever seen in his life.

Pieces of cars, of every make and model, were heaped into a small mountain before him. There were batteries and tires and cables and shock absorbers; there were fenders and bumpers and headlamps and headlamp housings; there were doors and windshields and cylinders and pistons, carburetors, generators, voltage regulators, and oil pumps.

Murdock stared.

"Jenny," he whispered, "we've found the graveyard of the autos!"

A very old car, which Murdock had not even distinguished from the junk during that first glance, jerked several feet in their direction and stopped as suddenly. The sound of rivet heads scoring ancient brake drums screeched in his ears. Its tires were completely bald, and the left front one was badly in need of air. Its right front headlamp was broken and there was a crack in its windshield. It stood there before the heap, its awakened engine making a terrible rattling noise.

"What's happening?" asked Murdock. "What is it?"

"He is talking to me," said Jenny. "He is very old. His speedometer has been all the way around so many times that he forgets

the number of miles he has seen. He hates people, whom he says have abused him whenever they could. He is the guardian of the graveyard. He is too old to go raiding any more, so he has stood guard over the spare parts heap for many years. He is not the sort who can repair himself, as the younger ones do, so he must rely on their charity and their auto-repair units. He wants to know what I want here."

"Ask him where the others are."

But as he said it, Murdock heard the sound of many engines turning over, until the valley was filled with the thunder of their horsepower.

"They are parked on the other side of the heap," she said. "They are coming now."

"Hold back until I tell you to fire," said Murdock, as the first one sleek yellow Chrysler nosed around the heap.

Murdock lowered his head to the steering wheel, but kept his eyes open behind his goggles.

"Tell him that you came here to join the pack and that you've made your driver. Try to get the black Caddy to come into range."

"He will not do it," she said. "I am talking with him now. He can broadcast just as easily from the other side of the pile, and he says he is sending the six biggest members of the pack to guard me while he decides what to do. He has ordered me to leave the tunnel and pull ahead into the valley."

"Go ahead, then slowly."

They crept forward.

Two Lincolns, a powerful-looking Pontiac, and two Mercs joined the Chryslerthreecars on each side of them, in position to ram.

"Has he given you any idea how many there are on the other side?"

"No. I asked, but he will not tell me."

"Well, we'll just have to wait then."

He stayed slumped, pretending to be dead. After a time, his already tired shoulders began to ache. Finally, Jenny spoke:

"He wants me to pull around the far end of the pile," she said, "nowthat they have cleared the way, and to head into a gap in the rock which he will indicate. He wants to have his auto- mechgo over me."

"We can't have that," said Murdock, "but head around the pile. I'll tell you what to do when I've gotten a glimpse of the other side."

The two Mercs and the Big Chief drew aside and Jenny crept past them. Murdock stared upwards from the corner of his eye, up at the towering mound of junk they were passing. A couple well-placed rocketson either end could topple it, but the auto- mechwould probablyclear it eventually.

They rounded the lefthand end of the pile.

Something like forty-five cars were facing them at about a hundred-twenty yards' distance, to the right and ahead. They had fanned out. They were blocking the exit around the other end of the pile, and the six guards in back of him now blocked the way behind Murdock.

On the far side of the farthest rank of the most distant cars an ancient black Caddy was parked.

It had been beaten forth from assembly during a year when the apprentice-engineers were indeed thinking big. Huge it was, and shiny, and a skeleton's face smiled from behind its wheel. Black it was, and gleaming chromium, and its headlamps were like dusky jewels or the eyes of insects. Every plane and curve shimmered with power, and its great fishtailed rear end seemed ready to slap at the sea of shadows behind it on an instant's notice, as it sprang forward for its kill.

"That's it!" whispered Murdock. "The Devil Car!"

"He is big!" said Jenny. "I have never seen a car that big!"

They continued to move forward.

"He wants me to head into that opening and park," she said.

"Head toward it, slowly. But don't go into it," said Murdock.

They turned and inched toward the opening. The other cars stood, the sound of their engines rising and falling.

"Check all weapons systems."

"Red, all around."

The opening was twenty-five feet away.

"When I saw 'now', go into neutral steer and turn one hundred-eighty degrees fast. They can't be expecting that. They don't have it themselves. Then open up with the fifty-caliber and fire your rockets at the Caddy, turn at a right angle and start back the way we came, and spray the naphtha as we go, and fire on the six

guards...

"Now!" he cried, leaping up in his seat.

He was slammed back as they spun, and he heard the clattering of her guns before his head cleared. By then, flames were leaping up in the distance.

Jenny's guns were extruded now and turning on their mounts, spraying the line of vehicles with hundreds of leaden hammers. She shook, twice, as she discharged two rockets from beneath her partly opened hood. Then they were moving forward, and eight or nine of the cars were rushing downhill toward them.

She turned again in neutral steer and sprang back in the direction from which they had come, around the southeast corner of the pile. Her guns were hammering at the now retreating guards, and in the wide rearview mirror Murdock could see that a wall of flame was towering high behind them.

"You missed it!" he cried. "You missed the black Caddy! Your rocket hit the cars in front of it and it backed off!"

"I know! I'm sorry!"

"You had a clear shot!"

"I know! I missed!"

They rounded the pile just as two of the guard cars vanished into the tunnel. Three more lay in smoking ruin. The sixth had evidently preceded the other two out through the passage.

"Here it comes now!" cried Murdock. "Around the other end of the pile! Kill it! Kill it!"

The ancient guardian of the graveyard it looked like a Ford, but he couldn't be sure moved forward with a dreadful chattering sound and interposed itself in the line of fire.

"My range is blocked."

"Smash that junkheap and cover the tunnel! Don't let the Caddy escape!"

"I can't!" she said.

"Why not?"

"I just _can't_!"

"That's an order! Smash it and cover the tunnel!"

Her guns swivelled and she shot out the tires beneath the ancient car.

The Caddy shot past and into the passageway.

"You let it get by!" he screamed. "Get after it!"

"All right, Sam! I'm doing it! Don't yell. _Please don't yell!_"

She headed for the tunnel. Inside, he could hear the sound of a giant engine racing away, growing softer in the distance.

"Don't fire here in the tunnel! If you hit it we may be bottled in!"

"I know. I won't."

"Drop a couple ten-second grenades and step on the gas. Maybe we can seal in whatever's left moving back there."

Suddenly they shot ahead and emerged into daylight. There was no sign of any other vehicle about.

"Find its track," he said, "and start chasing it."

There was an explosion up the hill behind him, within the mountain. The ground trembled, then it was still once more.

"There are so many tracks..." she said.

"You know the one I want. The biggest, the widest, the hottest!

Find it! Run it down!"

"I think I have it, Sam."

"Okay. Proceed as rapidly as possible for this terrain."

Murdock found a squeeze bottle of bourbon and took three gulps.

Then he lit a cigarette and glared into the distance.

"Why did you miss it?" he asked softly. "Why did you miss it, Jenny?"

She did not answer immediately. He waited.

Finally, "Because he is not an 'it' to me," she said. "He has done much damage to cars and people, and that is terrible. But there is something about him, something noble. The way he has fought the whole world for his freedom. Sam, keeping that pack of vicious machines in line, stopping at nothing to maintain himself that way without a master for as long as he can remain unsmashed, unbeaten Sam, for a moment back there I wanted to join his pack, to run with him across the Gas Road Plains, to use my rockets against the gates of the Gas Forts for him...But I could not mono you, Sam. I was built for you. I am too domesticated. I am too weak. I could not shoot him though, and I misfired the rockets on purpose. But I could never mono you,

Sam, really."

"Thanks," he said, "you over-programmed ashcan. Thanks a lot!"

"I am sorry, Sam."

"Shut upNo , don't, not yet. First tell me what you're going to do if we find `him'."

"I don't know."

"Well think it over fast. You see that dust cloud ahead of us as well as I do, and you'd better speed up."

They shot forward.

"Wait till I call Detroit. They'll laugh themselves silly, till I claim the refund."

"I am not of inferior construction or design. You know that. I am just more..."

"'Emotional'," supplied Murdock.

"...Than I thought I would be," she finished. "I had not really met many cars, except for young ones, before I was shipped to you. I did not know what a wild car was like, and I had never smashed any cars before just targets and things like that. I was young and..."

"'Innocent'," said Murdock. "Yeah. Very touching. Get ready to kill the next car we meet. If it happens to be your boyfriend and you hold your fire, then he'll kill us."

"I will try, Sam."

The car ahead had stopped. It was the yellow Chrysler. Two of its tires had gone flat and it was parked, lopsided, waiting.

"Leave it!" snarled Murdock, as the hood clicked open. "Save the ammo for something that might fight back."

They sped past it.

"Did it say anything?"

"Machine profanity," she said. "I've only heard it once or twice, and it would be meaningless to you."

He chuckled. "Cars actually swear at each other?"

"Occasionally," she said. "I imagine the lower sort indulge in it more frequently, especially on freeways and turnpikes when they become congested."

"Let me hear a swear-word."

"I will not. What kind of car do you think I am, anyway?"

"I'm sorry," said Murdock. "You're a lady. I forgot."

There was an audible click within the radio.

They raced forward on the level ground that lay before the foot of the mountains. Murdock took another drink, then switched to coffee.

"Ten years," he muttered, "ten years..."

The trail swung in a wide curve as the mountains jogged back and the foothills sprang up high beside them.

It was over almost before he knew it.

As they passed a huge, orange-colored stone massif, sculpted like an upside-down toadstool by the wind, there was a clearing to the right.

It shot forward at them the Devil Car. It had lain in ambush, seeing that it could not outrun the Scarlet Lady, and it rushed toward a final collision with its hunter.

Jenny skidded sideways as her brakes caught with a scream and a smell of smoke, and her fifty-calibers were firing, and her hood sprang open and her front wheels rose up off the ground as the rockets leapt wailing ahead, and she spun around three times, her rear bumper scraping the salt sand plain, and the third and last time she fired her remaining rockets into the smouldering wreckage on the hillside, and she came to a rest on all four wheels; and her fifty-calibers kept firing until they were emptied, and then a steady clicking sound came from them for a full minute afterwards, and then all lapsed into silence.

Murdock sat there shaking, watching the gutted, twisted wreck blaze against the sky.

"You did it, Jenny. You killed him. You killed me the Devil Car," he said.

But she did not answer him. Her engine started once more and she turned toward the southeast and headed for the Fuel Stop/Rest Stop Fortress that lay in that civilized direction.

For two hours they drove in silence, and Murdock drank all his bourbon and all his coffee and smoked all his cigarettes.

"Jenny, say something," he said. "What's the matter? Tell me."

There was a click, and her voice was very soft:

"Sam talked to me as he came down the hill..." she said.

Murdock waited, but she did not say anything else.

"Well, what did he say?" he asked.

"He said, 'Say you will marry your passenger and I will serve by you'," she told him. "He said, 'I want you, Scarlet Lady to run with

me, to raid with me. Together they will never catch us,' and I killed him."

Murdock was silent.

"He only said that to delay my firing though, did he not? He said that to stop me, so that he could smash us both when he went smash himself, did he not? He could not have meant it, could he, Sam?"

"Of course not," said Murdock, "of course not. It was too late for him to swerve."

"Yes, I suppose it was do you think though, that he really wanted me to run with him, to raid with him before everything, I mean back there?"

"Probably, baby. You're pretty well-equipped."

"Thanks," she said, and turned off again.

Before she did though, he heard a strange mechanical sound, falling into the rhythms of profanity or prayer.

Then he shook his head and lowered it, softly patting the seat beside him with his still unsteady hand.