

## NOT FADE AWAY

I became aware of him *five* parsecs away.

He rode a nickel-iron asteroid of a hundred metric tons as if it were an unruly steed, and he broke off chunks of it and hurled them at the stars, and he howled.

I manifested at the outer periphery of his system and waited to be noticed. I'm sure he had been aware of me long before I detected him, but he affected not to see me for several days, until my light reached him.

I studied him while I waited. There was something distinctly odd about his morphology. After a while I recognized it: he was wearing the prototype—the body our ancestors wore! I looked closer, and realized that it was the only body he had ever worn.

Oh, it had been Balanced and spaceproofed and the skull shielded, of course. But he looked as if when Balancing was discovered, he had been just barely young enough for the process to take. He must have been one of the oldest of the Eldest.

But why keep that ridiculous body configuration? It was hopelessly inefficient, suited only to existence on the surface of planets, and rather poorly to that. For a normal environment, everything about it was wrong. I saw that he had had the original sensory equipment improved for space conditions, but it was still limited and poorly placed. Everything about the body was laid out bilaterally and unidirectionally, creating a blind side. The engineering was all wrong, the four limbs all severely limited in mobility. Many of the joints were essentially one-directional, simple hinges.

Stranger still, the body was grotesquely, comically overmuscled. Whenever his back happened to be turned to his star, the forty-kilo bits of rock he hurled achieved system escape velocity—yet he was able to keep that asteroid clamped between his great thighs. What individual ever—much less routinely—needs that much strength in free space?

Oddest of all, of course, his mind was sealed.

Apparently totally. I could get no reading at all from him, and I am a very good reader. He must have been completely unplugged from the Bonding, and in all my three thousand years I have met only four such. He must have been as lonely as any of our ancestors ever was. Yet he knew that the Bonding exists, and refused it.

A number of objects were tethered or strapped to his body, all worn but showing signs of superb maintenance. It took me several days to identify them all positively as utensils, several more to realize that each was a weapon. It takes time for things to percolate down out of the Race Memory, and the oldest things take the most time.

By then he was ready to notice me. He focused one of his howls and directed it to me. He carefully ignored all the part of me that is Bonded, addressing only my individual ego, with great force.

"GO AWAY!"

"Why?" I asked reasonably.

"GO AWAY AT ONCE OR I WILL END YOU!"

I radiated startled interest. "Really? Why would you do that?"

"OH, GAAAH ..."

There was a silence of some hours.

"I will go away," I said at last, "if you will tell me why you want me to do so."

His volume was lower. "Do you know who I am?"

I laughed. "How could I know? Your mind is sealed."

"I am the last warrior."

"Warrior? Wait now . . . `warrior.' Must be an old word. `Warrior.' Oh—oh. You kill and destroy. Deliberately. How odd. Are you going to destroy me?"

"I may," he said darkly.

"I see. How might I dissuade you? I do not believe I am old enough to die competently yet, and I have at least one major obligation outstanding."

"Do you lack the courage to flee? Or the wit?"

"I shall attempt to flee if I find it necessary. But I would not expect to succeed."

"Ah. You fear me."

"Fear'? No. I recognize the menace you represent. I repeat: how might I dissuade you from ending me? Is there something I can offer you? Access to the Bonding of Minds, perhaps?"

This reply was instant. "If I suspect you of *planning* to initiate the Bonding process with me, I will make your death a thing of unending and unspeakable agony."

I projected startlement, then masked it. "What *can* I do for you, then?"

He laughed. "That's easy. Find me a fair fight. Find me an enemy. If he or she or it is as strong as me, I will let you go unharmed. If stronger, I will give you all I own, and consecrate my death to you."

"I am not sure I understand."

"I am the *last* warrior."

"Yes?"

"When I chose my profession, warriors were common, and commonly admired. We killed or destroyed not for personal gain, but to protect a group of non-warriors, or to protect an idea or an ideal."

I emanated confusion. "Against what?"

His answer was days in coming. "Other war-riors."

"How did the cycle get started?"

"Primitive men were all warriors."

"*Really?*"

"Then there came a time when the average man had to be forced to kill or destroy. One day, he could no longer be forced. A Balanced human in free space cannot be coerced—only slain. Can you visualize circumstances which would force you to kill?"

"Only with the greatest difficulty," I said. "But you enjoy it? You would find pleasure or value in killing me?"

A week passed. At last he smote his asteroid with his fist, sharply enough to cause rock to fly from its other side. "No. I lied. I will not kill you. What good is a fight you can't lose?"

"Why did you . . . `lie'?"

"In order to frighten you."

"You failed."

"Yes, I know."

"Why did you wish to frighten me?"

"To compel you to my will."

"Hmmm. I believe I see. Then you do wish to locate an enemy. I am baffled. I should have thought a warrior's prime goal to be the elimi-nation of all other warriors."

"No. A warrior's prime goal is to overcome other warriors. I am the greatest warrior our race has ever raised up. I have not worked in over five thousand years. There is no one to overcome."

"Oh."

"Do you know what the R-brain is?"

"Wait. It's coming. Oh. I know what the R-brain *was*. The primitive reptile brain from which the human brain evolved."

"And do you know that for a considerable time, early humans—true humans—possessed, beneath their sentient brains, a vestigial but powerful R-complex, called 'the subconscious mind'?"

"Of course. The First Great Antinomy."

"I have an R-complex."

I registered shock. "You cannot possibly be old enough."

I could sense his bitter grin before the sight of it crawled to me at lightspeed. "Do you notice anything interesting about this particular star system?"

I glanced around. "Barring your presence in it, no."

"Consider that planet there. The third."

At first glance it was an utterly ordinary planet, like a myriad of others in this out-of-the-way sector. It was wet and therefore alive, and even showed signs that it had evolved intelligent life at least once, but of course that was—by definition—long gone. None of its remaining lifeforms seemed anywhere near bright enough to leave it behind and enter the world yet. Its physical and ballistic properties appeared unre-markable.

But after only a few days of contemplation, I cried out in surprise. "Why . . . its period of rotation is almost *precisely* one standard day. And its period of revolution seems to approximate a standard year. And its surface acceleration is a standard gee. Do you mean to tell me that planet is . . . uh . . . is—"

"Dirt," he agreed. "And yonder star is Sol."

"And you imply that—"

"Yes. I was born here. On that planet, in fact. At a time when all the humans in the universe lived within the confines of this system—and used less than half the planets, at that."

"!!!"

"Do you still wonder that I shun your Bond-ing?"

"No. To you, with a reptile brain stem, it must be the ultimate obscenity."

"Defenselessness. Yes."

"A thing which can be neither dominated nor compelled. And which itself will not dominate or compel . . . you must hate us."

"Aye."

"You could be healed. The reptile part of your brain could—"

"I could be gelded too. And why not, since none will breed with me? Yet I

choose to retain my gonads. And my R-complex. Call it habit."

"I see." I paused in thought. "What prevents you from physically attacking the Bond? I believe that at this point in history, you could harm it greatly . . . perhaps even destroy it."

"I repeat: what good is a fight you can't lose?"

"Oh."

"In the old days . . . there was glory. There was a galaxy to be tamed, empires to be carved out of the sky, mighty enemies to challenge. More than once I pulverized a star. With four allies I battled the Ten of Algol, and after two centuries broke them. Then were other sentient races found, in the inner neighboring arm of the galaxy, and I learned the ways of fighting them."

He paused. "I was honored in those days. I was one of mankind's saviors." A terrible chuckle. "Do you know anything sorer than an unemployed savior?"

"And your fellows?"

"One day it was all changed. The brain had evolved. Man's enemies were broken or co-opted. It became clear that competition for unlimited wealth is insane. Peace broke out. The cursed Bonding began. At first we fought it as a plague swallowing our charges. But ere long we came to see that it was what they had freely chosen. Finally there came a day when we had only ourselves to fight."

"And?"

"We fought. Whole systems were laid to waste, alliances were made and betrayed, truly frightening energies were released. The rest of mankind withdrew from us and forgot us."

"I can see how this would be."

"Man had no need of us. Man was in harmony with himself, and his neighbors, and it was now plain that in all the galaxy there were no threatening races extant or imminent. For a long time we had hope that there might lie enemies beyond this galaxy—that we might yet be needed. And so we fought mock combats, preserving ourselves for our race. We dreamed of once again battling to save our species from harm; we dreamed of vindication."

A long pause.

"Then we heard of contact with Bondings of sentient beings from neighboring galaxies. The Unification began. In rage and despair we fell upon each other, and there was a mighty slaughter. There was one last false alarm of hope when the Malign Bonding of the Crab Nebula was found." His voice began to tremble with rage. "We waited for your summons. And you . . . you . . ." Suddenly he screamed. "YOU CURED THE BAS-TARDS!"

"Listen to me," I said. "A neuron is a wonderful thing. But when a billion neurons agree to work together, they become a thing a billion times more wonderful—a brain. A mind. There are as many stars in this galaxy as there are neurons in a single human mind. More than coincidence. This galaxy has *become* a single mind: the Bonding. There are as many galaxies in this universe as there are stars in the average galaxy. Each has, or is developing, its own Bonding. Each of these is to be a neuron in the Cosmic Mind. One day Unification will be complete, and the universe will be intelligent. You can be part of that mind, and share in it."

"No," he said emphatically. "If I am part of the Cosmic Mind, then I am part of its

primiti-ve subconscious mind. The subconscious is useful only for preservation from outside threat. As your brain evolved beyond your ancestors' subconscious mind, your universal mind has evolved beyond me. There is nothing in the plenum that you need fear." He leaned forward in sudden pain, embraced his asteroid with his arms as well as his legs. I began moving closer to him, not so rapidly as to alarm him if he should look up, but not slowly.

"When we understood this," he said, "we warriors fell upon each other anew. Four cen-turies ago Jarl and I allied to defeat The One In Red. That left only each other. We made it last as long as we could. Perhaps it was the greatest battle ever fought. Jarl was very very good. That was why I saved him for last."

"And you overcame him?"

"Since then I have been alone." He lifted his head quickly and roared at the universe, "Jarl, you son of a bitch, *why didn't you kill me?*" He put his face again to the rock.

I could not tell if he had seen me approach-ing.

"And in all the years since, you have had no opponent?"

"I tried cloning myself once. Useless. No clone can have my experience and training; the envi-ronment which produced me no longer exists. What good is a fight you cannot lose?"

I was coming ever closer. "Why do you not suicide?"

"What good is a fight you cannot lose?"

I was near now. "Then all these years, you have prayed for an enemy?"

"Aye." His voice was despairing.

"Your prayer is answered."

He stiffened. His head came up and he saw me.

"I represent the Bonding of the Crab," I said then. "The cure was imperfect," and I did direct at him a laser.

I was near, but he was quick, and his mirror shield deflected my bolt even before he could have had time to absorb my words. I followed the laser with other energies, and he dodged, deflected or neutralized them as fast as they could be mounted.

There was an instant's pause then, and I saw a grin begin slowly and spread across his face. Carnivore's warning. He flung his own weapons into space.

"I am delivered," he cried, and then he shifted his mass, throwing his planetoid into a spin. When it lay between us, I thought he had struck it with both feet, for suddenly it was rushing toward me. Of course I avoided it easily—but as it passed, he darted around from behind it, where he had been hidden, and grappled with me physically. He had hurled the rock not with his feet, but with a reaction drive.

Then did I understand why he kept such an ancient body form, for it was admirably suited to single combat. I had more limbs, but weaker, and one by one my own weapons were torn from me and hurled into the void. Meanwhile men-tal energies surged against each other from both sides, and space began to writhe around us.

Mentally I was stronger than he, for he had been long alone, and mental muscles can be exercised only on another mind. But his physi-cal power was awesome, and his ferocity a thing incomprehensible to me.

And now I see the end coming. Soon his terrible hands *will* reach my brain case

and rip it asunder. When this occurs, my body will explode with great force, and we shall both die. He knows this, and in this instant of time before the end, I know what he is doing, beneath his shield where I cannot probe. He is composing his last message for transmission to you, his people, his Bonding. He is warning you of mortal danger. He is telling you where to find his hidden DNA samples, where to find the records he has made of everything he knows about combat, how to train his clones to be *almost* as good as he is. And he is feeling the satisfaction of vindication. *I could have told you!* he is saying. *Ye who knew not my worth, who had forgotten me, yet will I save you!*

This is my own last message to you, to the same people, to the same Bonding. It worked. He believes me. I have accomplished what you asked of me. He has the hero's death he craved.

We will die together, he and I. And that is meet and proper, for I am the last Healer in the cosmos, and now I too am unemployed.