

## Worst Enemy

It is the far future, and organized crime is still dealing in weapons. An agent of the mob, under its orders, has stowed away onboard a military transport carrying a secret new weapon. The agent knows nothing about the weapon itself except that he is to kill the crew (two men), pilot the spacecraft to the surface of a predesignated, uninhabited planet, and wait there until a prearranged time when the mob will meet him on the surface to collect their prize. Having dispensed with the crew and landed on the planet, and with several hours to kill until they arrive, he searches the cargo hold, finds the weapon and takes it outside, ignoring his orders not to so much as touch it. He figures that if he can learn to operate the weapon before the mob arrives, he, not they will be in control. Fumbling with the various catches and levers he finds on the bazooka-like weapon, a CRT screen snaps out of its recess, and immediately images appear on its display. The weapon evidently has begun an automatic tracking process. Suddenly an arpeggio of tones is heard from a hidden speaker, followed by a simulated voice. The weapon can talk. And listen.

Deep in space, Zael turns away from the navigation computer. As she slides the memory cartridge into the reader she feels the computer take the helm and smoothly accelerate onto its course toward the prearranged rendezvous. Nothing to do for a while, she muses. Although she is intimidated by the thought of what might happen to her if the mob found out she had read the cartridge, her curiosity overcomes her. She begins to read.

The agent is able to learn nothing from the weapon, which answers none of his questions, but has several of its own, none of which makes sense. Suddenly it announces urgently that it is under attack by an incoming shell, calls out rapidly decreasing range values, and requests authorization to return fire. The agent, clutching the weapon, dives for cover behind a nearby boulder, and a moment later hears a loud explosion. When he peers around the boulder, a shallow crater appears at the spot where he had stood. His mind racing, the agent fears the worst: the mob has landed, detected his disobedience and is firing upon him from a distance. He reflects that the weapon must be very powerful if the mob is afraid to approach him except from afar. He has only one choice. When the weapon repeats its request to return fire, he grants it.

With a start, Zael rereads the warning. She knows the agent well, and how he shares her compulsive curiosity. If he attempts to operate the weapon, he will be in grave danger which he does not suspect. She moves quickly to override the navigation computer and brings the spacecraft about.

The weapon ignores the agent when he asks it which direction to point the barrel, and reports that a target has just moved into sensor range. It reports target lock and fires. A high-speed projectile exits the mouth of the barrel, flies a few dozen meters, and abruptly vanishes, leaving only an echo to mark its passage. Convinced that the first shell was a dud, he orders the weapon to fire another round. When the weapon announces that his first round narrowly missed its target, the agent's suspicions of a malfunction increase, but he repeats his order, to fire a second round. The weapon again announces target

acquisition and fires. Again the shell mysteriously vanishes after a brief flight. When the weapon reports that the second round scored a direct hit on the target, the agent, filled with rage and fear, hurls the weapon away from himself. It makes no sense to him that a vanishing shell could hit anything. Or could it? Zael would know, he reflects, and realizes how much he needs her now.

As Zael makes her final approach to the agent's landing site, she knows she is disobeying orders. But her love for the agent overrules her reason, and her only concern is the saving of his life. She pushes her fury to the back of her mind as she concentrates on the landing.

Minutes pass. The agent cowers behind the boulder which protected him before, waiting for the attack to resume. The quietness reassures him, but at the same time he suspects a trap. Glancing at the weapon, which now is murmuring inaudible data reports, the agent decides he'd better get the weapon back. Trap or not, defective weapon or not, he has no other defense. Cautiously he steps over to the weapon and examines it. The weapon seems to have sustained some damage which it has detected and reports as minor. It suddenly interrupts itself and warns that another enemy attack has been detected. Rather than running for cover as before, the agent makes a run for the spaceship, reasoning that the mob would not destroy the spacecraft and remaining weapons just to get him. As he thinks this, a shell strikes the ground where he had stood, and the resulting concussion knocks him to his hands and knees. Shaken but unhurt, he scrambles to his feet. With notice to the agent that damage sustained has reduced its ability to accurately target the enemy, the weapon reports it is ready to fire. Out of breath with exertion, the agent chokes out a command to fire. For a third time, the shell streaks toward the sky, and vanishes. As he hurls the weapon from him in disgust, another shell suddenly appears out of nowhere. As a strange quickening of the intellect comes over the agent, he suddenly becomes aware, in his last moments of life, of a new and horrible possibility. The last sound he hears is Zael's wail through his headset radio.

Zael is thrown to the ground by the force of the explosion. She starts to get up to run to the agent, but the sight of the smoking crater repulses her. He is beyond her help. The weapon lies a dozen yards away, apparently undamaged by the explosion. She begins to cry, but slowly her eyes narrow and she screams in rage. Calming herself with a great effort, she retrieves the weapon, turns slowly, and walks back to her spacecraft. Moments later she is airborne, circling her fallen lover and the military carrier. A command to the computer and a seismic charge arcs downward and obliterates all evidence of what has occurred. This done, she calmly instructs the onboard computer to lay in a course for the rendezvous point where by now the mob impatiently awaits her. And one more thing, she reminds herself. She slides the memory cartridge into the computer and pages rapidly to the warning. I wonder how long it will take them to figure it out, she says aloud, as she presses a button marked ERASE.