The Old Deal

Roger Zelazny

The Mutant Master had seated himself on the edge of the desk and was puffing silently on his cigarette. The Dormitory Head, his brow deeply furrowed, was sitting behind the desk concentrating on the problem at hand.

Finally the Head brightened. “Yes,” he announced, “there is such an expendab⁠—er, talented lad in my dormitory. I should have thought of him at once, I’ll call him immediately.”

He closed his eyes and sat motionless while he telepathed.

Suddenly the figure of a young man appeared in the middle of the room about a foot above the floor. It descended backward with a solid thud. As it regained its feet, rubbing its injured posterior, it sheepishly remarked, “Heh, forgot about that step by the door when I teleported.”

The Head turned to the Master and nodded, then he turned back to the waiting man.

“George,” he introduced, “I want you to meet the Mutant Master.”

“Golly,” said George, admiration oozing from his eyes, “the Master.”

“I think he’ll do,” mused the Master as his piercing eyes took stock of George’s stocky powerful frame. And he nodded as he took note of George’s low forehead and forward slouch. “Yes, I think he’ll do very well.”

He took a final draw on his cigarette and then stubbed out the butt in a convenient ashtray. “George,” he began, “You’ve been chosen for an extremely special mission. I want you to know that I wouldn’t pick just anybody for this job.”

“Gosh thanks!” said George as he proudly recalled that he was the only purebred mutant in existence.

“Yes, this is a special job for a special person,” the Master went on. “Now here is what we want you to do.” He pointed toward the landing field that lay beyond the office’s low window. “You’ll get into that camouflaged spaceship out there on the field and –”

George had been following the gesture with his eyes. “Pardon me sir,” he interrupted, “but what spaceship? I don’t see any –”

“Of course you don’t see it,” the Master snapped back. “I just told you that it was camouflaged.

“Now to continue. You go out there, get into it and blast off.” His hand slipped into a well-tailored jacket and withdrew a folded slip of paper. “Here is your course. When you get to the point marked STOP HERE, that’s where you stop. Get that?”

George paused a moment to think, then nodded.

“Good. I’ll be following your progress on a radar scope and when I see you stop, I’ll telepath the rest of your instructions. You can go now and good luck.”

George saluted sharply and teleported out.

After a few minutes George located the ship and before a few minutes had elapsed it rose on the top of a pillar of fire. With alternate blasts of its jets the ship sideslipped twice for course correction and swung into a trajectory that took it through a maze of asteroids.

The Master was a trifle stunned, he turned to the Head and commented, “A perfect takeoff.”

“Yes,” answered the Head. “You can’t beat those automatic pilots, even a child can operate one.”

Clouds of meteoric dust swam and swirled near his ship and now and then a handful would rattle against the hull. George looked through the viewpoint at the round redness of Mars, which always reminded him of a colored agate he had played with as a child. Which reminded him, what had ever become of that marble?

“George, am I getting through?” came a telepathic query.

George quickly awoke from his reverie. “Huh, oh, yes sir,” he answered.

“Good, now listen carefully. Turn on your telescreen; the knob under the screen and to the left that says ‘On & Off’ will do the trick.”

George quickly carried out the order. He proudly telepathed back:

“It’s on now, sir.”

“Fine. Now turn the knob under the screen and to the left that says ‘Focus’.”

There was a pause, then:

“Done, sir.”

“Do you see anything?”

“There’s a face in it.”

“That’s your reflection,” came the harassed reply. “Keep turning it until you see something else.”

“Now I see it, sir, another ship.”

“That’s it, all right,” the Master acknowledged. “Now, as you know, this year, 2252, is an election year. So far, we mutants have managed to get out candidates up to second place in public popularity. Aboard that oncoming ship is the present President of the Solar System, who is currently touring the system making campaign speeches. He still holds first place. Your job, kill him.”

“Yes, sir,” said George.

“He is scheduled to arrive on Mars in one hour, he should pass your way within minutes. When his ship is as close to you as possible, you are to teleport over it to, shoot him, and teleport back, then lose yourself among the asteroids.

“Yes, sir.”

“Any questions?”

“Yes, sir. What do I shoot him with?”

“There should be a gun on the console in front of you.”

“Oh, so there is, sir.”

“Good, carry on.”

George fixed the telescanner at full intensity and held the gun in full readiness. Only ten more seconds, he checked the time dial, and that approaching silvery bullet would reach proximity point.

“Nine, eight, seven,” counted George.

“Six more seconds,” said the Head as he glanced at his watch, “and our worries will be over. Just think, all that we’ve struggled and worked for, all out dreams and plans...”

“Four seconds now,” said the Master. “Three...”

“Two...one,” finished George. He teleported.

The Master, who had been following George telepathically, screamed in pained rage.

The Head, who had been reading the Master’s mind, buried his head in his arms and moaned softly.

George had missed the ship.

After a long, long time the Master stopped screaming and uttered seven words that had become classic.

“Our chance will come again in ’56.”

And sadly, they unpinned their campaign buttons.

Notes

This story appears for the first time with the Fourth Edition of this book. Zelazny said vaguely that “I had a few things in fanzines in the early 50’s, actually,”[[1]](#footnote-1) but at the time the First Edition was published in 2009, “Conditional Benefit” was the only known fanzine story from that time period. The fanzine containing this one resurfaced in an eBay listing after the Third Edition was published. There may be other early Zelazny stories in fanzines that remain to be rediscovered.

1. Dowling, Terry; Curtis, Keith. A Conversation with Roger Zelazny. Science Fiction (Australia) 1978;1 (2 [June]): p 11—23 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)