Targets

Lawrence Watt-Evans

Sunlight gleamed from the barrel of the main gun, still thrusting upward at empty sky. He did not think it had moved since his last visit. Except when he had insisted, he did not believe it had moved in years, perhaps decades. Every so often he would order the turret to be turned, the barrel to be raised and lowered, just to be sure that the harsh desert climate had not yet damaged the machinery beyond repair.

Of course, the caterpillar treads and most of the left rear quadrant had already been damaged beyond repair when he had first found the stranded machine, but that had not been the desert’s doing.

He walked up slowly, his hands raised. The machine remained motionless.

“Hello, Killer,” he called. “It’s me.”

“Good morning, sir,” the machine answered in its inhuman monotone—the military had never bothered with such frills as humanizing the voices of their machines. A small sensor turret swiveled to follow the old man as he approached. “Identity confirmed,” the machine said.

He lowered his hands, stepped forward, and pulled himself up to a comfortable perch on the sloping plastic armor of the foredeck. “Fine day, isn’t it?” he asked conversationally as he unslung his shoulder pack and dropped it beside him.

“Yes, sir. I am required to ask whether you have noticed any evidence of enemy activity.” The sensor turret scanned the horizon swiftly before returning to his face.

“Nope, not a thing. Sorry, Killer.” He patted the hot plastic.

“Yes, sir.”

“I don’t believe that you’ll be seeing any more action, you know.”

“You have expressed this opinion before, sir. I cannot rely on your opinion.”

“I know, I know,” he said. “But look out there. You’ve got radios, scanners, everything; do you see anything out there but empty desert?” He waved at the broad expanse of sand and scrap metal where once a thousand armored battle machines had clashed. Of the thousand, a few had survived, to move on to other places and other battles. Most were weathered wreckage on the sands. Of them all, only this one, Self-Directed Tank, Heavy, Model 304k “Westmoreland IV” , Serial Number 443, was still here and still functioning. If any salvage crew had worked the area they had missed it, or perhaps decided that it was not worth saving with its left tread and main engine spread over a dozen hectares of desert, with its tail buried in a shellhole and its nose cocked skyward.

He had found it quite by accident, years before, when he first fled from Resurrection City. He had spoken to it in his rusty Pre-War English—not many people were left who could speak the language—and had identified himself, given name, rank, and serial number, without mentioning that he had been cashiered even before the war wound down to its inevitable meaningless draw.

It was only a machine, and a stupid military one at that, but it was better company than the empty desert, the scurrying lizards, or the snakes that slept in the sun.

“Do you see anything out there?” he repeated.

“Yes, sir. A party of infantry appears to be approaching.”

“What?” He whirled. “Where?” he demanded.

“Fifteen degrees east of south.”

The old man squinted into the sun, peering past his own ramshackle shelter and supply dump. He had a pair of good binoculars in his pack, rebuilt from the range-finding apparatus on one of the wrecked tanks, but he did not want to bother digging them out, not yet.

When his eyes had adjusted, he could make out a few figures moving on the horizon.

“Damn,” he said. “I wonder who they are?”

He had a suspicion, however. He guessed that the people of Resurrection City had, after all these long years, decided they needed him again.

“Track them,” he said, “but don’t fire until I tell you. They may not be hostile.” He paused, then added as an afterthought, “And even if they are, we may not want to fire on them. There may be better targets later.”

“Understood, sir,” the tank replied. The old man heard machinery grinding, and watched as the long gun barrel lowered itself slowly. A motor whined, and the main turret traversed slightly, training the gun on the distant figures.

The old man looked up at the gun and asked, “Ah...how much ammunition do you have left?”

“Eight shells for the main armament, sir. Forty-six rounds for the machine guns; at present all are in the Number Two magazine, but they can be moved if necessary. Two pulse guns and the Number Three particle beam are still functional, not at optimum.”

“Any missiles?”

“No, sir. Racks and magazines empty.”

That was no surprise. He chided himself for bothering to ask. “All right, Killer,” he said. “Track them.”

“Yes, sir.”

The scanner turret rose slightly and whirred softly to itself, but remained pointed toward the approaching party.

“Can you make out any details?” he asked.

“No, sir,” the tank replied. It made no excuses, gave no explanations. He liked that. The machine never tried to justify itself, never invented reasons; it did what it was programmed to do.

He smiled, and muttered under his breath, “I yam what I yam, and that’s all what I yam. I should have called you ‘Popeye,’ Killer.”

“Yes, sir,” the machine replied, startling him. He had not meant it to hear him.

He sat, watching, for what seemed a very long time. Sometimes he used the binoculars; mostly he didn’t bother, since he really didn’t care much about details. Sweat ran down his sunken brown chest, down his bent back, from his stringy thighs, until the plastic beneath him was damp with it. The sun inched its way slowly across the heavens. The band of humans drew steadily closer.

The tank said nothing; it simply went about its business, tracking its chosen target. The sensor turret whirred occasionally but did not move; the main gun lowered imperceptibly every so often. As with the hour hand on an analog clock, the old man never saw it move, but all the same, every so often he noticed that it was lower.

The distant figures grew.

At roughly the point that they became discernible to the naked eye as definitely human, with hands and faces and clothing, carrying weapons and packs, the machine broke the long silence to say, “Unidentified infantry are within extreme sidearm range, sir. It might be advisable to take shelter.”

“No,” he said. “I’ll wait. Let’s see what they want.”

“Yes, sir.”

He knew the machine was just obeying orders, but he found himself almost touched by its solicitousness.

“Infantry are not in any known uniform, sir.”

“They may be civilians, Killer.”

“Unlikely, sir,” the machine said.

He glanced at the sensor turret, startled. That was not an assessment he would have expected the tank to make. It appeared that the machine was still able to surprise him, despite uncounted visits over the years, innumerable chats on the nonexistent military situation, and a thousand assorted strategy games they had played out together.

“We’ll see,” he said.

It was not much longer before the party came within hailing distance. There were five of them, all men, all armed. He waited for them to make the first move.

“Hello!” one of them shouted at last.

He waved, but did not shout back.

“Sergeant Cerullo, is that you?” the spokesman called, speaking the local patois.

He waved again, the dampness on which he sat suddenly uncomfortable. He shifted, and in an instant the dry desert air had sopped up the puddle of sweat.

They were looking for him, as he had feared. “What do you want?” he yelled back in the same tongue.

“We want to talk to you!”

“Did you come to take me back?”

The spokesman hesitated, then called, “Yes, actually, we did.”

“What if I don’t want to go?” he called.

“Well, we’re here to convince you,” the spokesman answered.

“What if I won’t be convinced?”

The men were close enough that he could see the leader’s smile, as well as the younger man behind him shifting his rifle, readying it for use. “Well, we’ll just see, I guess.”

“Fire a warning shot,” the old man said quietly, in English.

The sound of a single shot from the forward right machine gun snapped out. He did not see where the bullet went.

The five men stopped.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he said. “You tell Whittaker that.”

Above him, the main gun whirred as the barrel lowered slightly, taking aim at the newcomers’ feet.

The five conferred warily among themselves; he could not hear what was said.

An idea suddenly came to him.

“Can you hear them, Killer?” he asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“What are they saying?”

The monotone voice did not answer; instead, he heard a strange voice saying, in the postwar tongue, “Hey, Cap, that old loony has a fuckin’ tank! I’m not going any closer!” The tank paused, then added, in its own voice and language, “They are not speaking English, sir.”

“I know,” he replied. “It’s a local dialect.”

The discussion continued for a moment, then four of the men turned away. The fifth, the spokesman, paused long enough to shout, “We’ll be back, Sergeant!”

Then the entire party marched away, at the same pace as they had come.

He watched them go for several minutes.

“Sir,” the tank asked, distracting him, “did you understand what was said?”

“Sure, Killer; I speak their language. You heard me answer them.”

“Could you explain the situation to me? Were they enemy troops?”

He hesitated. “Not exactly, Killer. They’re from a place called Resurrection City—a neutral power, I guess you’d consider it. It was built after the war—I mean, after the fighting let up some.” He knew, from past experience, that the tank refused to accept that the war was over. Only a commissioned officer could tell it that, and he had never made it past technical sergeant. “I lived there for awhile—after my unit got shot up—and at first I thought it was a good idea.” He sighed at the memory. “They had a nice set-up; they’d salvaged a lot of what they needed, and were building or growing the rest, and everything was nicely organized. They had their own money, their own laws. But it didn’t last. This young hotshot decided to make it even better, and set up a lot of rules and regulations to keep everything fair. He convinced most of the younger people to join him, said that the older people were to blame for the war.” He shook his head. “People can be stupid, Killer. They started holding war crimes trials; they hanged everyone who had fought for either side. Except me.”

He stopped for a moment, remembering.

He had watched his friends—his enemies, too, for that matter—face their trials. Some had spoken out eloquently, some had remained silent; some had stood proudly, others had begged and pleaded. None of it had mattered. All had been hanged.

His own defense had been unique. He had displayed his dishonorable discharge, claiming that he had refused to fight.

In a way, that was the truth; in his first battle he had turned and run, and he had refused to follow orders to rejoin his company. He had told himself at the time that he was simply being sensible, obeying nature’s first law and guarding his own life by refusing to make himself a target for the enemy. The army had called it cowardice, and now, from the perspective of forty years distance, he had reached the conclusion that they had both been right. Common sense and cowardice definitely overlapped.

Of course, he couldn’t tell Killer any of that.

He remembered the lines of gallows that Whittaker and his gang had built, and how they had sagged beneath the weight of his own old comrades, most of whom had long since forgiven his cowardice. Whittaker had not been inclined to forgive anything.

He never forgot anything, either. He had looked at Cerullo’s records and had allowed his defense.

The old man knew that it had not been because Whittaker had accepted the argument, nor was it a simple act of mercy. It was a matter of politics, just as the trials and executions had been. Whittaker was using the veterans as a scapegoat; killing them cleared away a lot of lingering malaise and confusion that had hung over the settlement. Any problems could be blamed on the veterans.

It also relieved the overcrowding and the strains on the colony’s severely limited resources, of course.

And poor old Sergeant Cerullo had been spared in order to demonstrate the reasonableness of Whittaker’s government, to show that their justice could be tempered with mercy, that they were not bloodthirsty tyrants.

And, more importantly, Sergeant Cerullo could be useful. Resurrection City needed pre-war and wartime technology to survive, more so under Whittaker than before. All the technicians, however, had been veterans. No one in the younger generations had ever picked up more than the rudiments of mechanics; they had been too busy surviving to learn, and their elders had been too busy surviving to teach them.

So good old Sergeant Cerullo, the coward, would be very handy to keep the machines running.

And he had been, for a time.

“There was a man called Whittaker, Abner Whittaker, who took charge. Took command. I didn’t like him.” That was an understatement; the old man had recognized Whittaker for what he was. “So I left.” He had sabotaged his own machines and left one night, and had been pleasantly surprised when no one came after him. “After all, I wasn’t a citizen there, or anything.”

Being a citizen didn’t help much. The last time he had ventured back near Resurrection City the ring of barbed wire around the settlement had been doubled and built up to a good four meters high. The City had no external enemies; it never had. That fence was to keep the citizens in. Whittaker’s reign of terror had not stopped with the veterans.

“I guess, though, that they want me back. They came out here looking for me.”

“Yes, sir,” the machine acknowledged.

“I don’t want to go back.”

“No, sir.”

“If they come back, even if I’m not here, you open fire. I warned them this time; if they come back it’s their own fault.” He hesitated. “Ah...you can identify them, can’t you?”

“Yes, sir.”

Again, it offered no further explanation, leaving him to guess. Had it studied their faces, the infra-red patterns of their bodies, the rhythm of their hearts?

He didn’t know, and decided against asking.

The five men vanished over the southeastern horizon, and a few hours later the sun prepared to vanish over the western horizon. The old man slid down off the armored foredeck and prepared to head home.

“You take care of yourself, Killer,” he said.

“Yes, sir,” the tank replied.

He spent the next morning hauling water up from the river, taking breaks every so often to try and net the fish that gleamed beneath the surface. Shortly before noon he got lucky and actually landed one—a small one, and he was unsure what sort of fish it was, but it made a fine lunch.

When he had eaten he headed back for the old battlefield.

As he topped the last gentle rise out of the river’s shallow valley he glimpsed movement; he stopped and stared, then dug out his binoculars.

The five men from Resurrection City had returned. They were marching directly toward Killer. He focused the binoculars in as best he could at the bundle they were carrying, hoping he had been mistaken in his first assessment.

He had not been mistaken. They were carrying a portable rocket launcher and a bundle of armor-piercing rockets.

They were going to kill Killer.

Unless, of course, Killer got them first. He remembered the order he had given, to shoot if they came back. Killer would obey that.

Killer only had eight rounds for the big gun, though, and forty-six—no, forty-five—for the machine guns. The lasers were all broken, the pulse guns and particle beams short-range and intended mostly for use against electronic equipment, not people.

And Killer was immobilized. The main turret could no longer turn all the way, thanks to the damage to the rear deck, and the machine guns had never been meant to swivel beyond a small arc. It would fight, but if the men had any brains at all they would be able to find a safe spot and fire away until Killer was just another pile of scrap.

One or two of the men might be killed in the process; the old man certainly hoped that Killer would be able to nail at least one of them. The final outcome, though, seemed certain.

As yet no one had noticed his own presence, though. This was his chance to flee, to go someplace Whittaker’s men would never find him. Killer would keep these five busy for quite awhile.

He turned, then paused and turned back.

He couldn’t do it. He couldn’t leave Killer to be shot up that way.

That’s stupid, he told himself. It’s just a machine, just an idiot military robot. It’s not alive. And you fled readily enough before, when it was your country and your comrades at stake.

He wavered, but was not convinced. The tank was not alive, true, but he still did not want to see it destroyed. Killer itself, if it possessed any analogue of emotions at all, might welcome a final battle and an end to its long vigil, but he, Sergeant John Cerullo, did not want to see it destroyed.

It was all he had left.

A crippled war machine, weathering away in the desert, was all he had left to show for his life. The war that had taken everything else, from him and from the world, had left him this one thing, and he did not want to lose it.

If he turned and fled, he would have nothing left at all, nothing but his life. He had fled before, and all he had come away with was his life.

If he stayed, he could bargain with Whittaker, refuse to work unless Killer was left intact. Perhaps he could find other things to bargain about, as well. Whittaker would not kill him; he was too valuable.

He would be giving up his freedom, of course. He would be giving up the desert, giving up his long talks with Killer, his strategy games.

He would know, though, that the tank was still out there. Someday he might come back—or somebody else might.

The fact that Whittaker needed him, after so long, suggested that perhaps things were not going well in Resurrection City. Perhaps, before very much longer, the entire settlement might be free again, and he with them.

Even if that never happened, he could probably wangle his own liberty somehow. And Killer would be waiting.

Perhaps that would be worth a short stint in hell.

He’d spent his life looking out for himself, being a common-sense coward, and he was tired of it. He’d stayed alive when the others had died, and what had it gotten him?

A shack in the desert and a dumb machine as his only friend—a friend he would betray if he fled. The time had come, finally, to live dangerously.

“Hey!” he called, at the top of his lungs. “Over here!”