

First three chapters from *Weapon*, by Robert Mason.
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WEAPON

Chapter One

General Clyde Haynes watched the yacht sail smoothly by the mouth of the cove and wondered if they were spies. He raised his binoculars. Naked spies? Clyde grinned, his leathery face wrinkling along accustomed lines. Two naked spies with big tits.

One of the girls basking on the foredeck noticed him standing on the rocks and waved. Goddamn! What I wouldn't give to be out there. Too long, no pussy.

A wave crashed against his rocky perch and water splashed his legs, staining his camouflage pants. Clyde didn't notice. The girl roused her companion and together they waved, laughing. One girl stood up, holding onto a stay. Clyde groaned. Not a stitch. And they don't care. Where the hell were they when I was young? The yacht disappeared behind the coconut palms that lined the cove.

"Shit!" Clyde turned and jumped off the rocks. He trotted up the brilliant white beach, head craned, trying to see the boat. The cove was too narrow and he never saw the yacht again.

American girls, he was sure. Those were definitely American tits. But where do American girls stay in this part of Costa Rica? Not around here; that's a fact. Nobody around here. Probably staying down the coast, some tourist spot.

Clyde turned away from the cove and followed the path up the palm-covered bluff of Cape Santa Elena towards the mansion. The project directors had chosen this cape on the northwest coast of Costa Rica precisely because it was isolated. It was easy to secure.

Clyde looked up the hill. The white stucco mansion blazed against a cobalt sky. The red terra-cotta roof faceted with intersecting gables seemed to float above the walls. The whole building shimmered on the crest of a deep-green wave of tropical vegetation. The fact that there was already a building here was a bonus.

The film actor who owned it rented it willingly. A flock of seagulls swirled above the terrace that jutted seaward from the upper story.

Heels clicked together. Clyde heard, “Good morning, Sir!” before he saw the soldier. He returned the salute and stepped off the path towards the camouflaged guard. “Don’t be doing that, soldier,” said Clyde. “You jump up and salute like that on guard-duty you’re liable to get wasted.”

“Yessir. Sorry sir.”

“No problem, ah—” Clyde read the soldier’s black name tag. “—Private Sawyers. Just don’t want you to develop bad habits, Son. Someday you might be doing some real soldiering.”

The seagulls hovered over the red-tiled terrace, floating in the seabreeze, squawking, swooping down to catch the pieces of bread Solo tossed from his lounge chair.

Bill Stewart, co-owner of Electron Dynamics and the mansion’s official lessee, lay at a right angle to Solo, facing the beach. A tall, gangly, blond man, young-looking for forty-five, Bill covered his fair skin against the sun with white cotton pants, a splashy Hawaiian shirt and a Panama hat. The cool breeze singing up through the palms caressed his pale face and ruffled his shirt. He watched Clyde jog up the path. Clyde, Bill observed, double-timed everywhere he went. The man’s compact, hard, body was a measure of his vitality. Clyde was energetic; dumb but active.

Since the contracts with DARPA—the Defense Advanced Research Projects agency—began five years before, Electron Dynamics had grown to become a major defense contractor. Bill, a brilliant engineer, was now also wealthy. He seldom had time to enjoy the house he’d bought on Melbourne Beach. Trying to bask in the sun—a pastime which his skin would not tolerate—looked comfortable and seemed to Bill the thing that a multimillionaire ought to be doing at his expensive beach house. In Florida, the breeze was not cool on sunny days.

Bill smiled. The cool Costa Rican air felt exquisite as it wafted over his warm skin, swirling up his pant leg and under his loose shirt. He turned toward the squabbling gulls.

The back of Solo's chair was all he could see. A marble-sized ball of bread shot up. A noisy aerial duel among the gulls ended when the winner swooped away pursued by the others.

"Greedy bastards," said Bill.

"It's a game for them," Solo replied.

Bill smiled. Solo's floral-banded Panama hat turned, tracking the gulls like a straw radar antenna.

"You ready for tomorrow?" Bill said.

"I can't wait." Solo tossed another lump of bread.

Bill grinned. At last. Progress. "A lot of people are waiting to see how this turns out. Big opportunity for you."

"And for you, Bill."

"That's right. And for me." Bill saw Clyde run under the terrace. He added, "But if you fuck it up, I'll take the crap."

"I'm ready, Bill. I am the greatest Commie-killer there ever was," Solo said in a queer steady cadence. "A lean, mean, fighting machine. Lorenzo is as good as dead."

Bill grimaced. It was what they wanted to hear, but Solo parroted it without inflection, without conviction.

"That's the ticket!" Clyde strode onto the terrace as Solo spoke. White teeth gleamed against his tanned face. "You been talking to our boy, eh, Bill?"

"We've been working on some of the moral issues, Clyde. Solo was confused on a few points, but we've worked them out. I think."

"Moral issues?" Clyde's brow furrowed beneath his greying crew-cut. He walked over to Solo. "All you have to know, Solo, is that you're a warrior. An American warrior. And we are fighting for our fucking lives."

Bill closed his eyes. Not again.

Clyde continued. "It's been tough, but we're winning, boy. We beat 'em in Korea and Vietnam. We fucked 'em in Chile, Salvador, Guatemala. And now we're gonna beat 'em in Nicaragua. And with you—" Clyde shook his head, smiling broadly. "With you and the others like you, we're gonna stomp ass."

"Stomp ass!" said Solo as he tossed more bread aloft.

Clyde laughed and watched the gulls. When he looked at the tiles below the gulls, he frowned. “Ah, Solo. You wanna cut that out? Place is covered in gull shit.”

“I hate gull shit!” said Solo.

Clyde shook his head and sat down beside Bill. “What’s with our boy, Bill? I’ve never seen him so goddamn agreeable.”

“I’ll tell you later,” said Bill nodding towards Solo.

“Yeah, later.” Clyde looked out through the white wooden railing at the sea. “Hey, Bill. Did you see that stuff sailing by a few minutes ago?”

“The yacht?”

“On the yacht, Bill. Two naked chicks. Cooze, Bill. How long has it been? A month?”

“Three weeks,” said Bill. “I didn’t see any girls, Clyde. Too far away.”

“Jesus, Bill.” Clyde grabbed his binoculars. “You oughta keep a pair of these around, man. Never know what the fuck you’ll see. I mean—Solo, did you see—” Clyde turned around. “—those tits?” he said to the back of the empty lounge. Solo was gone. “Where’d the hell he go?”

“Probably went to study up for the mission,” said Bill.

“Man he’s fast. And quiet,” said Clyde. “These guys are going to be hell to stop.”

“I’m afraid you’re right,” said Bill.

Chapter Two

Rain sounds reached the ground long before the drops. A peccary rooting in the humus looked up, wrinkling its nose. The stalking jaguar froze, watching his prey sniff the air.

Drops fell through the top layer of the rain forest canopy, hit the second tier or the third in the two-hundred foot fall, breaking into mist. Fog swirled white against the deep shadows. The peccary resumed snuffling for food.

Hidden in a cave of matapalo roots, doom twitched his tail and resumed his slow stalk. Water drops beaded on the jaguar’s whiskers and fell, finally, to the ground.

The peccary pushed its pig-snout deep into the composting forest floor. The jaguar crept forward a few more inches. When the peccary paused to look for danger, the cat froze.

Something moved at the edge of the jaguar's vision. He looked. Nothing. Sniffed the air. Nothing. The jaguar squinted, still bothered, as he resumed stalking.

"Great picture. From ten miles away," said Bill. Wearing another of his large collection of gaudy Hawaiian shirts, he sat in front of his monitor in the control room. The incongruous floor-length curtains and spidery crystal chandelier were all that remained of the dining room on the first floor of the mansion. Crammed with computers, monitors and technicians, it looked like a miniature version of Cape Kennedy's Mission Control during a launch.

"Yeah. Amazing," Clyde yawned. As the military deputy director of the project, Clyde was not interested in technical details. Clyde did not understand how Bill made any of this work, and did not care to learn. Clyde was interested in results.

The image of the jaguar stealthily inching his way through the palmetos grew bigger as Solo zoomed in on the cat's face.

"What's with the goddamn jaguar? What about the mission—"

"Mission." Both men looked at the the monitor, taken by surprise. Solo's voice from the speaker was sullen, mechanical, electronic.

"Yes," said Bill.

As Solo zoomed back to a wider view, the cat launched itself silently through the leaves, calm intention on his face. The peccary wheeled, dropped the hymenia pod it had found, screamed terror. A metallic squeak came from the speaker. Solo zoomed to close-up as the cat shook his kill. Blood pulsed from ragged puncture wounds and dripped from the jaguar's teeth, more drops on the ground.

"Sick."

"C'mon, Clyde. He's watching everything. A good sign," Bill said.

The cat turned suddenly and dragged his meal away.

The monitor showed a hugely magnified drop of blood hanging from the serrated edge of a leaf.

“Mission,” Bill coaxed.

“What is this?” Clyde was appalled. “We’re supposed to be killing someone. Dammit.”

“Mission.” The same distant, emotionless voice acknowledged from the speaker, but the image on the monitor still showed the drop of blood. The drop lengthened, distorting the world it reflected, and slipped off the leaf.

The scene on the monitor changed abruptly.

A wet leaf plastered against the lens. They waited, wincing, for Solo to wipe it off, but the robot let the leaf slide slowly across its eye as it crept like the jaguar, floating through the dripping foliage.

Bill blinked instinctively, pulled off his stereo viewing glasses and rubbed his eye. It had seemed to Bill that the leaf dragged across his own eyeball. The glasses put him there, inside Solo. He put them back on. He stared at the monitor, saw what the robot was seeing ten miles away as it watched its target through the dense jungle growth.

In the target area, a small clearing in the jungle, Corporal Lorenzo appeared through gaps in the leaves, wheeling at every sound. As the target, Corporal Lorenzo’s job was to see the robot before it saw him. Caciques shrieked. Toucans rasped. A spider monkey chattered overhead.

Solo’s head tilted bringing his arm into view on the monitor. Wet leaves stuck to the black plastic. Mats of golden-orb spider web covered everything. Beads of water raced among the debris as the robot moved to unfasten the Ruger survival rifle on its belt.

Bill’s throat tightened as Solo brought the rifle up and unfolded the stock. Corporal Lorenzo looked right at Solo. The robot froze. Lorenzo didn’t see it. He whirled at the raucous rasping of a toucan. The robot sighted, centering the crosshairs of the telescopic sight on Corporal Lorenzo’s temple.

“He’s got him,” said someone at the back of the room.

Adjacent images on the monitor showed what Solo saw through each eye. In the left picture, a black plastic hand matted with spider web and jungle debris held the forestock of a blackened stainless steel Ruger aimed at a stand of palm fronds. Now and then, the observers at Control glimpsed Lorenzo moving between the leaves. The right picture showed a clear close-up view of Lorenzo, sweating

profusely, eyes darting. A crosshair hovered at a spot midway between his ear and eye. Like an expert human marksman, the robot sighted without having to wink. It couldn't wink.

The two views were now too disparate for the stereo glasses to blend. Bill removed them and looked back and forth between the two pictures. As Lorenzo moved around the clearing, the crosshairs tracked him unerringly, centered on his skull, never wavering. The robot's job was to decide for itself when to fire.

As Solo let the rifle rest loosely in his left hand, a dragonfly fluttered to a landing on his thumb. The gun sight continued to track Lorenzo perfectly.

Solo's left eye zoomed in on the insect. The dragonfly tilted its head as the camera optics moved, shifting to closeup. In the control room monitor, the left picture filled with the dragonfly's iridescent face. The right picture showed Corporal Lorenzo being tracked by a highpowered rifle.

"Why doesn't he shoot, goddamnit?" Clyde said.

Bill turned, whispering, "He will, Clyde. He's never seen a live dragonfly before." He turned back to the monitor quickly.

Clyde muttered: "I'm so fucking happy."

The dragonfly preened itself, wiped its thousand eyes, stopped occasionally to look around, ignored the featureless black face which loomed over it. Lorenzo vanished from the monitor. Solo had lowered the rifle. The dragonfly perched comfortably on the robot's thumb and stared at Bill from both pictures on the monitor.

The audience of technicians groaned.

Bill shook his head slowly.

They saw Corporal Lorenzo approaching through the foliage. The robot was off guard, and Lorenzo had seen it moving.

"What the hell is wrong with him?" said the general.

"Almost," said Bill quietly.

Corporal Lorenzo's face grew large behind the preening dragonfly. His voice reverberated through the speakers, "Nice bug you got there, Solo."

"What is the problem, Bill?" said Clyde.

"It takes time, Clyde. The nature of the beast. It's learning."

“You’d a thought the thing would learn faster—all that money.”

The monitor showed branches and leaves passing by Solo’s head. Lorenzo, invisible behind the machine, spoke.

“You sure you know where you’re going?”

“Yes.”

“What was so special about that bug?”

“Odonata albanil.”

“Huh?”

“Genus and species.”

“Oh.”

Then only rustling sounds. On the monitor, leaves and vines and insects floated past Solo’s eyes.

General Haynes watched Solo’s pictures, shaking his head. “He seems human sometimes, the way he talks to Lorenzo. He seems to understand.”

“He does understand. So why won’t he pull the trigger? He’s getting smarter everyday, Clyde.” Bill said, sighing. “I don’t know how much longer he’s gonna keep buying this crap we’re feeding him. We should be telling him the truth.”

“He doesn’t need to know the truth, Bill. He’s supposed to follow orders. Hell, we don’t even tell grunts the truth—how else you gonna get ’em to fight?”

“We’re playing with fire, Clyde. He’s going to find out we’ve been lying. A pissed-off grunt is one thing. But Solo—”

“I’m glad those fucking webs don’t bother you,” said Lorenzo from the speaker.

“It is the strongest natural fiber,” said Solo. “Indians use it to make fish nets.”

“Yeah? They’re still creepy-crawlies.”

“Nephila clavipes.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, the name of the big fucking spiders.”

“Yes.”

Solo and Lorenzo dodged and twisted through the thick undergrowth. Solo was following an electronic path to the waiting helicopter. There was no other trail.

Solo’s position, tracked by satellites, showed as as a glowing blue spot on the navigation monitor. The dot blinked, moving towards the chopper.

Clyde picked up a microphone. "Tell them Solo's just about there."

An electric double-click sounded in a speaker at the front of the room. "Red One, Control."

"Roger, Control. Go."

"Your date's almost ready."

"Roger."

The whine of the chopper's turbine starting up came over the speaker. Bill grabbed the viewing glasses and put them on. He flinched when a wet branch slapped across Solo's face. Solo's arm, matted with cobwebs, leaves and twigs, pushed a palm branch aside. The chopper sat hissing, blades swinging lazily, in the center of the clearing. A circle of grim commandos surrounded it, rifles ready.

Bill smiled, feeling guilty that he did. It was possible, he supposed, that someone could get past the battalions that held the perimeter around the Project Solo zone. But if there was a square mile of Costa Rica that was secure, this was it.

Solo ducked under the whirling rotors to the open cockpit door. The pilot signaled wait. The crewchief and gunner ran up with rags. "Man you look like Swamp Thing, Solo," yelled the crewchief, grinning. "Let us get some of this jungle shit off you, okay?"

"Okay."

The rags were useless. It was easier just to pull the cobwebs off in mats. Solo studied the whirling rotor hub assembly while the men fussed with the debris.

"Shit!" The crewchief flicked a huge spider off his hand. When it hit the ground, he raised his foot.

"No," said Solo.

"Hey, Solo," the crewchief yelled. "They can't hurt you, babe, but they can sure as hell fuck with me."

"She will not bite you."

The crewchief saw the pilot raise his hand and shake his head. Don't argue with Solo.

"She?" The crewchief screwed up his mouth in disgust but left the spider alone. He felt a shiver of fear. He'd forgotten what Solo could do. How close had he come to getting killed? He pulled more cobwebs off the robot. Just keep it friendly, he thought. "How do you know it's a she?"

“The female spins the web. The males are so tiny as to be almost invisible.”

“Yeah?” He pulled a sheet of silk tangled with insect and plant debris off Solo’s chest. “That’s sure good to know, man.”

“Yes,” said Solo.

Solo had flunked all the assassination tests so far, but he loved to fly. That part of the trial at least was a success. Solo climbed into the Huey’s cockpit, carefully lowering himself into the right seat so as not to bump the cyclic. The crewchief helped fasten the safety harness and closed the door. When Solo put on a flight helmet and slid the visor down, he looked almost human.

“You got it,” said the pilot, Chief Warrant Officer Sam Thompson, smiling. Solo was by far his best student. “Everybody’s on board.”

“I got it,” said Solo in the intercom.

Bill saw a hundred dials and switches fly by as Solo scanned the cockpit panel. He followed its hand, now relatively clean, to the collective. Solo twisted the throttle. The rotors spun to a blur, beating the air with a dull slapping noise. The sound grew louder, thudding, as Solo pulled the collective up. The machine rose out of the clearing.

The Huey tilted forward accelerating toward a low spot in the treeline. Solo hugged the canopy contours. To Bill, the treetops flashing by were dizzying, sickening. Approaching a huge hymenia tree, he saw hundreds of bird nests hanging like stuffed socks off the branches. Gleaming black oropendolas and dusty brown cowbirds swarmed among them. Solo banked away from the colony, giving it room. A minute later the Pacific Ocean flashed into view. Solo banked hard along the beach, climbing to two-hundred feet. Waves broke in slow motion below them.

The mansion looked perfectly peaceful from the air until they got close, Bill noted as Solo circled, looking down. Some of the two hundred troopers hidden in the jungle around the mansion were visible, entrenched around the perimeter hedges. Two Hueys squatted on the lawn behind the main house. A ten-acre tent city for a thousand soldiers intruded among the trees a hundred yards behind the gardens.

How obvious were these signs from further up? Certainly the choppers showed up on Russian satellites. That should reveal nothing of what was going on.

The US military rented dozens of similar mansions all over Central America. There was nothing unusual about this one.

It amused Bill that through Solo he could see the building in which he sat and also hear the chopper from which he looked through Solo's eyes.

Solo banked for a landing into the seabreeze. Thompson had his hand on his knee next to the cyclic just in case. He'd had human students—advanced students—who'd blown it on the final approach. He also knew that if Solo were damaged through his negligence, they'd make him a WAC.

When Solo hit the buffeting downdrafts on the leeward side of the mansion, he'd already pulled up the collective, adding sufficient power to compensate. The landing flare and hover were perfect. He set the machine down next to the other Hueys as though he'd logged thousands of hours. This was his tenth.

Solo shut down the machine. Bill heard Thompson say, "Well, Solo, I have to say it. You get a perfect grade. Great job."

"Yes," said Solo.

Chapter Three

Watching waves chasing sandpipers, Bill sipped a vodka tonic on the upstairs terrace. He put his foot on the railing. As he leaned over to tie his shoelaces, Bill remembered the months of training it took to teach Solo to tie his shoes. Image interpretation, body-part position sensing, and tactile feedback. Something kids learned in weeks. But Solo learned more and more quickly. He had become an expert helicopter pilot in ten hours. Bill sipped his drink and smiled to himself. Will I ever be able to stop seeing everything as a problem to be solved? A sandpiper chased a retreating wave, speared a sand flea with his beak, turned and raced away from the next wave. The bird's agility recalled the frustration they'd felt during the year it took Solo to learn to walk. Solo fell so often he became depressed and wouldn't try again for days. Solo's construction and programming encouraged such feelings to arise. Emotions in humans establish priorities and form purpose and were therefore necessary in an intelligent machine. Without an emotional structure, Solo would wander aimlessly. Though he had provided for emotional responses in Solo, Bill was amazed when they occurred. Whether what

Solo felt what a human felt was entirely conjecture. People could only guess how Solo felt by watching what Solo did.

A machine that experienced what seemed to be emotional episodes caused the people working around to forget that Solo was a machine. Clyde, for example, thought of Solo as a child that needed careful instruction.

“I’m surprised at you, Solo,” said Clyde. “I thought you understood what the hell we’re trying to do here.”

Solo lay in his chair and did not reply. Clyde shook his head sadly. “Okay, Solo. We go through it again.” Clyde leaned towards Solo and held up a finger. “First, there’s good guys and there’s bad guys.”

Bill jerked around. “Jesus, Clyde, will you give us a fucking break.” He twisted the chair towards Clyde. Solo lay inert in a sling chair. Clyde was poised on the edge of his seat, staring at Bill.

“What d’you mean?” A child’s surprise broke Clyde’s tough face.

“I mean what I said. Solo’s not a moron. He knows this. He’s heard it a hundred goddamn times. I’ve heard a hundred goddamn times. Give us both a fucking break.”

“You know, Bill, you shouldn’t be drinking so early in the day; it’s duty hours.”

“Civilian’s prerogative, Clyde.”

Clyde turned back to Solo. “You probably do know what I’m talking about, Solo, but maybe we ought to go over it again, to be sure. Okay?”

“Yes,” said Solo. Nothing moved when Solo spoke. No mouth showed if Solo smiled or frowned. No one could tell where Solo’s lenses looked. Solo spoke without gesture. Solo could synthesize any voice, given a few words to sample. He now chose to use Clyde’s, but the sound buzzed slightly as he attempted to mimic Clyde’s raspiness.

“See,” said Clyde. He looked back at Bill indignantly.

Bill shook his head. “Solo, tell us the difference between a good guy and a bad guy.”

“A good guy is a man who does good things—an American,” said Solo. “A bad guy is a man who does bad things—a Communist.”

“That’s right!” said Clyde.

“Jesus,” said Bill.

“So, Solo,” said Clyde. “We’re the good guys. Bill and I. All the soldiers here. You too, Solo. And we want you to kill the bad guys we tell you to kill.”

“No,” said Solo.

“I thought you said you understood me,” said Clyde.

“I understand you.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“You have not asked me to solve a problem.”

Clyde glanced quickly at Bill. Bill grinned. Clyde continued, “I mean, why won’t you kill the bad guys we ask you to?”

“Lorenzo is not bad,” said Solo.

“I get it!” yelled Clyde. “I see.” He turned to Bill again with triumph on his face. “Solo, listen to me carefully. Corporal Lorenzo was pretending to be a bad guy. Your rifle is loaded with blanks. We just wanted to see if you could stalk a simulated bad guy and pretend to compromise him. Do you understand now?”

“Yes. Compromise: eliminate, delete, extirpate, fuck him up, kill.” Solo had refined his imitation of Clyde’s voice until it was perfect.

“Ah, yeah. That’s right.” Clyde was unnerved by the string of synonyms delivered in his own voice. “Solo, use your own voice from now on—gives me the creeps to keep hearing myself talking out of your head.” Solo nodded. “So if we repeated the mission tomorrow, you’d pull the trigger?”

“No,” said Solo.

Clyde stood up suddenly. “I need a drink,” he said. He stopped midway on his way to the bar, turning back to Bill. “Okay, expert—” He pointed to Solo.

Bill nodded. “Solo, I thought you understood that this mission was a new TAU.” Bill used the acronym for Thematic Abstraction Unit. The term flagged previously defined social situations or plans which Solo had learned, like: TAU-Close-Call, TAU-Hypocrisy or TAU-Evade-Enemy.

“Yes, Bill, TAU-Elimination.”

“That’s right. You understand you have made a mistake?”

“No.” The robot lay comfortably on the lounge, not moving. “I tracked the target and placed him properly in the sight picture. Pulling the trigger was superfluous.”

“It was part of the instruction of this simulation to pull the trigger.”

“Yes,” said Solo. “However, there were no actual bullets in the rifle. All critical events of the mission were accomplished.” Solo’s voice was natural-sounding now, animated with appropriate inflection, sounding vaguely like David Brinkley. “It is also my job to make decisions.”

Clyde slumped into his seat next to Solo, swirling a whiskey and water.

Bill leaned forward, speaking quietly, “If we assigned a TAU-Elimination mission with real bullets and against a real enemy, would you pull the trigger?”

Solo rolled his head slightly to face Bill. The movement indicated where he looked, a courtesy he had learned to use with humans. “I have always done my tasks well. It would be logical to assume that I would continue to do so.”

Bill sat back. He sipped his drink and stared at the robot. Solo reverted to a maddeningly literal view of things when he, it, became cornered. He played dumb. Why was Solo being evasive now? Certainly it can lie, thought Bill, but equivocation? There was no provision for that. Solo was strictly forbidden to dodge a direct question from his builders. Evading an enemy, yes. But not us. The system was learning, but it was learning the wrong things. Despite the team indoctrination and the this-is-your-enemy propaganda, Solo grew more independent. Troublesome. All by itself—as Bill had predicted—somewhere in that mass of a million processors something was being born and was growing fast. Yet the programs that encouraged learning and emotions were the only way to build a machine like Solo in the first place. Bill’s dream, to be able to talk to a sentient machine, was now the nightmare of attempting to control one. “Okay, Solo.” Bill leaned forward. “Go charge your batteries. We’ll be working on TAU-Survey tomorrow.”

“Yes.” The overburdened lounge chair groaned as Solo leaned forward. At six feet two inches, Bill weighed a hundred and seventy-five pounds. The machine, the same height, weighed three-hundred pounds. Solo stood up and left the terrace without saying another word.

“There’s something cooking inside that boy,” said Clyde.

“I know,” said Bill. “He’s balking. He questions the missions.”

“That’s right,” said Clyde. “This simulated assassination stuff gives him too much room to maneuver. If we wanna know what he’d do in the real world, we

have to give him a real-world mission. That's why we're here. I think we're gonna have to have him kill someone."

Bill stared at Clyde in disbelief. "You're serious?"

"That's what this's all about, Bill, remember?"

"Solo's just the prototype, Clyde. We've got to move slowly. We're only beginning to find out what he can do. Solo just can't kill now. I think that the accident with McNeil traumatized him. We have to let him work through it at his own pace."

Clyde grimaced at McNeil's name. "Bullshit. We gotta know. He said he would if the target were real."

"He said it was logical to assume that he would—"

"So, let's give him a real target, goddamnit. Find out if he's bluffing. We've got bunches of 'em just north of here."

Bill stared into Clyde's blue eyes. They'd both been to Vietnam. They'd both seen the carnage. How could they think so differently? "As a fucking test?"

"Wake up, Bill!" Clyde scowled and leaned forward. "We're killing them every day. With guns, bombs, fire, clubs. Whatever. What does it matter what we kill them with, for chrissake? It's like testing another rifle to me."

Bill believed him.

"They'll never let you do it."

"Of course they will, Bill. It's a provision in the damn test criteria. We have to know if a Solo can function in the real world."

"Nobody ever told me that! A test killing?"

Clyde watched Bill's face redden. He said quietly, "It's in the military test criteria, Bill."

Bill shook his head slowly, glaring at Clyde. Of course they wouldn't have told me that. "I won't lift a finger to help, Clyde," he said.

Clyde stood up, towering over Bill. "You know, Bill, with all the influence you have on Solo these days, I don't think we need you anymore anyway. The machine understands me better everyday. I can put a damn TAU in front of words too. Solo just needs firmer guidance. Face it, Bill, sometimes you just aren't capable of doing what has to be done." He turned and stalked through the French doors.

Bill watched the curtains swirl in the seabreeze. The surf hissed behind him. Gulls cried. He turned his chair around. The orange sun sliced slowly into the ocean. “We’ll see,” he said.

Solo lay on his lounge in his room. Through the gauzy curtained bay windows of an upstairs bedroom he watched a flying squirrel glide between two coconut trees. The squirrel landed at the exact spot Solo predicted at launch. He shifted his attention. Inside the room, he saw himself reflected in the ornately framed mirror on the dresser. Zooming in on his silvered eye covers, he saw reflected in them the whole side of the room, the dresser, the two sets of bay windows, the painting of a bowl of fruit by Cezanne. He wondered what was behind the eye covers. The question asked itself into infinity in the reflections he saw.

He zoomed back and looked at himself in the mirror. Three cables snaked from a compartment—an input/output port, an I/O port—on his right side. One, connected to a wall outlet, charged his batteries. The second, looped around the table leg, connected him to the laserdisk player. No picture formed on the TV monitor next to it. Digital information from the laserdisk was being transmitted directly to his brain faster than it could be shown on the monitor. Somewhere in his brain he saw the pictures and heard the narrator from the Huey training disk: “Four dash forty-seven,” said the narrator. “If failure of the inlet Guide Actuator occurs, the pilot will notice an instantaneous rise in EGT. By reducing collective pitch, the EGT can be maintained...” An exploded view of a section of the Huey’s turbine changed in synchrony with the narration.

The third cable connected Solo to Control’s main computer. Through this link, Solo used the super-computer—ordinary and certainly not sentient—to solve very complicated mathematical problems, problems it was better suited to solve than he. Solo listened, interested, as the computer encoded a message and sent it out on the top-secret military computer network, MILnet, to Washington.

End of sample chapters from *Weapon* ©1989 by Robert Mason.

WEAPON is out of print, but a few hardbacks are available from Patience Press.