

## Prologue

*This is a tribute to my all-time favorite science fiction story. The title and name of the author is lost in a labyrinth of distant memories. Of the scores I've read through a lifetime of enjoyment of the genre, the theme of this one stands etched in my mind.*

*To satisfy my frustration at being unable to find it again, I borrowed the theme to write my own version. I hope the reader enjoys it as much as I did the original.*

# The Wimp

by  
Roger Smalling

Jeremy Whitby sat on his last crate of food and wept. His mathematician mind did not need a calculator to tell him how long it would last. *Six weeks, maybe eight if I ration hard*, he thought to himself. *But rationing won't help. That will still leave me two months to starve to death.*

He stood up, walked outside the house and looked up at the sky. "You morons! You blithering imbeciles," he shouted. "You have stranded me here to die." He knew no one would hear him. Not at 700 light years from earth. Nor would anyone on the planet hear. He was the only one there.

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Months before on earth, Director Jordan Stenton, president of the Galactic Colony Service, looked across his polished mahogany desk at one of the most wimpy-looking men of the several he had interviewed that day. The Director thought, *This man obviously expects to be dismissed immediately. That explains why he averts those gray-blue eyes every time I speak to him.*

Director Stenton smiled, "I believe you are the man we want for this mission, Mr. Whitby."

Jeremy Whitby, who had been slouching timidly, sat up abruptly. "I beg your pardon, sir? You said there have been at least 600 applicants." He paused and cleared his throat nervously and continued, "I am indeed honored, sir, but I must ask...exactly, what abilities do you see in me that would qualify me for an exploratory mission on a distant planet?"

"None whatsoever," the Director replied. "That is precisely why we picked you."

"Sir, I read the brochures," Jeremy replied, "so I understand you wanted people with no experience in exploration, survival or weapon skills. I assumed you expect to do the training yourself for those you call your proto-colonists. However, you can see that I am not exactly what most would consider a candidate for such training."

The Director's paternalistic and disdainful smile barely hid his true thoughts. *What an excuse for a man. Skinny, timid, no confidence. Why is it that wimps are usually skinny? Are they afraid to eat?*

He spoke, "Mr. Whitby, we can find all the intrepid adventurers we want for exploring the planets we intend to colonize. They apply by the dozen every day. Our robotic technology has made types like that obsolete. Our scanners can tell us from space all we want to know about a planet before anyone sets foot on it. Our problem is to convince ordinary citizens to go. They want absolute proof it is safe, before leaving everything to live on a world they know nothing about."

"Yes," Whitby replied, "and paying you their life savings for the passage."

The Director chuckled. "Spoken like a true accountant, Whitby, which I see your application says is your profession." He leaned back in his black leather executive chair and continued.

"You see Whitby, people want to hear that someone has already lived on the target planet and returned safely. And not just anyone. Certainly not a gung-ho macho type, but an ordinary man with none of those skills you mentioned."

Director Stenton continued, "Here's the deal, Jeremy. May I call you Jeremy?"

Whitby replied, "Yes, of course. This is getting intriguing."

"All we want you to do is live on Delta Prime, our next colony target, for one year. Everything you need will be provided. A year's worth of rations. Whatever food and clothing you choose. A robotic supply ship will take you there. Robots will set up your lodging and storehouse. Then the ship will take off and maintain an orbit around the planet and return to pick you up the day you are to leave."

Jeremy was sitting up straighter by now. "What about possible dangerous wildlife? Will I have weapons and training in how to use them?"

"No, Jeremy. Our Organoscanner has scanned the target planet, Delta Prime, for any kind of fauna. Nothing but vegetation exists on the surface. Entirely safe, so no weapons are necessary. Besides, it will be better propaganda to say that our proto-colonist survived without weapons of any kind." The Director smiled. "The only thing you have to worry about is boredom."

"I'm used to boredom. I'm an accountant, remember?"

"I see you have a sense of humor, Jeremy. May I ask what are your motives for going?"

"Well, sir, I'm tired of my life as it is. Few friends. Never was any good at sports. No girl friends. Can't get a date. Frankly, sir, being away from the human race for a year is more attractive than it would be to most people."

Jeremy paused to clear his throat again. "Also, I must ask you, Director, was the salary mentioned in the brochure a misprint?"

"No Jeremy, it wasn't."

"That's more than I could make in twenty years," Jeremy replied. "How's that for a motive?"

"Jeremy, you're hired."

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Even with the new derelium star drive, the trip to Delta Prime took nearly a month. The landing went without incident. The robots did a perfect job of setting up the stormproof lodging and the storehouse about twenty meters away. The supply ship took off like the Director said and Jeremy settled down to a leisurely life of reading and writing. He even wrote a few poems about the environment; the low hills a half-mile away and the varied colors of the three moons. Not great poetry he knew, but he didn't care.

He heard a noise outside one night but ignored it. Maybe a stack of crates settling.

In the morning, he found a corner of the storehouse ripped open. At first he thought it might have been a crate that fell off a stack and broke the wall, until he spotted the claw marks.

Crates had been torn apart. Containers of food pierced and spoiled. Some clothing items were shredded. *Whenever did this, Jeremy thought, must be big and strong.*

The creature had left a trail leading to the nearby hills. Although Jeremy was terrified, he followed until the trail rounded a knoll and disappeared. He dared not follow it around a blind curve, so he climbed the knoll, lay on the ground at the top and peered over.

The trail led to the mouth of a cave across a stretch of barren ground, about 50 meters from the knoll. Jeremy gasped and thought, *The Director said the Organoscanner searched the entire surface of the planet for fauna. Gang of fools! Did it never occur to them to scan for life under the surface?* He slid down the knoll in the direction of the house, careful to avoid noise.

This was serious. He had to find a way to keep the creature out, whatever it was. He repaired the breach in the storehouse wall as best he could with the few tools he had. It was pathetic. He calculated he had lost about five percent of his stores.

Another raid the next night. He shined a flashlight through the house window and the sight sickened him.

The light revealed a low lying bulk, about three feet high and eight feet long, something like a giant centipede with a bulbous back, multiple legs and a string of yellow eyes across the face. Two long claw-like protrusions extended from the front that tore at the fabric of the storehouse.

The creature turned and hissed in Jeremy's direction, then backed away from the light. Jeremy shut off the flashlight.

It took a full hour to recover his composure and think through the situation. Ripping and smashing sounds continued through the night. Jeremy slept not at all, terrified the monster would attempt to break into the house.

The next morning, he surveyed the damage. Another tenth destroyed. *It will only be time before this creature attacks the house. I have no weapons.* He remembered the monster retreating from the light and had an idea.

It took the better part of the day to string a set of lights around the roof of the house. Not enough to protect both buildings completely. Hopefully it would keep him safe until he found a way to discourage the creature.

The following night, the raid continued. Several more crates destroyed. Jeremy spent the day lugging crates into the house. It was backbreaking work for a man not used to manual labor. He stacked crates from floor to ceiling. That night the din outside was even louder. He ventured a look outside and saw at least three shadows milling around the storehouse.

It would be a race against time. It took him four exhausting days to stack the house full of crates until he could hardly move around. It was not enough. The rest of the storehouse was at the mercy of the creatures.

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Months went by. Jeremy surveyed the shambles of the storehouse. Smashed boxes, broken support tubing, spoiled containers strewn everywhere.

One crate of supplies was left in the house. *The options are simple*, he thought. *Starve to death or suicide*. He looked over the rubble and noticed a shard of broken crate, about a foot long, tapered and sharp on the end. He walked over and picked it up.

As he turned the shard over in his hand, he recalled an incident in his childhood. A bully had beaten him up. Not just once but twice. One day, he asked himself what it would be like to hit the bully just once. He knew if he did, the bully would beat him worse than if he just took the abuse. *Just once*. He said to himself.

The next time, he hit the bully square in the mouth. Indeed, the bully beat him badly. When Jeremy got home, he hurt all over except in one place, his hand, the one that hit the bully. It felt good. Very good.

He looked up at the hills and had an idea. *Maybe there is a third option after all*.

It took him the better part of an hour to rummage through the rubble to find what he was looking for. A broken piece of plastic tubing, about two meters long, part of the support structure for the storehouse.

It took the rest of the day to figure out how to attach the pointed shard to the end of the pipe and make it stay. Electrical wire and tape made a dubious looking spear but it stuck in the ground and held when he threw it.

"Just once," he said to himself.

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The next morning, Jeremy opened the last crate of supplies and ate an ample breakfast with complete disregard to rationing. Afterwards, he picked up his spear and a flashlight, then strode outside and stood by the rubble.

A teardrop splattered on the dusty ground in front of his foot. He was crying again. He looked at it for a couple of seconds, then ground it into the dirt with the heel of his boot. *Well, I've taken my first step*, he chuckled.

He took another step and then another, shuffling along, head down, looking

up occasionally to make sure he was still on course toward the cave. His hand was shaking, knuckles white, causing the spearhead to waggle.

He rounded the base of the knoll and stopped. The mouth of the cave was about 50 meters away, the aperture around three meters high and a couple of meters wide. He said out loud, "Monster, one of us is going to eat well tonight. Probably you. But at least I won't die of starvation."

He took a deep and trembling breath, switched on the flashlight, then walked forward at a brisk pace. At the halfway point he picked up his pace. Then he began to jog. By the time he reached the cave, he was no longer jogging. He was sprinting full tilt, shouting in rage, the spear held high as he plunged through the mouth of the cave into the blackness beyond.

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Four months later on earth, Director Stenton of the Galactic Colony Services, stood at the base of the landing platform for the company star ships. He was ecstatic. The ship from Delta Prime had just returned, bringing back Jeremy Whitby, the planet's proto-colonist. *This, he thought, is going to bring in a bundle of money for the company. And a fat bonus for me.*

The entire senior staff stood around him. Behind them, thousands of citizens milled in anticipation, hopeful for a berth on the first transports to the new colony. Many had already sold everything they had for passage, desperate to escape to a new life on a new planet.

The ramp of the ship opened with a hiss and descended slowly to the tarmac with a thud. The crowd held its breath, waiting in anticipation to cheer Jeremy. A shadow of the morning sun obscured the doorway and the top of the ramp. For a moment, the crowd could see nothing. Then the indistinct form of a man appeared in the shadow of the doorway.

The man descended slowly down the ramp. Director Stenton started to clap and the crowd cheered. When the man stepped into the sunlight, a stunned silence swept over the crowd and Director Stenton stopped clapping.

What they saw on the ramp was nothing like what they expected. They saw a man clothed in a robe of strangely colored skins, tied around the waist with a twisted thong. His bare arms hung at his side, fists clenching and unclenching, slowly, rhythmically.

A breeze blew a wisp of shoulder-length scraggly hair over the man's face. A muscled arm reached up and flung it aside. He surveyed the crowd,

squinting slightly in the morning sun, his head turning slowly, as though looking for something or someone.

Director Stenton stood stunned, his hands still in a clapping posture. "Whitby?" he said.

The face of the man on the ramp snapped toward the Director and met his eyes. Director Stenton started to speak but the words caught in his throat. It was neither the skins nor the hair that transfixed him. It was the eyes.

Director Stenton knew it was Whitby's eyes but with a quality he had only seen in pictures. It was like the eyes of a predator, the steely cold gaze of a wolf.

Or, like the eyes of a dangerous man.

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