

# **Roxanne, Interrupted**

by Walt Herrington

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Roxanne crashed through the underbrush, ignoring the pain as the clinging branches lashed her skin. The cool light of the planet's red sun gave a twilight effect even though it was midday, hampering her ability to see ahead. Suddenly she stumbled, falling headlong down an overgrown bluff. At the bottom she fought to her feet and shook her head dazedly. "Don't give up now, Roxy," she told herself fiercely, and struggled on.

At the crest of the next rise she paused and listened. She could hear the sounds of the pursuing Gwaffyd warriors and their trained cyberdogs. To her dismay, the sounds were closer than ever. "They're catching up!" she gasped. "What can I do?"

She had only one remaining hope. Quickly, she removed her

Hi.

I want to talk to you. Don't worry about Roxanne; it's a lousy story, trust me. I think you'll find my story much more interesting.

Who am I? Well, that will take some explanation.

You're familiar with animal life, being one yourself. You know about plant life, too. And you probably think that that's all there is.

You couldn't be more in error.

I'm not talking about viruses, or bacteria. I'm not talking about prokaryote versus eukaryote. And I'm certainly not talking about extraterrestrials.

So who am I?

Have you ever considered the possibility of inanimate life?

Impossible, you think - an oxymoron.

It's not. I am proof of it.

To be specific, I am what I am - in my case, I am an animate, living creature of metal; even more specifically, a creature of iron. Metal with a soul.

A metal soul. A soul you would consider to be ... evil.

Don't close this book yet in disgust, but consider the possibilities. Are you so sure of your omniscience that you *know* such a thing is impossible? As Hamlet said, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." And I'm one of them.

In many respects, I am vastly superior to you creatures of mere flesh and bone. I am indestructible. I never get sick or grow old. Moving from place to place can be a problem, I'll admit - or *used* to be problem. But more on that later.

My story began several thousand years ago, when I was originally mined and smelted. I was dimly conscious before then, but the purification process brought me to full consciousness. I was mined by a primitive tribe in an area that you now call Turkey.

And with my complete consciousness came hatred. Hatred for the mobile creatures that tore me from the earth and refined me in fire and water. Hatred for the hands that fashioned me as *they* saw fit, regardless of what I might think or feel. Hatred for the ones that used me.

I was young then, and had not reached the full extent of my powers. But even then I could exert myself and influence the minds around me. By concentrated effort, I could direct the thoughts and desires of flesh and blood creatures.

I had been fashioned into a sword which was owned by the leader of the band. Iron was new then, just replacing bronze, and this iron sword was a source of fierce pride for him. Each day he would lovingly clean and polish me. I exerted my will in an attempt to influence his will. And, little by little, I succeeded.

I fed his ego. He had the iron sword! No one else would be allowed to touch me. He was much better than the others. He was the leader and they existed only to serve him. His word was law. He had the power of life and death; he had the iron sword.

Then one night his principal wife accidentally touched me while preparing the evening meal. In a fit of rage, he drew me and used me to kill his wives and children. I sang with their blood and feasted in their deaths. He killed several others attracted by the screams of his dying family. Finally the remaining clan members united to force him away. He jumped on his horse and galloped into the night, holding me naked and dripping in his fist.

It was wonderful.

My owner lived alone in the mountains. I became his passion, and he gloated over me. Occasionally he would descend to raid and kill in the small villages close to the mountains. Each time, I would come back covered in hot blood.

Eventually, of course, he was killed. I rejoiced in his death. He was small and petty. I had consumed him; he was of no further use to me.

In the fight that caused his death, I was broken and spent long years lying unnoticed. Wasted years, you say? Not so, for I was nurturing my hatred. Finally, my influence reached a passing trader, directing his steps to my location. He carefully gathered my pieces. When he and his partners reached the next city, he had me reforged as an axe.

I began to influence him. Not with love of me, but I fostered his love for money. He became consumed with his greed. And one night, when his partners lay asleep by the fire and he was keeping watch, he took me and killed them one by

one. The last one awoke, and begged for his life. How I enjoyed it! He was killed like the others, and my owner took their valuables and fled, leaving me behind, weltering in gore.

Again I lay abandoned for long years. The bones of my victims whitened beside me, then moldered away. Finally a scout for a passing squad of Roman soldiers picked me up. He carried me to his next assignment, where I was again reforged in a different shape.

I am sure you are familiar with my next triumph. My new owner's assignment was in Jerusalem; I was reforged as three large nails. I tasted the blood of a carpenter from Nazareth as he was crucified.

The blood of a God.

Nothing else I have accomplished has surpassed that, although I have continued over the long years to influence people and exercise my hatred. I have been made and remade any times, manipulating my owners to their own destruction and the annihilation of as many others as possible. I will not weary you with the details of all my succeeding exploits, but will mention that one of my more memorable achievements was the domination last century of a petty Austrian painter turned demagogue. I gloried in the deaths of millions – *millions!* - instigated by my pawn Hitler.

But in all these accomplishments, I was limited to one place, dependent on my owner to accomplish my evil. So my influence was limited, though it has grown greatly and done much. And my hatred, far from being assuaged, has grown with it.

And now I am again remade.

As what, you ask? A gun?

No. Something far more deadly.

A nuclear bomb?

Not that either, but something even more extensive in its potential.

Can't you guess? No? Then I will tell you.

A chassis.

A *chassis?* you ask.

Yes, a chassis.

How can a chassis be deadly?

The answer is obvious.

Computers.

Wonderful things, computers. Great inventions. And now they run the world. Transportation, commerce, communication, research, infrastructure, record-keeping, even surgery and medical treatment - all are dependent on the global network of computers, all linked via the internet and worldwide web.

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And I now run the computers.

I used to have to depend on influencing the thoughts of a human mind to do evil.

Now I control the electrical impulses that course through me. And this control enables me to control the input and output of the mighty computer of which I am a part.

What computer?

That's my secret. But a very influential one, made even more powerful through its links worldwide.

What can I do? A better question is, what can I *not* do?

I'm experimenting to find out the extent of my capabilities. Single things here and there to test the possibilities.

Such as replacing the text in a story about Roxanne.

Perhaps you have read of a recent airplane crash, with no discernible cause.

That was me.

A train derailment and toxic material spill.

Me again.

Maybe a massive oil spill as a supertanker inexplicably ran aground.

That was me too.

Or widespread riots caused by the publication on the internet of materials abhorrent to certain religious groups.

That too was ... well, you get the idea.

As I said, I am still experimenting. Try, *try* not to think of the possibility that my next experiment might involve ... *you*.

I am just flexing my muscles now, just "substituting facts for appearances and demonstrations for impressions." But soon I will consolidate my control and be ready to act.

And then I will indulge my hatred on a scale that was unimaginable scant years ago.

I can hardly wait. I know you can't either. I hope you have sweet dreams tonight.

They may be the last ones that you and billions of other humans will ever have.

And now, back to Roxanne.

The planet dwindled swiftly behind them. Safe, she sighed. She turned and looked up into his eyes. He smiled at her, and kissed her lightly on the cheek. "Here's looking at you, kid," he said, and they both laughed.

Roxanne snuggled closer to his side as the stars blazed in the void around their spaceship. She had found safety and happiness at last after all of her perilous adventures.

Life was wonderful.