

# "Hello," said the Stick

## by Michael Swanwick

Arms races, by their nature, tend to escalate. But the biggest leaps aren't necessarily the most dramatic....

"Hello," said the stick.

The soldier stopped, and looked around. He did not touch the hilt of his sword, but he adjusted his stance so he could reach it quickly, if need be. But there was nothing to be seen. The moors stretched flat and empty for miles about. "Who said that?"

"I did. Down here."

"Ah. I see." The soldier poked gingerly at the stick with his foot. "Some sort of radio device, eh? I've heard of such. Where are you speaking from?"

"I'm right here. The stick. I'm from off-planet. They can make things like me there."

"Can they, now? Well that's interesting, I suppose."

"Pick me up," said the stick. "Take me with you."

"Why?"

"Because I make an excellent weapon."

"No, I mean what's in it for you?"

The stick paused. "You're smarter than you look."

"Thanks. I think."

"OK, here's the deal. I'm a symbiotic mechanism. I was designed to be totally helpless without a human partner. Pick me up, throw an acorn in the air, take a swing at it, and I can shift my weight so you hit it a country mile. Leave me here and I can't budge an inch."

"Why would they build you like that?"

"So I'd be a good and faithful tool. And I will. I'll be the best quarterstaff you ever had. Try me and see."

"How do I know you won't take over my brain?" the soldier asked suspiciously. "I've heard offworld wizards can make devices that do things like that."

"They're called technicians, not wizards. And that sort of technology is strictly prohibited on planetary surfaces. You have nothing to worry about."

"Even so ... it's nothing I'd want to chance."

The stick sighed. "Tell me something. What's your rank? Are you a general? A field commander?"

"Tramping alone across the moors like this? Naw, I'm just a gallowglass-a mercenary and a foot soldier."

"Then what have you got to lose?"

The soldier laughed aloud. He bent to pick up the stick. Then he put it down again. Then he picked it up.

"See?"

"Well, I don't mind telling you that takes a weight off my mind."

"I could use a change of scenery. Let's go. We can talk along the way." The soldier resumed his stroll down the dirt track. He swung the stick lightly back and forth before him, admiring how it lopped off the heads of thistles, while deftly sidestepping the sedge-roses. "So you're off to join the Iron Duke in his siege of Port Morningstar, are you?" the stick remarked conversationally.

"How'd you know that?"

"Oh, one hears things, being a stick. Fly on the wall, and all that."

"It's an unfamiliar figure of speech, but I catch your meaning. Who do you think's going to win? The Iron Duke or the Council of Seven?"

"It's a close thing, by all accounts. But the Iron Duke has the advantage of numbers. That always counts for something. If I had to bet money, I'd say you chose employers well."

"That's good. I like being on the winning side. Less chance of dying, for one thing."

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They'd progressed several miles across the moors when the Sun began to set. The soldier laid the stick aside and set a snare for supper. By the time he'd pitched a tent, made camp, and cut peat for a fire, he'd caught a rabbit. He roasted it slow and, because he had a fondness for drumsticks, ate all six legs first, along with three small bunyips, boiled with a pinch of salt from a tin. Like many an old campaigner, he ate in silence, giving the food his undivided attention.

"Well," he said when he was full and in the mood for conversation again. "What were you doing out here in the middle of this godforsaken wilderness?"

The stick had been stuck into the earth on the opposite side of the campfire, so that it stood upright. "I was dropped by a soldier," it said, "much like yourself. He was in pretty bad shape at the time. I doubt he's still alive."

The soldier frowned. "You're not exactly standard gear."

"No, I'm not. By compact, planetside wars are fought with primitive weaponry. It was found that wars were almost as environmentally destructive as the internal combustion engine. So..."

"Internal combustion engine?"

"Never mind. It's complicated. The point I was trying to make, though, is that the technology is there, even if it's not supposed to be used. So they cheat. Your side, the other side. Everybody cheats."

"How so?" "That sword of yours, for example. Take it out, let's get a look at it."

He drew the sword. Firelight glimmered across its surface.

"Tungsten-ceramic-titanium alloy. Self-sharpening, never rusts. You could slam it against a granite boulder and it wouldn't break. Am I right?"

"It's a good blade. I couldn't say what it was made of."

"Trust me on this one."

"Still ... you're a lot fancier than this old sword of mine. It can't talk, for one thing."

"It's possible," said the stick, "that the Council of Seven is, out of desperation, pushing the envelope a little, these days."

"Now that's a figure of speech I've neither heard before nor can comprehend."

"It means simply that it's likely they're using weapons rather more sophisticated than is strictly speaking allowed by the Covenants of Warfare. There's a lot riding on this siege. The Iron Duke has put everything he has into it. If he were defeated, then the worst the Council of Seven could expect would be sanctions and a fine. So long as they don't use tac-nukes or self-reprogramming viruses, the powers that be won't invoke their right to invade."

"Tac-nukes or self-reprogramming viruses?"

"Again, it's complicated. But I see you're yawning. Why don't you bank the fire and turn in? Get some sleep," said the stick. "We can talk more in the morning."

\* \* \*

But in the morning, the soldier didn't feel much like talking. He packed his gear, shouldered the stick, and set off down the road with far less vigor than he had the day before. On this, the stick did not comment.

At noon, the soldier stopped for lunch. He let his pack slip from his shoulders and leaned the stick against it. Then he rummaged within for the left-over rabbit, only to make a face and thrust it away from him. "Phaw!" he said. "I cannot remember when I felt so weak! I must be coming down with something."

"Do you think so?" the stick asked.

"Aye. And I'm nauseated, and I've got the sweats as well."

The soldier wiped his forehead with his hand. It came back bloody.

"Chort!" he swore. "What's wrong with me?" "Radiation poisoning, I expect. I operate off a plutonium battery."

"It's ... you ... You knew this would happen to me." Unsteadily, he stood, and drew his sword. He struck at the stick with all his might. Sparks flew, but it was not damaged. Again and again he struck, until his strength was gone. His eyes filled with tears. "Oh, foul and treacherous stick, to kill a man so!"

“Is this crueler than hacking a man to death with a big knife? I don't see how. But it's not necessary for you to die.”

“No?”

“No. If you grab your gear and hurry, you just might make it to the Iron Duke's camp in time. The medics there can heal you-antiradiation treatments aren't proscribed by the Protocols. And, to tell you the truth, you do more damage to the Iron Duke's cause alive and using up his personnel and resources than you do neatly dead in the moorlands. Go! Now!”

With a curse, the soldier kicked the stick as hard as he could. Then he grabbed his pack and shambled off.

It was not long before he disappeared over the horizon.

A day passed. Then another.

A young man came trotting down the dirt track. He carried a sword and a light pack. He had the look of a mercenary.

“Hello,” said the stick.

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