

Roger Zelazny. The Great Slow Kings

Drax and Dran sat in the great Throne Hall of Glan, discussing life. Monarchs by virtue of superior intellect and physique--and the fact that they were the last two survivors of the race of Glan--theirs was a divided rule over the planet and their one subject, Zindrome, the palace robot.

Drax had been musing for the past four centuries (theirs was a sluggish sort) over the possibility of life on other planets in the galaxy.

Accordingly, "Dran," said he, addressing the other (who was becoming mildly curious as to his thoughts), "Dran, I've been thinking. There may be life on other planets in the galaxy."

Dran considered his response to this, as the world wheeled several times about its sun.

"True," he finally agreed, "there may."

After several months Drax shot back, "If there is, we ought to find out."

"Why?" asked Dran with equal promptness, which caused the other to suspect that he, too, had been thinking along these lines.

So he measured his next statement out cautiously, first testing each word within the plated retort of his reptilian skull.

"Our kingdom is rather underpopulated at present," he observed. "It would be good to have many subjects once more."

Dran regarded him askance, then slowly turned his head. He closed one eye and half-closed the other, taking full stock of his co-ruler, whose appearance, as he had suspected, was unchanged since the last time he had looked.

"That, also, is true," he noted. "What do you suggest we do?"

This time Drax turned, reappraising him, eye to eye.

I think we ought to find out if there is life on other planets in the galaxy."

"Hmm."

Two quick rounds of the seasons went unnoticed, then, "Let me think about it," he said, and turned away.

After what he deemed a polite period of time, Drax coughed.

"Have you thought sufficiently?"

"No."

Drax struggled to focus his eyes on the near-subliminal streak of bluish light which traversed, re-traversed and re-re-traversed the Hall as he waited.

"Zindrome!" he finally called out.

The robot slowed his movements to a statue-like immobility to accommodate his master. A feather duster protruded from his right limb.

"You called, great Lord of Glan?"

"Yes, Zindrome, worthy subject. Those old spaceships which we constructed in happier days, and never got around to using. Are any of them still capable of operation?"

"I'll check, great Lord."

He seemed to change position slightly.

"There are three hundred eighty-two," he announced, "of which four are in functioning condition, great Lord. I've checked all the operating circuits."

"Drax," warned Dran, "you are arrogating unauthorized powers to yourself once more. You should have conferred with me before issuing that order."

"I apologize," stated the other. "I simply wanted to expedite matters, should your decision be that we conduct a survey."

"You have anticipated my decision correctly," nodded Dran, "but your eagerness seems to bespeak a hidden purpose."

"No purpose but the good of the realm," smiled the other.

"That may be, but the last time you spoke of 'the good of the realm' the civil strife which ensued cost us our other robot."

"I have learned my lesson and profited thereby. I shall be more judicious in the future."

"I hope so. Now, about this investigation--which part of the galaxy do you intend to investigate first?"

A tension-filled pause ensued.

"I had assumed," murmured Drax, "that you would conduct the expedition. Being the more mature monarch, yours should be a more adequate decision as to whether or not a particular species is worthy of our enlightened rule."

"Yes, but your youth tends to make you more active than I. The journey should be more expeditiously conducted by you." He emphasized the word "expeditiously."

"We could both go, in separate ships," offered Drax. "That would be truly expeditious--"

Their heated debating was cut short by a metallic cough-equivalent.

"Masters," suggested Zindrome, "the half-life of radioactive materials being as ephemeral as it is, I regret to report that only one spaceship is now in operational condition."

"That settles it, Dran. You go. It will require a steadier rrand to manage an underpowered ship."

"And leave you to foment civil strife and usurp unfranchised powers? No, you go!"

"I suppose we could both go," sighed Drax.

"Fine! Leave the kingdom leaderless! That is the kind of muddleheaded

thinking which brought about our present political embarrassment."

"Masters," said Zindrome, "if _someone_ doesn't go soon the ship will be useless."

They both studied their servant, approving the rapid chain of logic forged by his simple statement.

"Very well," they smiled in unison, "_you_ go."

Zindrome bowed quite obsequiously and departed from the great Throne Hall of Glan.

"Perhaps we should authorize Zindrome to construct facsimiles of himself," stated Dran, tentatively. "If we had more subjects we could accomplish more."

"Are you forgetting our most recent agreement?" asked Drax. "A superfluity of robots tended to stimulate factionalism last time--and certain people grew ambitious..." He let his voice trail off over the years, for emphasis.

"I am not certain as to whether your last allusion contains a hidden accusation," began the other carefully. "If so, permit me to caution you concerning rashness--and to remind you who it was who engineered the Mono-Robot Protection Pact."

"Do you believe things will be different in the case of a multitude of organic subjects?" inquired the other.

"Definitely," said Dran. "There is a certain irrational element in the rationale of the organic being, making it less amenable to direct orders than a machine would be. Our robots, at least, were faithful when we ordered them to destroy each other. Irresponsible organic subjects either do it without being told, which is boorish, or refuse to do it when you order them, which is insubordination."

"True," smiled Drax, unearthing a gem he had preserved for millennia against this occasion. "Concerning organic life the only statement which can be made with certainty is that life is uncertain."

"Hmm." Dran narrowed his eyes to slits. "Let me ponder that for a moment. Like much of your thinking it seems to smack of a concealed sophistry."

"It contains none, I assure you. It is the fruit of much meditation."

"Hmm."

Dran's pondering was cut short, by the arrival of Zindrome who clutched two brownish blurs beneath his metal arms.

"Back already, Zindrome? What have you there? Slow them down so we can see them."

"They are under sedation at present, great Masters. It is the movements caused by their breathing which produce the unpleasant vibration pattern on your retinas. To subject them to more narcosis could prove deleterious."

"Nevertheless," maintained Dran, "we must appraise our new subjects carefully, which requires that we see them. Slow them down some more."

"You gave that order without-" began Drax, but was distracted by the sudden appearance of the two hairy bipeds.

"Warm-blooded?" he asked.

"Yes, Lord."

"That bespeaks a very brief life-span."

"True," offered Dran, "but that kind tends to reproduce quite rapidly."

"That observation tends to be correct," nodded Drax. "Tell me, Zindrome, do they represent the sexes necessary for reproduction?"

"Yes, Master. There are two sexes among these anthropoids, so I brought one of each."

"That was very wise. Where did you find them?"

"Several billion light years from here."

"Turn those two loose outside and go fetch us some more."

The creatures vanished. Zindrome appeared not to have moved.

"Have you the fuel necessary for another such journey?"

"Yes, my Lord. More of it has evolved recently."

"Excellent."

The robot departed.

"What sort of governmental setup should be inaugurate this time?" asked Drax.

"Set us review the arguments for the various types."

"A good idea."

In the midst of their discussion Zindrome returned and stood waiting to be recognized.

"What is it, Zindrome? Did you forget something?"

"No, great Lords. When I returned to the world from which I obtained the samples I discovered that the race had progressed to the point where it developed fission processes, engaged in an atomic war and annihilated itself."

"That was extremely inconsiderate--typical, however, I should say, of warm-blooded instability."

Zindrome continued to shift.

"Have you something else to report?"

"Yes, great Masters. The two specimens I released have multiplied and are now spread over the entire planet of Glan."

"We should have been advised!"

"Yes, great Lords, but I was absent and--"

"They themselves should have reported this action!"

"Masters, I am afraid they are unaware of your existence."

"How could that have happened?" asked Dran.

"We are presently buried beneath several thousand layers of alluvial rock. The geological shifts--"

"You have your orders to maintain the place and clean the grounds," glowered Dran. "Have you been frittering away your time again?"

"No, great Lords! It all occurred during my absence. I shall attend to it immediately."

"First," ordered Drax, "tell us what else our subjects have been up to, that they saw fit to conceal from us."

"Recently," observed the robot, "they have discovered how to forge and temper metals. Upon landing, I observed that they had developed many ingenious instruments of a cutting variety. Unfortunately they were using them to cut one another."

"Do you mean," roared Dran, "that there is strife in the kingdom?"

"Uh, yes, my Lord."

"I will not brook unauthorized violence among my subjects!"

"_Our_ subjects," added Drax, with a meaningful glare.

"_Our_ subjects," amended Dran. "We must take immediate action."

"Agreed."

"Agreed."

"I shall issue orders forbidding their engagement in activities leading to bloodshed."

"I presume that you mean a joint proclamation," stated Drax.

"Of course. I was not slighting you, I was simply shaken by the civil emergency. We shall draft an official proclamation. Let Zindrome fetch us writing instruments."

"Zindrome, fetch--"

"I have them here, my Lords."

"Now, let me see. How shall we phrase it...?"

"Perhaps I should clean the palace while your Excellencies--"

"No! Wait right here! This will be very brief and to the point."

"Mm. 'We hereby proclaim...'"

"Don't forget our titles."

"True. 'We, the imperial monarchs of Glan, herebeneath undersigned, do hereby...'"

A feeble pulse of gamma rays passed unnoticed by the two rulers. The faithful Zindrome diagnosed its nature, however, and tried unsuccessfully to obtain the monarchs' attention. Finally, he dismissed the project with a stoical gesture typical of his kind. He waited.

"There!" they agreed flourishing the document. "Now you can tell us what you have been trying to say, Zindrome. But make it brief, you must deliver this soon."

"It is already too late, great Lords. This race, also, progressed into civilized states, developed nuclear energy and eradicated itself while you were writing."

"Barbarous!"

"Warm-blooded irresponsibility!"

"May I go clean up now, great Masters?"

"Soon, Zindrome, soon. First, though, I move that we file the proclamation in the Archives for future use, in the event of similar occurrences."

Dran nodded.

"I agree. _We_ so order."

The robot accepted the crumbling proclamation and vanished from sight.

"You know," Drax mused, "there must be lots of radioactive material lying about now..."

"There probably is."

"It could be used to fuel a ship for another expedition."

"Perhaps."

"This time we could instruct Zindrome to bring back something with a longer lifespan and more deliberate habits--somewhat nearer our own."

"That would have its dangers. But perhaps we could junk the Mono-Robot Protection Pact and order Zindrome to manufacture extras of himself. Under strict supervision."

"That would have its dangers too."

"At any rate, I should have to ponder your suggestion carefully."

"And I yours."

"It's been a busy day," nodded Dran. "Let's sleep on it."

"A good idea."

Sounds of saurian snoring emerged from the great Throne Hall of Glan.
