

Heroes

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The ground shook from an incoming round. Close! Bomb, rocket, or artillery, it was hard to tell. The officer in charge of the bunker was looking out an observation slit through a pair of image-enhancing glasses. He turned to me and asked, “Was this what you bargained for when you signed on?”

“Not exactly,” I answered. “I thought I would be reporting the easy conquest of yet another planet. The usual quick demonstration of our technological superiority, followed by the inhabitants wisely capitulating.”

Another explosion shook the ground. This one was closer or bigger than the last. Dust fell from the ceiling. I protected my recorder’s optics until the air cleared.

The officer said, “They’re so much like us. Two arms, two legs, two eyes. Most of them were smart enough to surrender when we shut down their satellites, long-haul communications, and power grids. But not this bunch. They don’t know *how* to give up. They insist on fighting with anything they can find. They have fought us with *spears*, if you can believe it!”

Another ground-shaking boom. “That wasn’t a spear,” I said.

“No, it wasn’t. They have been modifying their weapons to work without solid state electronics, so our EMP generators are ineffective. They even took antique weapons out of museums. What desperation!”

“I don’t think they are desperate,” I replied. “They attack when conditions are right for them, when an overcast day makes our orbiting lasers useless. They accept their losses, but do not waste lives. They think they can *win*! Why don’t we go all out and finish this?”

“With nuclear weapons? The inhabitants have them too, and they might be able to get some of them to work. This world would not be of much use to either of us if we started nuking each other.”

Another explosion, and a chunk of the ceiling fell. The officer turned to me and said, “That does it. I’m evacuating you to orbit on the next shuttle.”

“Because I’m a woman?”

“Partly that, but also because you are a non-combatant. I don’t know how the inhabitants would treat you. We have heard nothing about any of our people who have been captured.”

I thought about how *we* treat captives. Extract what information we can, then . . . dispose of them.

I asked the officer, “They can’t beat us, can they?”

“In the long term, probably not. However, they might throw us out of *here*.”

Just then there was an explosion that must have been a direct hit on the bunker’s roof. When I picked myself up, I saw that the officer was dead. I had never learned his name. I saw no movement from the other bunker occupants. I picked up the officer’s glasses, and looked out the observation slit, which was now somewhat larger than it had been.

A ground vehicle came over a small hill, moving fast and swerving rapidly from side to side. Our remaining high-powered laser found it and blew it to pieces.

The ground vehicle must have been a diversion. As it exploded, an airplane came swooping out of the sky. The airplane had a *propeller*, of all things! It released a bomb that destroyed the laser. I began to wish I had evacuated the day before.

Enemy soldiers were pouring over the hill, firing rifles and grenades. Our troops were putting up a desultory counter fire with small arms. We clearly were on the defensive now.

I tried the bunker door. It was jammed. I picked up a rifle, trying to remember the sketchy training I had received.

I could hear voices outside the bunker. Alien voices. Although I speak their language fairly well, I could not make out what they were saying.

An explosion blew open the door, knocking me down. An enemy soldier jumped in. I raised the rifle, but he kicked it from my hands. Then he stood over me as he surveyed the devastated bunker. He was enough like us to be a small, horrible caricature, his dark skin the most distinguishing characteristic.

I asked him, "Will you rape me?"

He replied, "You're not my type. Not green enough." Then he laughed.

I summoned all my courage. "Will you kill me, then?"

"No, you'll be treated well. Alive, you're useful. Dead, you're just smelly meat."

I stood, shakily. I looked down at the soldier, a third shorter than I. I asked him, "What is your name?"

He replied, "What does it matter? Oh, well, it's Smith. Isaiah Smith, Gunnery Sergeant, United States Marine Corps."