

On Our Shield

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"This is a great honor, you know."

The Man did not answer. The speaker's mandibles twitched at the insult.

"You do not understand. This is not like the auctions you knew of on Earth. Ichor is the price here."

Still silence.

"You are witnessing the ends of entire bloodlines. See, there." The speaker gestured to a viewing panel. Two battered and bleeding insectoids wielded massive scythes, the blades stained black with the blood of the fallen.

"Both represent new genetic lines. Both have been approved to seize a home planet for their queenship. And yet..."

The two figures shrieked, charged, fell, and died.

"Entire possibilities and potentialities extinguished..." the speaker said, its limbs quivering in excitement. "And all of it for the right to hunt the Last Man."

The Last Man remained silent. He watched as the ones who slaughtered his race tore each other to pieces. But although he watched, his mind was not present. He was trying to remember who he was before this. Was he a father? A brother? Did he have a spouse? Did he work in an office or in a field, at a computer or at a lathe, watching over people or toiling beneath them? Did he have a salary? Vacation time? Did he travel the world, did he live his whole life in one town, did he own or rent?

Did he fight?

Did he take to gun and knife, to bomb and bullet, to starship and grav-tank to try and stop the advance of these butchers?

Had he killed before?

His mind was not there. His body closed his fists for him, curling the fingers in such a way that the knuckles cracked. An old habit? Or just something that he saw in a movie once?

Only one of the image panels before him remained. On it, an insectoid with the slender frame and dulled carapace of age removed an arm from its opponent, a broad-shouldered, shiny-chested beast of a bug that shrieked in pain and anger. The pair clashed again, but this time strength and speed triumphed over experience and grit. The old one's head tumbled to the jungle floor, a fountain of ink spewing from its severed neck. The victor twirled its scythe and pounded its chest, and then the display

screen disappeared. The wall behind it opened up into the lush green of the world where Man would breathe His last.

"The victor is -" the speaker made an unintelligible series of sounds. "Not the one most expected to win, but there is no surprise. That one will hunt you, that one will find you, and that one will kill you. Such is its right."

Hot, humid air crawled up into the belly of the ship, making the man sweat.

"The best way to honor your race is to *try* to give a good fight. To that end, you should know that it will take two days for the victor to reach this area from the arena. If you do not sleep, you should be able to get to the food, weapons, and other supplies located at-"

The Last Man was not listening. He walked down the ramp from the ship into the jungle, his thin clothing sticking to his back and chest as if it had been pasted there.

"If you do not fight, you will dishonor your race!" the speaker called after him. "You are the Last Man. You must give your conquerors something to remember your people by!"

The speaker shouted more as the Last Man disappeared into the green.

* * *

His memories, he was forced to admit, were truly gone. In their place was nothing more than a titanic sense of loss...grief...sadness...

...rage.

Information was coming to him now, all of the bits and pieces he had unknowingly absorbed from viewing the auction. The way that they used the trees to hunt, hanging from the branches, motionless, camouflaged, waiting to drop on their victims. The wide arcs in which they swung their scythes, vulnerable to a half-dozen blind spots and weak points. And the victor that would now be coming for the Last Man, down one arm, its motion slightly aberrant when compared to the others of its species...an old leg injury? A birth defect? Whatever it was, it would give an edge when the time came.

The Last Man, the last analytic animal, stood without memories in the jungle where he and his race would soon expire. While his brain worked out a plan, his eyes searched the scenery for potential - and finding it, his hands set about turning it from a possibility into a reality.

"Come back with your shield, or on it." So went the saying of an ancient warrior race. This time, Humanity could not do the former, but thanks to the Last Man, it would die while still remaining true to its nature. Its essence. Its shield.

With rock and stick and flame, his ancestors had once conquered a planet. Now, with rock and stick and flame, he would give them one last victory to their name.