

The Grudge

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When I was three years old, I was given a choice between a stuffed monkey, a stuffed giraffe, or a stuffed kangaroo. There really wasn't much of a difference between them. They'd been sewn together from the unwanted scraps of the textile mill three towns over and filled with whatever could be found that was "close enough" to being soft: used cotton balls, sawdust, even old packing paper. The animals were dirty and lumpy, and if you squeezed them real tight you could feel the hard edge of something pushing into your ribs.

I chose a giraffe. And I loved that ugly little thing more than I could say. We all loved our stuffed misfits, us dirty children of miners and seamstresses, dragging our Frankenstein squeezetoy to the daily defense classes that our parents and older siblings attended. We held our monkeys and giraffes and kangaroos by threadbare limbs as we waited for the teachers to take us, one by one, to the cold hard seats in the back room. The seats where they told us that our animal friends had magic powers that could make the Xelsx go away. All we had to do was pull on their tails as hard as we could and the monsters would disappear.

And then the teachers would attach the cold electrodes to our foreheads and suddenly we'd find ourselves standing in a gray landscape, surrounded by Xelsx, their blood-spattered carapaces glittering as they raised their wicked doubleswords over their heads to cut us in half. And we'd scream and scream and some of us would wet ourselves and the only way we could make them go away was to pull on the tails of our stuffed animals. Once we did that, the Xelsx disappeared and our teachers gave us hugs and sent us to the other room for some thin juice and stale cookies.

I don't know how it was for the other children in my village, but I saw the Xelsx in my dreams every night. Every night I woke up in a sweat, my hand wrapped around my poor giraffe's tail and tugging it as hard as I could. Night after night and day after day I pulled on that unfortunate, misshapen beast, until I finally tore its sad little bottom right open. When I did, a silver cylinder popped out of the hole I made, and when I showed it to my parents they beat me and took both it and my giraffe away.

I was given a new giraffe the next day, but I didn't want it. I wanted the old one, but without any strange silver pieces inside. I left the new animal on my shelf, and when my parents found out that I had no interest in it, I was allowed to start taking the daily defense classes with them and my older sister.

They taught me how to shoot guns, both large and small, and how to throw grenades and set charges on plastic explosives. They taught me how to jab a bamboo spear into the areas on the Xelsx that were unprotected by their natural armor. They taught me how to handle pain, how to tie a tourniquet, how to bring mercy to an almost-dead ally, and how to stay utterly calm in the midst of death, destruction, chaos, and hell.

I was eight years old when they taught me these things.

When I was ten, the Xelsx halted their advance on Earth. They had decimated our armies, razed our colonies, and torched our resource and research fleets. They could have utterly eradicated the human race. Instead, they chose to honor us. They chose to praise us, like a patronizing adult complimenting a child they had crushed at chess. To them, we were a warrior race like their own. They would allow us to end our own lives as we saw fit - as was expected for a population that had suffered such a thorough defeat.

They left us without a glance over their shoulders, trusting that we would complete the honor-bound extermination of our race. They didn't see us load the anti-Xelsx pathogens into long-distance rockets and fire them at their ancillary supply planets. They didn't see us rebuild our fleet in secret or start training pilots again. They only saw us when we showed up in their airspace, and by that time the plagues that we'd only intended to release in the event of a home invasion were now ravaging their coreworlds, taking out entire colonies in weeks, burning massive holes in their infrastructure, and sending their worker populations into a panic.

The Xelsx swore at us between their ichor-soaked coughs. They cursed us with the invectives of a million generations of their warrior ancestors. We acted without honor, they said. We acted with complete disregard for the sanctity of war. We violated their most closely-held tenets. We spat upon their holiest of sacraments.

Yeah. You're goddamn right we did.

We're converging now on their final home, their first home, where their insectoid ancestors crawled free of the acrid mud to terrorize the universe. The cockpit of this fighter is tight, but it would be tighter if I hadn't endured years of the undernourishment of wartime rationing. The controls are shoved right between my knees, the canopy is a mere inch and a half from the top of my helmet, but I still found a way to make room for a little stuffed giraffe like the one I had as a kid. There are strict regulations against bringing anything other than your official kit and a personal religious symbol into your craft. But those stuffed animals are our religion now...they protected us from our fears and nightmares when we were barely old enough to understand them...and in the event that the Xelsx ever actually landed on Earth, the tiny bombs inside of our monkeys and kangaroos and giraffes were primed and ready to go. So long as one of the bugs was within thirty feet of us, all we had to do was pull on their tails as hard as we could and the monsters would disappear...forever...

To be clear, this is revenge, pure and simple. Not for the lives lost, but for turning us into a race of death-worshippers and hell-fanatics. Humanity was never innocent by any means, but the ferocity of our conflict with the Xelsx turned us into something else. Something so desperate to cling to our existence that we wanted to make sure that any race that sought to exterminate us would have to face extermination themselves. A species where every member is a weapon from the moment they can grasp and pull.

I feel some fear as I approach this final battle. Not of death...I've been prepared for that since before I could speak. But I'm afraid of what we will have left once our revenge is complete. How many wounded generations will it take for us to relax our newfound fascination with self-destruction, self-immolation, and self-assignment to the void? Will there even *be* future generations once we stop having children for their wartime utility and start having them for...whatever reasons we used to have them?

Have we forever closed the door on art and music and prose and science and architecture and all of the things by which we once defined our history, our populations, and our species?

I don't know the answers to these questions. But the closer I get to this final fight, the less I find myself thinking about them. Right now, I'm just filled with utter glee that we've caused the Xelsx so much pain and suffering. And as I quickly fall into the deathlust that my parents and teachers and species taught to me, the last conscious thought I have is this:

Perhaps my purpose is to clear the way of humanity's enemies so that we can finally heal and rebuild. Or perhaps my purpose is to finalize our damnation and our spiralling descent into nothingness. I don't know. All I do know is that my final moments in this universe will be spent cradling a small, stuffed giraffe made of castoff materials, surrounded by the enemies of the soul of Man. And with a wink and a tug I will make all of the monsters in my life disappear.

Forever.