

Blood Sacrifice

by Clayton Emery

Men screamed and scattered as a giant scorpion rushed from the mist.

A blood-red blur long as a shuttle craft, it was studded with spikes and a forked tail that dripped poison. Half the men in its path were manacled, so keeled over in the narrow corridor. Seven were shredded by razor claws. Soldiers in green dived and dodged, many floating off the twisted floor. Only the guards in red-lacquered armor ducked their heads and stood their ground and hammered massed-plasma charges at the joints in the scorpion's carapace. A dozen charges exploding inside the shell pulped its guts, so the monster teetered and laid down, graceful as a banking butterfly. Under it twitched a dozen corpses.

"Christ, why couldn't it wait until AFTER?" Bullock thumbed back his green helmet and wiped his brow, then bounced his prisoner off the canted floor.

Jessup wore orange prison coveralls and chains, and shuffled along barefoot. He snuffed blood from his nose. Bullock had hurled him to the stone floor and knelt on him during the attack. Not for love. Jessup snarled, "Thanks. It'd be a shame to lose your sheep when you've dragged me this far."

"Belt up." Bullock batted the prisoner's head. "Talk like that got you here, sheepdip."

"YOUR talk got me here! YOU turned me in!"

"You don't know that. Pick up your feet."

Infantrymen hustled their prisoners back into line, neatly paired one to one. A red guard fired bolts into the huge leaking carcass, cutting it into halves. The elite hated scorpions, the only enemies that could penetrate their red armor. The dead beast was dragged aside. Called a scorpion, sometimes a lobster, the alien was big as a truck, shaggy with quills, armed with claws and a double-stinger venomous tail. Mangled prisoners were sorted into dead or dying, and green-clad infantrymen who'd lost partners cursed and turned back for the troopship moored at the surface. Red guards ranged into dark pockets, peering through goggles at the warm, hazy air that reeked of rancid oranges, though no one had ever found any fruit.

The planetoid was riddled with wormhole corridors and odd-shaped rooms jutting at odd angles, most rooms empty but some crammed with exotic machinery and baffled technicians. In spots black shafts tilted towards the planet's hot core, down deep where scorpions skittered. One ovoid cavern even sported stone tiers like an arena and twisted exits. But the long line of green and orange men trudged steadily towards the tall room ahead as if feeding a giant's maw.

As the line crawled, Jessup's talked to quell his suffocating fear. "So you finally get your armor."

"Yep." Bullock looked off at nothing, but never lose sight of Jessup.

"Get to join the Red Brigade, SERGEANT."

"That's right, ex-sergeant."

"Because you turned me in!"

"Because I EARNED it."

Jessup tried to spit and failed. "You earned nothing, no more than Earth. This rock was a gift from the gods! Alien relics covered with dust, no one knows how they work, and Earth too scared to even inspect 'em and kill the golden goose!"

"One machine works just fine, and they got scientists workin' on the rest," Bullock dismissed. "Anyway, it ain't your problem."

"It WAS. We just didn't pay attention. They find a goddamn machine that turns out red guards, and the next thing you know, a shadow government's built an army of 'em. We wake up one morning and bingo! a new president's spouting, 'It's time to assume our rightful place in the galaxy!'"

"There goes your mouth again, getting your face in trouble." Bullock was nervous too, a little.

"Unbelievable the armor machine makes Earthers invincible. Just Earthers..."

"You're boring me."

Jessup stared at the nearest guard, clad crown to foot in armor red as crusted blood. Its surface was pebbled and dimpled like a scorpion's carapace and matched the wearer's shape, for each suit custom-grew on a lucky recipient, and would neither fit nor function for anyone else. Once fully grown, it locked into a hardness that few weapons could penetrate, yet flexed where a man needed to move, and could be pulled off and on like a rubber wetsuit -- in most cases. "A wedding of alien biotech, alien nanotech, and human physiology," experts explained, and no more.

Facing a dim branch corridor, a red guard screwed up his head lamp so a white blob danced on gray mist. Guards patted their rifles, fiddled with settings, muttered into mikes. Scorpion activity always picked up when prisoners were "processed."

"They smell blood and come running." Jessup spat. "It's not right, none of it..."

"It gives us someplace to stow loudmouths like you."

"They said prisoners were shipped out to terraform. Then that they were easing overpopulation... No one believed it."

The pair crept under the stone archway. Ahead a prisoner gibbered, and Jessup stumbled. Bullock eased him along in the light gravity, gently as guiding a child up stairs.

"Did you turn me in?" Jessup grated. "Tell a dying man."

Hanging onto Jessup's bicep, Bullock shrugged. "If I hadn't, someone else would've. You were talking insurrection."

"I wasn't organizing resistance! I was just asking questions!"

"Dumb."

Jessup closed his eyes, for he agreed, then looked around, mesmerized. Walls and floor undulated like frozen waves. Wild sigils that no one could interpret danced on the walls. In a sloping wall, two black chutes beckoned. Men were busy. Technicians supervised. Medicos took pulses and thumped chests. Army clerks marked clipboards. A dozen blood-spattered MPs labored with prisoners. A red guard stood at ease, rifle strapped across his chest.

"Six weeks," Bullock breathed, "and I'll be wearing the finest suit of armor that ever existed. Then we take on the Wild Black, where NOTHING can hurt us."

"Keep your head down," Jessup needled. It rankled the Red Guards that the neck joint, where the lumpy helmet curled to padded shoulders, was the one chink in the holy armor.

Fascinated and sick, Jessup watched an infantryman surrender his prisoner. The soldier himself then stripped, handed his dog tags to a clerk to be checked against the list, had a plastic face shield slipped over his head by a tech, was sat in the mouth of the right chute. The counterpart prisoner was "processed" by hard-handed MPs with stone faces. Men cried, screamed, begged, stood icy calm: it was all the same to them.

When the head tech signalled, the prisoner was hurled down the left chute while the soldier slid down the right chute.

A scream echoed from the left.

Jessup sagged. Bullock propped him. "Almost there. No sweat. Take it like a man."

Even anger had deserted the prisoner. "It doesn't matter, I guess. I'd never have lasted under the new laws. I talk too much. Even spitting on the sidewalk's a capital offense now."

"It's for the best. It's part of a larger plan," Bullock quoted. "Some reds think it's religious. Sacrifice a sheep and get a super-soldier. And every fourth or fifth man can't even shuck off the armor. They're bonded, the `chosen'. Soldiers for Earth's manifest destiny."

"It's sick," Jessup gagged. "You're sick, Bulldick."

The infantryman stiffened. "I hated it when you called me that! It made it easier to turn you in!"

"Shove it up your ass, Bulldick." Jessup's emotions collapsed years into seconds. "I hope you and your stinking fascist empire and your lobster-soldiers spin into a black hole. I hope you brave pricks go so far out you bump into something that eats you alive."

"We'll see." Bullock growled. They reached the head of the line, and shoved his prisoner at the MPs. "But you won't."

Without resisting, Jessup was kicked behind the knees while his manacles were twisted tight. Two MPs sheared off his clothes like shearing a sheep, then ripped off his dog tags because he was dead. Iron hands lugged him to the left chute and stripped his manacles. Whimpering despite his resolve, Jessup glimpsed Bullock, naked but for a face shield, sliding into the parallel hole. Then he was pitched in.

Jessup banged down hard and slid through blackness rank with sweat and fear. The chute was slick. He couldn't stop falling, couldn't grab or kick to slow down. The smell of blood, like sheared copper, stiffened as the space narrowed. Fetid air puffed in his face.

Tumbling, he saw something flicker below his feet. A silver wire, or a laser beam, or a scalpel.

The last thing Jessup ever saw.

He plunged through a hundred silver streaks and was sliced to ribbons.

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Bullock also tumbled and rolled in darkness. A blob of pitch or tar struck his skin. And burned. Then another. Hot jots like molten lead splashed his knee, his belly, his back, the plastic face shield. A hot fiery spray drenched him, and he grayed out from the pain...

Bullock's rump thumped on a cool rubber mattress. He lay in a irregular room distant from the first. Two technicians wearing gloves helped him rise and face a fogged mirror.

Bullock was dappled head to toe in pulsing raw redness like skinned muscle.

A tech took his face shield. "Welcome to the Red Guards. You get six weeks R&R to cool and harden."

The other said, "Then it's out to the fringes, to fame and glory."

Bullock grinned. "About time!"

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A year later, Bullock was back.

Busted to private again. Busted for goldbricking, for sucking up the wrong people, for cussing the wrong idiots. Busted to the crappiest detail in the army, herding sheep and soldiers into the armor machine in the winding stinking misting corridors.

And watching for scorpions, though he wasn't worried. He'd seen one blown down when he'd escorted Jessup and earned his armor. His armor. No matter what, they couldn't take his armor. So it was just a matter of time --

"SCORPION!" the headset crackled. An officer barked flankers to Checkpoint C, near the entry doors.

"HEY!" bawled another voice. "Another one! Point K! No, THREE!"

WHAT THE HELL? Bullock wondered. Scorpions never attacked in packs --

Gray mist boiled as four scorpions charged him in tandem. Snapping his rifle high, Bullock slammed massed plasma at the first one's leg joints. White fury sizzled across red chitin. He whirled and fired again, but a pincer snagged his leg and jerked so his bolt scoured dust off the ceiling. He kicked loose, bounced to his feet, and fired at scorpions all around. His headset snarled with screams and pleas -- red guards dying. Scorpions charged infantrymen and sheep, scattering the line but slashing and nipping only soldiers. A red guard convulsed as a stinger punctured his armor's neck joint.

A behemoth blind-sided Bullock, and his back slammed stone. A pincer crushed his rifle, spitting electricity and ozone. Bullock scrabbled for his pistol but lost it. Twin pincers bracketed his neck, banged him against the wall and snipped his comm wire. But the pincers didn't close, nor did the poisonous stingers stab.

In fact, the scorpion seemed to wait. For what? And since when were these bastards so SMART?

Bullock croaked for help and got no reply. The scorpion scuttled down the corridor with the man dangling like a mouse from a cat's maw. Where was it going?

To a smooth stretch of wall where Bullock's headlamp painted a white blob. The forked tail crooked over the soldier's head. A stinger scratched like a steel stylus.

HI BULLDICK.

"What?" Bullock chirped. "My God!"

The pincer scratched slowly. THE NEW ME.

"There's -- no way!" Bullock sobbed for breath. "Jessup? You got -- ripped to shreds!"

REASSEMBLED. HURT LIKE HELL.

"Jesus!"

YOU TOO.

"Me?"

FOUND PICTUREGRAPHS. MACHINES R CALLIBRATED FOR ALIENS. SHOULDN'T HURT. ARMOR SHOULD HARDEN IN MINUTES. YOU TURDS TOO BUSY CONQUERING UNIVERSE TO THINK.

"Think about --"

ARENA.

Bullock remembered the vast chamber with tiered seats, all hewed from stone.

ALIENS CAME HERE. SHOVED TWO GUYS DOWN CHUTE. ONE TURNS INTO SCORP, OTHER GETS ARMOR. FIGHT IN ARENA. OR MAYBE TRAINING TO PLAY WAR. NOT SURE.

"No! Nobody'd turn themself into a -- monster!"

HUMAN THINKING. THIS IS *ALIEN* PYSCHOLOGY. WHO KNOWS?

"But -- What're you --"

The scorpion Jessup clattered to a fresh wall. Granite crumbs rained as it scratched. ORGANIZING, LIKE TRIAL FRAMED ME. TALKING TO OTHER SCORPS.

"Oh, no..."

SOME SCORPS GO NUTS AND ATTACK YOU. SOME GO NUTS AND WE GOTTA KILL. BUT *THOUSANDS* DOWN THERE. *PISSSED*.

Bullock whimpered.

WE TRAIN. A SCORP ARMY. KILL YOU REDS, TAKE SHIP, GET MORE SHIPS, LOAD UP *EVERYBODY*. GO HOME, LAND ON TOP OF FASCIST HQ. BITE HEADS OFF, SUE FOR PEACE WITH UNDERGROUND.

"You can't --"

GOODBYE EMPIRE, scratched the stinger.

Pincers flexed around Bullock's neck. He kicked and beat his fists, like pounding iron bars. "Wait, Jessup! Listen! We can deal! Why bite someone's head off?"

The stinger etched the wall. THATS' BEST PART.

Jessup's pincers snipped off Bullock's head like a grape.

It tasted great.

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