F*ault*©

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This is an original short story and has
never appeared elsewhere.

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The President looked at the aerial photograph lying on the table before him. It showed an alien spacecraft resting in a deserted area. Dead bodies and broken weapons lay strewn around it.

Almost absent-mindedly, he pressed a button on the side of his table. A screen to his right lighted up and showed the visage of the Internal Security (IS) Chief of Staff.

"Report," ordered the President.

"Bad news, sir. Our mission is facing some unexpected challenges."

"I can see as much. I have the photo before me. Tell me what happened."

The Chief cleared his throat. "The nukes just didn't go off. The aliens seem to have the power to blanket out all nuclear reactions."

The President bent forward and to the right, putting his face close to the screen.

"Do you know what this means?"

"Yes," said the Chief. "This means that the aliens were not making idle threats. They can totally destroy us if they want. All they have to do is blanket the nuclear reactions within the sun, as they said they would do if we do not offer total surrender."

"Do you have any suggestions now?"

"Sir, I was thinking... Why don't we put Project Earthknight to use?"

The President's face lit-up and a tight smile appeared on his lips.

"Yeah. Great idea," he said eagerly. "Send the tin can against them. Either he will beat the aliens off or we will be rid of the armored idiot. Either way, we win."

"We did choose the wrong guy for the project, didn't we?" the Chief said ruefully.

The President slammed the tabletop with his fist.

"Who could have thought that the son of an ex-officer of IS would turn out to be a goddamn do-gooder ready to go against us - his creators - over what he calls his principles?"

"And the publicity we gave him didn't do any good either. He has become the people's favorite. Any overt action against him and you could say goodbye to your re-election."

"You telling me? I know it. I know it. But perhaps this is our chance. Let the aliens take care of him."

Early next morning, while it was just getting light, the IS aircar reached the house of Gary Vanguard. It was an old house, rambling and quaint. He had inherited it from his parents.

The aircar, after picking up Gary, lifted off the ground and sped away.

Gary quickly dressed up in his Earthknight armor, except for his helmet.

"Hey Moe! What's it this time?" the tall young man addressed the pilot.

"Call me Moe just once more and I will kill you," said the woman.

"Okay, okay, Morgana, then. Now tell me what is going on?"

"Aliens, of course," responded Morgana.

"Aliens? But there was nothing in the news."

"No, there wasn't," said Morgana. "Strange thing is that the aliens too seem to want to avoid publicity. They landed their spaceship in a remote, uninhabited spot. They radioed in an ultimatum demanding our unconditional surrender. And they did it using modulated frequency signals that could be received only on our equipment."

"Ultimatum demanding surrender? What did the ultimatum say?"

"Surrender unconditionally or we will destroy your sun."

Gary's face registered a mild shock. "Whoosh!" he said.

Morgana smiled. "As per tradition, the correct expression in these circumstances is 'sheesh'!" she said.

"But why us?" Gary asked. "Why not some other country?"

"Today America, tomorrow the world," said Morgana nonchalantly.

"Where's the spaceship supposed to be?"

"Near San Andreas."

"Now why does that name ring a bell?"

"Could it be because it is a well-known place in America?"

"Yeah! I got it now," Gary said, ignoring Morgana's comment. "There was an earthquake in that region last week. Was it caused by landing of the ship?"

"No. The ship landed two days after the quake," said Morgana.

Gary put on his helmet. The helmet covered his face changing it into a black, featureless oval. It was the only non-metallic part of the suit, made of bullet-proof plastic. Fully dressed, he looked like a black tin giant. The suit was smooth and displayed graceful curves except for the varied weaponry distributed all over it, and the back jets that gave it the ability to fly. It was strong and much lighter than it looked.

"So what's the situation now?" asked Earthknight.

"The aliens challenged us to attack them," Morgana said. "Our troops did. With nukes. And failed!"

Earthknight sat down on the large seat specially provided to accommodate his armor. "The nukes failed. And they are sending ME to face these aliens? What am I supposed to do?"

"The chief has an idea," Morgana said. "You are required to try to have yourself taken prisoner by the aliens. Then you are supposed to try to destroy the ship from the inside, where it may not be that invulnerable."

"How does the chief come up with these great ideas?"

"Look, there's the spaceship," Morgana pointed to the view panel. The aircar was hovering over the alien spacecraft. It was huge.

Earthknight moved towards the door of the aircar. "And what will you be doing while I risk my butt down there?"

"I will be hovering above, observing your progress." Morgana smiled sweetly.

Earthknight opened the door and jumped out. He smiled as he activated the armor jets and slowly floated down.

He landed near the alien ship and looked at the corpses spread around it.

"Don't these sons of bitches from space have anything better to do than come and try to conquer earth?" he said to the wind.

He sat down near a corpse.

"Who are you guys?" He asked the dead. "What are you doing here? What purpose did your deaths serve in the grand design?"

The helmet hid his face and his tears as well.

"Do you have any relatives? Wife, parents, brothers, sisters, children? What kind

of a family do you come from? Did you have good parents? Were you a good son to them?"

He lifted up the head of the corpse and looked carefully into the face. It seemed to be the face of a young man.

"What was your purpose in life? Did you fulfill your purpose?"

The corpse didn't answer. The dead rarely do.

Gary stood up. Enough of waxing philosophical, Gary dear, he admonished himself. Get along with your job.

He turned to the ship and attacked the hull with his laser. Minutes later, he shut the laser down.

"Didn't even smudge the paint job on that hull," he murmured. "Now all I got to do is wait for the welcoming committee to come out and capture me."

He waited.

"Will they capture me?"

He waited.

"Or kill me?"

He waited.

"Come on, get me." He gave the hull a kick.

An opening appeared on the top of the hull and something like a gigantic fly swatter emerged out of it.

The gigantic fly swatter swatted Earthknight and swished back inside the space-ship.

"Now what am I supposed to do?" thought Gary while he lay face down on the ground. "The damned aliens seem to have a sense of humor which is almost human."

He got up and reactivated his jets. Once again he was hovering over the spaceship, wondering what to do next. The aircar buzzed around him like an irritating fly.

He then saw something far off. It seemed to be some sort of a construction - big structure in the midst of nowhere. Curious, he extended the armor's telescopic sight. He could just make out the huge board over the gate. It read: SAN ANDREAS SEIS-MIC RESEARCH STATION. A few cars and trucks were parked in front of the gate.

San Andreas. Seismic research. The association of ideas brought back memories of his graduate years and his geology lessons. A worm of an idea burrowed its way up his subconscious. He flew towards the research station and landed just outside the gate.

The aircar landed behind him. The door of the aircar opened and Morgana stepped out.

"The fly swatter," she said and started laughing uncontrollably.

Earthknight glared at her but of course she could not see the glare behind his helmet.

They entered the gate.

Eventually, they found themselves sitting in an office. It was clean, sparsely furnished with a table and a few chairs. On one side of the table, face forward, sat a slightly plump, bespectacled, middle aged lady, who must have been quite attractive a decade or so ago. A plaque on the table proclaimed her to be Dr. Susan Reickert, Assistant Director. There was a window behind her but it was closed and the blinds had been pulled down. The only illumination was from an overhead light.

Dr. Reickert spoke. "Normally, I don't see people at this time of the day, but seems that a suit such as yours can do wonders when it comes to public relations."

"A good suit can take you places," agreed Gary, "not to mention an IS badge."

"In reply to your earlier question," Dr. Reickert said, "yes, it is possible to induce controlled earthquakes in regions along a fault line."

"How?" asked Morgana.

"To explain, I will have to give you a miniature lesson in geo-tectonics." Gary listened attentively as Dr. Reickert explained. "Earthquakes are caused when two land plates rub against each other along a fault line. By injecting specified quantities of fluids - like water - at strategic points along the fault line, the plates can be artificially made to start moving. This is how we can induce earthquakes of specific strengths in specific regions."

"Water can cause earthquakes?" Morgana was incredulous.

Dr. Reickert ignored Morgana. "Now tell me where you want this earthquake

induced, and why?"

   "I will show you." Earthknight turned to Morgana. "You stay here until we get back."

   "What have earthquakes got to do with fighting the aliens?" asked Morgana. "And I still don't believe you can cause earthquakes with water."

  It took some time for Dr. Reickert to get used to flying over the land in the arms of Earthknight, but once she did, she started enjoying it.

  "You know," she shouted over the whistling of the wind, "when I used to read those Superman comics and see Supes flying through the air with Lois Lane in his arms, I used to imagine myself in her place."

  "So how are you today, Lois?" said Gary.

  "Tops, Clarke."

  They were nearing the spaceship.

   "What I am going to show you, Dr. Rieckert," said Gary, "is top secret."

   "Susan," said Dr. Reickert.

   "What?"

   "Call me Susan."

   Gary laughed.

   "Why are you laughing?"

   "What a time to get informal."

  Far off in the horizon, just the tip of the alien spaceship could be seen.

  "Anyway, as I was saying, Susan," Gary continued, "what I am going to show you is top secret. I hope they don't throw me into a federal prison for letting the cat out of the bag."

   "What cat?"

  Gary pointed below. "That cat."

  There was shock and awe on Susan's face as she looked down and saw the spaceship and the dead bodies around it. "What is that?" She whispered.

  "It is an alien spaceship and they want to conquer earth, and…"

  "And what?"

"And the spaceship is invulnerable to all our weapons, as evidenced by the bodies of our dead soldiers around it."

Susan's face had turned white. The sight of the battle torn bodies was not pleasant.

"Mark the spot, Susan," said Gary. "This is the answer to your questions about where and why. Now I want an answer to my question."

"The answer is, yes."

They turned back.

Susan led him to what seemed to be a bustling computer lab. People were busy on various instruments and terminals. Many faces turned curiously toward the man dressed in a black armor. Quite a few of them seemed to recognize Earthknight and smiled and nodded as he passed by.

Susan grabbed an empty terminal and started tapping the keyboard. Gary watched from behind her chair as figures and shapes danced on the screen.

"Ah yes! Here we are," Susan declared happily. I have found the exact quantity of water that we need to inject and the exact spot where it should be done."

"Okay! Let's go," said Gary.

Earthknight and Susan once again stood outside the gate of the research station. Earthknight spread his arms wide to invite Susan to another flight.

"No," Susan declined with a slight regret on her face. "This time, we'll have to travel by road."

"Why?"

"We'll have to take the water tanker."

"Oh!"

Earthknight and Susan moved to a water tanker on wheels.

Susan got into the truck and started it. Earthknight flew and Morgana followed from air in the aircar.

They travelled for about quarter of an hour.

Susan stopped the truck one point and climbed down. Earthknight and Morgana landed close to her. The far away silhouette of the spaceship could be seen from this

spot.

"Here is a hole in the ground that leads to the fault," Susan pointed.

Gary dragged the hose from the tanker to the hole. Susan looked in the direction of the spaceship and started the pump. Morgana sat beside the hole, watching the water gushing into it. She turned and saw Gary still looking in the direction of the spaceship.

"Looking out for the fly swatter?" She grinned.

"That's enough water," Susan declared and stopped the pump. "Now let's make tracks."

Gary shut down the pump and started rolling the hose. Susan stopped him.

"Forget the tanker. There is not enough time to make our escape before it hits. Fly."

They flew-Susan in Earthknight's arms and Morgana in the aircar.

They hovered over the spaceship and they watched, waited.

The ground below seemed to vibrate.

"Thar she blows!" Gary shouted.

The vibrations grew into tremors. The ground below the spaceship started to split open. Slowly, inexorably, the crack in the ground widened. It widened enough to cause the spaceship to tilt slightly. It widened enough to make the spaceship sink halfway through the ground. It widened enough to swallow the spaceship whole. And then it began to narrow down.

The aliens were strong but not strong enough to fight earth itself.

"A resounding success, don't you think?" Earthknight said as he removed his helmet. He was back in the aircar with Morgana.

"Not at all a success," replied Morgana.

"What?"

"You did not follow the script," she said. "Your orders were to infiltrate, go aboard the ship somehow. And you failed. Now we don't even know what the aliens looked like and all their technology has been buried with them."

Suddenly, she burst into laughter. "And don't forget the fly swatter," she gasped.

Earthknight looked at her darkly.

"Some day I will either kill you or marry you," he said.

The end

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