

**They were indeed puny**  
A short story by CG Hatton

Marsh traced a finger over the readout – two months of power if he went down to absolute minimum standby. He looked at the red tracers on the chart; there was company approaching, sneaking across his fading screen with a signature that could have been theirs but was more likely to be them. Tiny labels matching speed with the tracers suggested an ETA of three and a half months.

He sat back in his chair and rubbed at his eyes.  
Something else would have to go.

The hangar was vast. Its tiled floor echoed gently with the soft footfalls of his boots scuffing in the dust. He was still thinking of a way to avoid shutting down the AI as he thumbed the switch and killed the only company he'd had in longer than he liked to remember. The silence afterwards was stifling.

He walked out into the courtyard and let the winds and warm sand blast away the cobwebs.  
Three and a half months wasn't so long.

The next day he checked out the status of the defence stations from the main boards. Two more tracking beams were missing, deteriorated beyond repair. Irritating but even if he'd caught them in time, he didn't have any spares left to take out to them.

He checked the mail – nothing – and sent out a routine message to whoever, encrypted and with a fuzzy tail to hide their source even though, from the tracers, they already knew he was here. He thought then about running the mainscan again, decided against it and shut down the boards. No point in maintaining silence but no point wasting power either.

Just before they reached orbit, Marsh ran the mainscan. He sat at the control station and rested his fingers on the keys for a long minute before initiating the search. The scan would show up worse than last time; he knew that and felt cold and very small and very human. Earth was long gone and the Inner Stations hadn't lasted much longer as they swept across this end of space.

Marsh delayed to check the mail, no harm in hoping, ran some patch-up maintenance on the failing systems and then hit the button. It didn't take long to show him that this was it. Final stand. Nothing from any of the other stations except a few brief, broken up transmissions recording the last moments. There were no life signs within range now, excepting of course the battle cruisers homing in on his base right now. He sat back and reached out into space and felt the nothing.

He was ready when they surrounded the compound.

He watched them close in on the last human outpost in the universe and, with calm deliberation and a demeanour belying the pounding in his chest, laid an array of rifles and side arms on the bench. Systems were shut down to bare minimum, local scan only, watching the figures approach from all directions. He didn't switch on any of the video links, didn't want to see them until they were here before him for real.

They spread out and closed in.

He snatched up a rifle as the far door opened cautiously – even now, at the end, they were still wary of this race that had refused to die without a fight. He let them enter, ducking their bony heads to pass through a doorway designed for bodies of a smaller scale than theirs. They straightened up and split off, stalking close to the walls on either side, not one of them taking their protruding eyes off him at any time.

He backed away slowly, keeping the rifle aimed steadily at the doorway. He could feel their presence all around now, hear the dry wheezing breath from all sides. They carried a

variety of arms, including rifles to match his own, he noted. What else had they plundered as superior to their own?

He stiffened as the last couple of the aliens entered. These two were different, subtle touches about their armour and a way of standing that marked them as somehow separate from the rest.

They stared at him and began to approach.

One of them made a sudden sound, dry and grating and probably what passed for a laugh. It prodded Marsh in the chest. He let the rifle drop as the alien took hold of the barrel and forced it easily to one side, laughing again as it leaned down to look him in the face. It smelled of decaying leaves.

Marsh took a step back, still holding the rifle. It said something then to its second-in-command, chattering high-pitched words that made no sense to the human. He could understand the tone of it though, deriding and mocking. He felt cold to the bone despite the warmth of the draught that was creeping through the open door.

It prodded him again, with more force this time, sending him stumbling backwards. He staggered upright and brought the rifle between them again.

“How does it feel,” boomed into his head, scratchy words translated somehow for him to understand, “hu-man, to be the last of your race!?” More raucous laughing from the one in front of him. The rest were silent. It stood back of a sudden and chattered again, violent and brusque, all laughter gone. In that split second, Marsh gathered up the last remnants of all human courage and took a lunge at the second-in-command that was lifting its rifle.

He caught the blast full in the chest and fell.

The echo of the shot faded.

Gartang laughed again. “They were indeed puny!” He looked about him, “Are we sure this is the very last?”

“Yes, my lord.” Barung sounded strangely hesitant.

Gartang looked at his underling and frowned. “Ha, send word back to command that we have succeeded.” He laughed again and kicked at the tiny body that lay spilling red into the dust. No one had moved. “Barung, send word!”

Barung shifted his weight and raised the rifle to aim at him. Gartang laughed viciously and moved to grab the barrel. There was movement to the side. A hand caught his wrist and forced him back.

“How does it feel . . .,” Barung began and took a step forward, nudged Gartang in the chest, again and slowly again.

Confusion mixed with anger. “What is this?”

“How does it feel to be the last of your race?”

This time there was no laughter.

Barung-Marsh took another step forward. Breathing was difficult in this air; it was taking him some time to adjust to the confines of the alien body but the presence of the others in the room was a comfort after so long alone. He could feel them now and they whispered silent welcomes to him. He avoided looking down.

“Every time . . .” he said to the alien, feeling the unfamiliar words catch in his parched throat, “every time that you killed one of us, we killed one of you. And now you’re the last. Tell me, how does it feel . . .?”

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