



Myra's Monster

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Category: Romance, Paranormal, Fantasy, Science Fiction

Description: The huge alien looms over me, all blue beautiful muscles and barely-leashed rage

He moves with the deadly grace of a stalking tiger.

His claws could shred my spacesuit in seconds.

I've invaded his spaceship, woken him from ten thousand years of sleep, and my employers are looting without mercy. He has every right to his fury.

But it's passion, not fear, that makes my heart race.

And if I can tell anything from his body language, he feels the same.

... I did mention he was HUGE, right?

Myra's Monster was first published in the Monsters Before Men anthology, though this version has minor changes. It's a short, fast-paced science fiction romance, with no cheating, no cliffhanger, and a happy ever after to make you smile.

Total Pages (Source): 10

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MYRA

The stale air had a hint of burned plastic and the airmaker made a worrying whine. The artificial gravity kept glitching, too. Myra's Joy was falling apart around me and if I didn't get some repairs made soon, she'd be my tomb as well as my ship.

Worst of all was the worrying silence from the engine room. Ever since I bought her, the Joy's engine had made an awful racket you could hear through the entire ship. I doubted it had suddenly fixed itself, so I had to assume it was on the verge of death.

"Well? Found anything yet?" Hess asked, flicking a knife across the cabin. Despite the faltering gravity, it struck the center of the target he'd set up. I shivered, wondering how close he was to using me as target practice.

Volkov growled something at his partner. I didn't speak Russian, but from the way he looked at me with his cold, shark-like eyes, I didn't think he'd taken my side. The huge, genemodded hulk of a mobster dwarfed his slender counterpart and he looked like he could crush my skull if I annoyed him enough.

Fortunately, I finally had something to report. Outside, in the darkness of space, hung my hope of salvation. The answer to all our prayers, wrapped in the dark between the stars.

"I've found a Tyradyn bioship," I said, trying to sound happier than I felt. "That's worth your time, right, Mr. Hess?"

Both mobsters were behind me in the cockpit before I finished speaking. Hess only had eyes for the viewport, scanning the black for his prize. To my surprise, Volkov rested a massive hand on my shoulder and gave it an encouraging squeeze.

“Good. Good find.” Despite his harsh accent, he sounded almost friendly. I repressed a shudder—there was still no hint of emotion in his dark eyes.

“Don’t congratulate her yet,” Hess said. “We don’t have a thing to show for this trip yet, right? Your debt’s not paid till we’ve got a prize worth selling.”

“The bounty alone?—”

Hess cut me off with a sharp chopping gesture. “We never cooperate with the Reps. Never. Anyway, they’d just destroy it, right? A criminal waste when there could be anything aboard.”

Which was exactly why the United Republics would destroy it. Tyradyn ruins had a history, like all the Ancient civilizations that had died out before humanity reached the stars. Several seats in the Republic senate were empty because of idiots bringing back civilization destroying ‘prizes’ from Ancient ruins.

Now it was my turn to be that idiot.

Don’t think like that. Doing my best not to show fear, I focused on the controls, centering the sensors on the bioship. Most discoveries are fine, lifesaving even. Better medicines, food crops that will grow in near vacuum...we might be about to revolutionize the galaxy.

I tried not to think about Dr. Danforth, who’d come back merged with an ancient war machine. I’d made a deal with Hess: he got this chance to loot Ancient technology from uncharted space. In exchange, he forgave my debts and paid for the Joy’s

repairs. It was too late to back out now.

The bioship hung in perpetual darkness. Out here among the comets, even the star it orbited was barely more than a distant point of light. I'd only found it because it was slightly warmer than its surroundings.

I hit the spotlights, bathing the bioship's surface in light. Or part of it, at least. I'd thought I had a grip on its size but seeing just how little of its hull I illuminated really drove home how much it dwarfed theJoy.

Cracked and rough, the bioship's hull was in remarkably good condition for a ship abandoned ten thousand years ago. Humans were still figuring out farming when the Tyradyn civilization ended in a war using technology we still didn't understand.

Hess whistled, low and long. Batting my hands from the controls, he swung the viewer across the mottled black and green hull, muttering to himself. I resisted the urge to wrest my ship back from him. It wouldn't be a healthy choice.

"Mr. Hess studied xenoarchaeology," Volkov said. "Excuse his impatience, he has always wanted to see more than sterilized Ancient ruins."

I nodded, unwilling to risk speaking. If I did, I'd probably ask something stupid like, 'Why didn't he just charter a ship, then?'

No good would come of that, especially since I knew the answer. This way, his ride was practically free—all it cost him was my debt and the cost of the repairs. Any pilot willing to raid an Ancient ship would do it for themselves, not get hired to do it for someone else.

"There! Look, an opening in the hull." Hess focused the viewer on a buckled stretch of the bioship and grinned like a maniac. "That's where we get in."

I clenched my teeth and didn't argue. No point insisting on a proper survey when the mob boss wants to get inside now. Maneuvering closer, I matched the gigantic ship's tumble and anchored the Joy above the hole Hess had spotted.

"There. I'll hold position until?—"

Volkov laughed, and Hess cut me off with a savage, cutting gesture. "No chance, sweetheart. Your autopilot can handle that while you come with us. Don't want you to 'accidentally' fly off and strand us here. Think of it as an adventure—how many people have set foot in an Ancient ship?"

Better question: how many survived and came back without some horrible contamination? Again, I swallowed the question. It wouldn't make a difference, and he had a point. Now that I was here, I wanted to see the inside of a Tyradyn ship.

Getting into my spacesuit was a chore. Designed to be put on with a crewmate's help, I struggled to get into it on my own. The mobsters would have been happy to help, but I chose the risk of spacing myself over stripping in front of them.

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While they dressed in their fancy, armored suits, I checked every inch of mine for scratches that might become tears. It was pointless—what was I going to do if I didn't like the look of it?—but the ritual made me feel safer. When I finally closed the helmet and turned on the suit's airmaker, I was ready to face the unknown.

The air in the suit was worse than theJoy's. It lacked the burned hydrocarbon smell, but it somehow tastedsticky. Doing my best to ignore that worrying sign, I joined the others in the airlock and looked out at the punctured hull of the ancient ship.

Hess made the jump across first, and his childlike shout of glee when his boots hit the alien surface almost endeared him to me. My first step onto the bioship's hull felt like sacrilege, like I was walking on someone's grave. To be fair, that was probably literally true, but the deaths had been too long ago to worryabout. At least, that's what I tried to tell myself as Volkov joined us and we made our way to the hull breach.

2

MONSTER

Out here on the frozen edge of interstellar space, nothing happens fast. Eons passed without change, and I slumbered in my cocoon, barely aware of time passing.

Over the long centuries, Home pulled herself back together. Scavenging material from drifting space dust was a slow process and gathering energy to do anything with it even slower. The race between the self-repair systems and entropy was a long one, and no winner had emerged yet.

Unexpectedly, something changed. Light! A feast of energy, pumped in at a rate Home had almost forgotten was possible. Thirsty, she drank in more than the distant starlight would provide in a century. Systems that hadn't seen activity in thousands of years sprang to life, spending carefully hoarded materials in a flurry of activity, and I drifted toward consciousness.

Waking up hurt. Of course it did—waking from longsleep always did. The ship's umbilicals pumped me full of life, my veins expanding as fluid filled through them for the first time in far too long. I shifted, testing my body and finding it ready for action. My limbs moved at my command, my claws slid out of their sheaths, and I breathed again.

Thin air, carrying a scent of rot, filled my lungs. Something else, too, a smell I did not recognize. The reason Home woke me.

Intruders.

3

MYRA

The first surprise greeted us as we pulled ourselves through the crack in the warship's hull. The moment I was inside, I had weight again. Artificial gravity turned inward into down and pulled me to the deck with a thud. If it had been any stronger, I'd have risked breaking something. As it was, I stumbled but kept my feet.

Hess landed harder, tumbling across the decking with a string of curses. Volkov surprised me by landing elegantly. His genemods hadn't just jacked up his strength, they'd given him superb reflexes too.

While Volkov lifted Hess to his feet, I looked up, cursing under my breath. We'd

dropped twenty feet or more from the opening and getting back up would be a challenge. Especially if we found something worth bringing back.

“How is the gravity still working?” Hess’s voice crackled with static, but that didn’t hide the awe in it.

Volkov shrugged. “More concerned about the air.”

He tapped the wrist readout of his suit, and I checked my own. Blinked, and checked again. We were in an atmosphere? I’d have assumed my battered old suit’s sensors were playing up, but his was brand new. We couldn’t both have the same malfunction.

It was too thin to breathe, but as I watched, the pressure gauge crept up. So did the temperature, though it was still below freezing.

“The ship is waking up,” Hess said, rubbing his hands together. “We should get a move on. If the power’s working, there has to be some amazing treasure in here.”

Great, the Ancient warship is still functioning, and that makes him happy to loot it? Not trusting myself to say anything, I shone my flashlight around, examining the room we’d landed in for anything that might satisfy his greed.

Nothing. We’d fallen into what might have once been a cargo hold. Hard to tell, since it was empty, the dark green deck stretching away in every direction. The rough surface seemed to be made of twisted roots or branches, woven together in a pattern that looked as though it was moving under my flashlight.

Nothing to take here. We’re going to have to go deeper. The idea made me shiver. This ‘wreck’ was too functional for my tastes, and every minute we spent in it just upped the chances of something going wrong. But Hess wasn’t going back empty-handed, and standing around worrying about it wouldn’t help anyone.

If I'm going to do something this stupid, I'd better commit to it. Unclipping the cutting laser from my belt, I tested it on the decking, watching it burn and part under the beam. The weave separated, edges bubbling as liquid boiled away.

I learned from my mistakes, and this time I anchored a line before stepping through the gap. A good thing too, because the next level down had stronger gravity, a good two-thirds of Earth Standard. The motor-winch on my belt whined under the strain, but it got me down safely. More importantly, the rope gave me a way back up.

Which was great news, because I felt like I'd stumbled into a treasure trove. This room seemed as vast as the hold above, though it was hard to be sure because of the jungle filling it.

Yes, a jungle. I know it sounds crazy, but there it was. Tree trunks stretched from floor to ceiling, branches forming the deck I'd just cut through. Other plants grew between those mighty columns. Bulbous fruit hung from vines, glowing a faint blue-white. Strange shadows flickered as they swung back and forth, adding a creepy, surreal air to the place.

I stared around in awe. This wasn't the fossilized remains of an ancient garden. These plants were living, growing, millennia after the fall of the civilization that planted them. And they were beautiful. Flowers bloomed, dark purples and royal blues catching the light of the fruit. Vines wound around the trunks, glittering wetly and seeming to mark a path through the forest.

Turning slowly, I let my suit's camera get a good long look at everything. Biotech companies would fall over themselves to pay for this stuff, and rich collectors would want those flowers. If I filled my sample bags with plants from this garden, I'd make a fortune. And it would leave more than enough for the mobsters to get rich off, too.

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My crazy gamble had paid off, and the mob wouldn't carve me up for my organs after all. For the first time in weeks, I let myself relax and breathe. Volkov and Hess followed me down the line as I took careful pictures of the first plant I wanted to harvest.

An awed silence filled our comms channel. The mobsters stared around the dark jungle, silence stretching until Volkov muttered something in Russian. I didn't need to speak the language to recognize a swear word when I heard one.

That broke the spell. Hess shook himself and spoke in the quiet, reverent tones more appropriate for a church.

"We're gonna be so fucking rich. Grab a sample of everything."

4

MONSTER

My cocoon parted as soon as the pressure outside was enough to breathe. Built to defend Home, my body functioned for extended periods without air, but there was no point in using up my reserves. Not when an unknown intruder walked the halls.

My neck frills fanned out, listening for the comforting brush of the colony's mindsong, and found only silence. I'd entered my cocoon listening to the painful melodies of the dying, but I emerged alone. The absence of my siblings burned like a star in my primary heart, a terrible pain no warrior should ever know. All my life, I'd been part of the colony-chorus, and now I sang alone.

Almost alone. Home herself still sang, though her song was weak, fragmented, distracted. What little remained of her focused on using the gift of light the intruders brought to repair herself and storing the excess.

She sang to the flowers and branches of the garden, shaping the flow of air and precious water to take advantage of the energy the creatures brought. She sang to the walls, weaving fresh material to plug the gaps in the hull and heal the damage the intruders caused as they explored.

I followed that branch of Home's song to find the attackers, hoping to prevent further damage. A painful, discordant note entered Home's voice as one plucked a flower, disrupting the delicate ecosystem of the garden. Eons of inactivity left it balanced on a fine edge, and the slightest push might kill it.

I surged forward, unwilling to wait for my body to fully awaken. Using my four lower limbs to run, I held the remaining two high, ready to rend and tear. I would kill these intruders and feed their bodies to Home. Their nutrients would help repair the damage they had done.

Had the colony been healthier, I'd have rushed them as soon as I arrived. But now I had to be careful—if I died, I would leave Home defenseless, and that was unthinkable. Knowing nothing of my targets, I needed information before charging in.

So, instead of heading straight for the lights, I climbed into the branches above the garden and looked down to examine the intruders.

Three of them walked among the plants, and they weren't any species I recognized. Four-limbed bipeds, each wrapped in tight insulating suits, they looked clumsy and uncoordinated as they moved. Clear helmets let me see their faces, pale and soft under the glass. One bared his teeth in an expression I couldn't read, radiating cruel

joy and jealousy as he plucked another flower to add to his already bulging bag. I tagged him the greatest threat to Home.

Another, by far the largest of the trio, kept a careful watch on the trees. I tagged him as the greatest threat to me.

But it was the third intruder who gave me pause. Her face, framed by curly red hair, was stunning for all its alien strangeness. There was something about her green eyes, the curves that her primitive spacesuit hugged so tightly, that made my hearts blaze with an emotion other than rage.

Unlike the others, she walked with care for the garden she moved through. When she stopped to pick a plant, she examined it carefully first, minimizing the harm she did to surrounding life. She acted with respect for the place she found herself.

I didn't know what to make of that, but there was no excuse for harming Home. Instinct told me to slay all three of them, yet I hesitated. Curious, I spread my frills to listen to the intruders' mindsongs.

5

MYRA

The forest stretched on in all directions, dark and glorious and beautiful. It was like being in a place of worship, some gigantic alien cathedral of plants. One more impressive than anything humans had built.

Ten thousand years of neglect, and still it functioned. The Tyradyn awed me, and I understood why the authorities didn't want people poking around in their ruins. If they could do this, what other miracles had they achieved?

I won't figure that out, I'm no xenoarcheologist. All I need is something worth selling, and I can go. The thought felt almost sacrilegious. Stealing from this place was too close to tomb robbery.

Not that Hess and Volkov cared. The pair of them took anything that looked interesting and did so without a care for the damage they did. I winced as Volkov snapped a branch off a tree, and Hess used a laser cutter to sever a length of vine.

Doing my best to do as little damage as possible, I pushed past the branches of a pitch-black miniature tree and stretched up for a glowing fruit. As I closed my fingers on it, a strange sensation washed over me. Like curiosity, but not my curiosity. Which made no sense.

I looked around, shining my light into the darkness, and saw nothing. But I didn't know what I was looking for, and the weird shadows of the jungle could have hidden anything.

There wasn't the time to worry about it. I plucked the fruit and dropped it into a sample bag. Behind me, the mobsters talked in Russian as they cut their own samples.

If I had something to worry about, I told myself, it was them.

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MONSTER

The intruders spoke crudely, forming sounds to carry meaning rather than thinking to each other. The noises were meaningless to me, of course, but I was not so limited. Spreading my frills, I listened to the patterns of their minds rather than the words they spoke.

The two males radiated anger, suspicion, hunger. Not hunger for food, water, or oxygen. Those I would have understood and sympathized with. Their hungers were never-ending pits they would shovel resources into, no matter the cost to anyone else.

They didn't even trust each other. Whatever alliance bound them was nothing like the connection I had shared with Home and the rest of my kin. Suspicion went both ways, and eventually they'd end up hunting each other. Even in this den of plenty, I caught each of them wondering whether they'd profit more if the other died here.

The female was different. Her strongest feelings were wonder and fear and guilt. As I watched, she plucked a fruit with great care. Doing her best not to damage anything else, she tucked it into a pouch for safekeeping. Awe filled her mind, song, drowning out all other emotions and leaving her defenseless while the other two watched for danger with paranoid intensity.

There was something beautiful about the shape of her mind. Something quite unlike her companions, a warmth and openness which they lacked. These were not members of the same Hive, as difficult as that was for me to grasp, and the female didn't fit with the males even slightly.

I couldn't afford to wait until I understood. Home was suffering, and the damage got worse with every passing moment. The males carved pieces out of everything they passed, uncaring about the harm they did.

An attack without knowing more would be foolish, but I dared not wait. Learning about my foes would require me to take a risk.

I spread my frills fully, a dangerous move in the presence of strangers. It left me vulnerable to both psychic and physical attacks, the delicate frills thin and vulnerable.

But it let me peer deeper into the strange, closed-off minds of my prey. Feelings resolved into thoughts and I lost myself in the alien minds.

... rich, I'm going to be so fucking rich... do I need to share?

... this is so beautiful... what were the people who built it like?

... kill the bitch, take her ship, Volkov can fly it... keep all this for ourselves...

The female didn't think about the males at all, lost in wonder at the garden's beauty. But the males thought about her, and it wasn't pleasant. Unexpected anger blossomed in me as they considered killing her. It made no sense. They were all intruders. Why would I care if they murdered each other?

Home's quiet, fading mind song gave me no answers, but neither did she condemn my feelings. I had to make my decision here, and the smaller male prompted me. He drew something from his belt, a tool I didn't recognize. I didn't need to. His thoughts betrayed him—it was a weapon, and he raised it toward the female with a smug rush of superiority, as though murdering one of his companions was a moment of pride for him.

MYRA

The creature came out of nowhere. One second, we were alone in the creepy garden of wonders. The next, a monster rushed down the trunk of the tree, four long limbs gripping the bark and two more reaching out with razor-sharp claws extended to tear and slice.

I squeaked in alarm and leaped backward, tripping over a tangled vine and falling on my ass. A bolt of light shot overhead, scorching into a black tree as Hess tracked his laser pistol towards the sapphire-blue carapace of the attacker.

That's a fast draw,I thought, a facade of calm over the raging torrent of panic that filled my mind. The creature tore past me, moving faster than anything that size had a right to, dodging to the side as Hess tried to bring the laser to bear.

With reflexes as impressive as its speed, the Tyradyn creature ducked under the blinding laser beam and crashed into Hess. The mobster screamed as he bounced off a tree and landed in an ungainly tumble, dropping his pistol. The creature followed close behind him, claws out, and I thought that was the end of Hess.

I hadn't taken Volkov into account, though. The giant smashed into the Tyradyn's side with enough force to drive it away from Hess, and the two of them slammed into a tree with bone-cracking force.

Volkov rebounded, just avoiding a slashing claw that would have opened his stomach. Ducking under a second claw, he drove a punch into the creature's belly. With his augmented strength and speed, I wondered if he had a chance.

Not the time to take bets,I told myself, scrambling to my feet and looking for a way

out. Volkov and Hess were welcome to fight this monster, but I wanted to put a door between me and it. Preferably a door and several light years.

Hess's shot had carved a smoldering line through the plants ahead of me, and seeing it made me wince. If I hadn't fallen, the beam would have sliced through my head.

No wonder he'd been so quick on the draw. He'd already been aiming at me, which meant I needed a door between us, too. I scrambled through the undergrowth, trying to circle toward the rope while the mobsters and the monster fought it out.

A line of red light burned past me, slicing through the colorful flowers ahead and making me swear as I ducked behind a tree. Hess had recovered his pistol and yep, he was shooting at me rather than the Tyradyn monster.

It wasn't comforting news, but at least now I knew.

"Where d'you think you're going?" His shout carried a mix of panic and anger. "Going to abandon us to this thing? I'll kill you first."

"We've got to get out of here," I said. Reasoning with Hess wasn't much of a plan, but I didn't have a better idea. "Come on, we've got plenty of samples. Let's go."

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No answer, but no laser fire either. I took that as a sign Hess might go for it. That would have to do, because we didn't have time to argue.

Cautiously, I popped my head up from behind my tree trunk cover. Hess was right there, laser pistol aimed between my eyes, a savage grin on his face. I wasn't even surprised. Yeah, that's predictable. Disappointing, but predictable.

His finger tightened on the trigger, and everything slowed down. It was like we were both moving through treacle, and I was going to watch myself die in slow motion. There wasn't time to throw myself back into cover, or to do anything at all.

Not for me, anyway. While everything else moved at a crawl, the Tyradyn beast moved as fast as ever, appearing from nowhere to grab Hess's gun arm and pull. Hess screamed as his arm came off at the shoulder with a wet ripping sound.

The screams cut off when the beast's claw mercifully sliced open Hess's neck. He dropped like a sack of potatoes, and time snapped back to normal.

Volkov's fist smashed into the back of the creature's head, taking advantage of its distraction. It staggered back and he followed, hammering brutal blows into its carapace.

I looked around for some way to help, though I wasn't sure which of them I'd rescue from the other. Volkov was human, at least, but his boss had tried to shoot me twice. And both times, the beast had saved my life.

Before I solved that dilemma, the Tyradyn did it for me. Rearing up on its hind legs,

it lifted its middle limbs as another pair of arms, catching Volkov by surprise. The big man's genemodded reflexes were fast enough to dodge the monster's grapple, but that left him open to a punch that sent him flying.

He tried to recover, bouncing back to his feet as soon as he hit the ground. It wasn't enough—the Tyradyn's claws slashed across his torso and blood sprayed everywhere as he collapsed.

I'd watched the exchange frozen in terror, only snapping out of it when Volkov collapsed. That broke my paralysis and I ran for the rope. Not that I had a hope in hell of outdistancing the monster, but I had to try.

I made it perhaps five steps before it bounded into my path. Heart pounding, I skidded to a halt and looked up at it, shuddering.

Hess's laser hadn't saved him. Volkov's genemods hadn't done him any good. Now here I stood without either, face to face with a ten-thousand-year-old alien war machine.

It was beautiful, in the same strange and alien way the forest was. Shiny blue carapace covered it in articulated plates, each piece perfectly fitting to the next, letting the creature move with the graceful elegance of a tiger. Purple markings down its flanks and long limbs might have been writing or body art. Its rear legs were thick and powerful, middle legs slender and dexterous, and its arms precise and deadly.

But it was the eyes that caught me. Three pairs of huge purple orbs, an orange circle like fire around each pitch-black pupil, met my gaze with an intensity that made my breath catch. Those eyes were stunning, and I couldn't look away.

They were expressive too. Or perhaps I was fooling myself into thinking that the monster looked lonely? But I couldn't shake the impression. This creature was all

alone, and the feeling was like an ache in my soul.

My heart beat loud in my ears, reminding me I was still alive. My breathing sounded deafening in my helmet, my pulse raced, and my skin tingled all over. Death loomed over me, and all I could do was wait for the end.

But the monster didn't attack. Cocking its head to one side quizzically, it lowered a hand to tap claws on my helmet's visor.

It (he? Somehow, I was sure he was male) leaned in, jaws opening wide. His teeth gleamed, a row of vicious fangs ending in needle points. This was a killing machine, built or grown for war, and I suddenly had a lot more sympathy for the politicians who'd banned salvage of Ancient technology.

It was a pity, because he was also hotter than I could have imagined. Perhaps it was the fight-or-flight reaction flooding my system, but the huge, powerful body of the monster before me called to me.

"... hello?" I knew he wouldn't hear me through my helmet. And even if he did, he wouldn't understand. I had to try. "Please don't kill me?"

Those eyes, the piercing, impenetrable gaze, pinned me in place. I wouldn't have moved even if he'd let go of me. His sorrowful orbs transfixed me.

With a loud snap, frills opened up around his neck, framing his head with a glittering rainbow circle that wavered back and forth. The effect was mesmerizing, and somehow, I heard words as I watched the colors flow.

No, not heard. The words were thoughts, but not in my own voice. Calm/peace/safety.

They weren't quite words, but to my surprise, I felt safer. My breathing slowed from

panicked gasps and something else formed in my mind. A question.

Why other humans attack you? Are you dangerous?

“No,” I answered quickly, shaking my head for emphasis and hoping I wasn’t imagining things. “Nope, they’re just assholes. Thank you for saving me from them! I’m not here to cause any trouble, I didn’t realize there was anyone alive here, I’ll just be going.”

Myra will stay. The command wasn’t needed. Against his strength and speed, escape was impossible, and if he wasn’t planning on killing me, I didn’t want to run off. But I wondered how he knew my name. He could project thoughts into my mind. Did that mean...?

Are you reading my mind? I thought my question at him as best I could. It was an embarrassing question, but I comforted myself with the knowledge that if I was wrong, he’d never know I’d asked.

Yes/affirmative/listening. I shivered, trying not to show my surprise at being right. Pointless—I felt a strange, dry amusement at the edge of my mind, reminding me that he heard my thoughts. That only made things worse, and a blush spread over my cheeks.

The amusement faded into concern. Was the telepathic killing machine worried about me?

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Yes. Concern/confusion. Myra is clever, has a beautiful song. Why is it bad to listen?

God, now my cheeks burned red. I tried to keep my mind focused on staying alive. The last thing I wanted was the creature knowing how attractive I found him.

Shit. Fuck.

I'm giving myself away, aren't I?

To my relief, he didn't reply. But he didn't need to. Not thinking about how hot he was would have been impossible, and he'd confirmed he was reading my thoughts. I did my best to find something else to focus on before I started thinking about how his carapace would feel against my naked skin or what his cock would be like.

Shit!

"What's your name?" I blurted the question out, the first thing that came to mind. The only answer was a confused mess of emotions with no words. "You don't have one? Oh. You don't have one that fits in sound, do you? Why would a telepath need a name, right?"

Yes/correct/am. The medley of emotions played out again, slowly, like he was enunciating his name. Fear and shock, anger and pride, joy of accomplishment and gratitude for rescue, all mixed. It fit, I realized, looking up at the towering killing machine. When his kin were afraid and angry, he would be there for them. His pride in saving his family, his joy at defending his home, their gratitude, it all mixed into a bundle that was quintessentially him.

A pity I can't emote on command. Though I've got no trouble with the gratitude after he saved me from Hess and Volkov.

But the rest? Yeah, no, the closest I got was grateful/scared/admiring/kinda-turned-on, which wasn't even close. As soon as I realized what I was broadcasting, I added a polio to the mix, and he sent amused tolerance back at me.

"I think I need a name for you," I said, trying to break the cycle. "If you're okay with that? I can call you..."

I trailed off there, my embarrassment mixing with his projected anticipation. The huge and deadly alien waited patiently as I struggled for focus. Again, his amusement pressed at the edge of my thoughts, amusement tinged with something else.

Something hungry and eager. I shook my head, trying to clear it.

The fear was still there, but it was the breathless, exciting fear of an adventure, not the more immediate terror of my death. I'd had quite enough of that from Hess and Volkov, so the difference was obvious.

"Fearjoyangergrateful is a bit of a mouthful," I said aloud, trying my best to summarize the emotions that made up his psychic 'name' and rejecting the result as soon as I spoke it. "How about, uh, Tyradyn? No, Tyr is better. Right?"

I didn't know how much he understood, or how he'd react. It would be like someone calling me 'Human' or maybe 'Hue' because they couldn't pronounce my name. He stared at me, six eyes blinking in pairs, until he finally nodded.

Tyr it is.

MONSTER

I'd never had a name. Not in the way Myra meant. All of my kin were extensions of Home, and we knew each other by our parts in the chorus of Home's mindsong. If a gardener needed a warrior, it did not matter whether they got me or another.

Deep sadness filled me at the realization that would never happen again. It was just me and Home now, and Home's song was fading. Soon, I would be alone.

No member of the Hive is alone. It's a contradiction, an impossibility. Alone and dead were almost identical concepts to us, and one would follow the other closely.

The possibility of moving to another colony had never occurred to me. Before meeting Myra, I wouldn't have wanted to—the death of the colony and my death were naturally linked. Me outliving Home was as meaningless an idea as my arm outliving me.

But now, things were different. Myra's mindsong, singular and self-contained, called to me. She offered me a name, a place that was my own. A place in the universe that included her.

Unlike the other humans, Myra's mind filled with wonder at Home's beauty. And her complex feelings toward me woke an eager desire in my hearts.

It wasn't just her mind that appealed to me. Her body, wrapped in skintight and vacuum-proof material, looked deliciously soft and invitingly curved. I wanted to see her without that covering, to bare her skin to mine. To hear her mind awaken to my touch and watch her body flourish.

Our minds resonated, her fear/desire/excitement echoing my need/hunger/lust, each of us inflaming the other as we stood, looking into each other's eyes. She had only

two, bright green and piercing, set in a round face framed by red hair. Her skin, pale aside from the flush spreading across her cheeks, gave a beautiful contrast to the full, red splendor of her lips.

I nodded, accepting the name 'Tyr' she gave me. Accepting that and more. Myra shivered, tongue darting out to wet her lips, mixed feelings clarifying into an invitation.

One I would not refuse.

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MYRA

Tyr's claws tore through my spacesuit like a plasma torch through tinfoil. The first cut let in freezing air and made me gasp, the second tore away the whole front panel. Panic filled me as the air from my suit emptied into the garden, erupting from the rips in an icy fog. The suit's alarm screamed for a moment, then fell silent as the alien pulled off my helmet and cast it aside.

With effortless precision, Tyr carved the clothes from my body. Despite his speed, he didn't leave so much as a scratch on my skin. It took him less than five seconds to strip me naked.

I stared up into his eyes, my panic subsiding. This wasn't an attack. It was an answer to my secret longing.

Desire radiated from Tyr, an urgent need reflecting my own. How had I hoped to hide this from a telepath? Stupid of me to try, and doubly so when I found him sharing my feelings.

Some, at least. Lust and curiosity, yes, but there wasn't a hint of fear in his heart. Tyr's confidence was like a rock, anchoring us both as his clawed fingers caressed and explored me.

Am I going crazy? I asked myself, heart racing and pulse pounding in my ears. He's a Tyradyn war machine, not a human. Does he even have a dick?

Whatever the answer, I couldn't deny that he got me fired up in a way no human ever

had. I needed this. I neededhim.

As soon as I admitted that to myself, Tyr grabbed me and lifted me against him. His hard carapace surprised me with its heat and a strange, coarse texture that drove my body wild. He brought his mouth down to mine, tongue pushing between my lips in a powerful kiss, probing and urgent. Long, flexible, rough, it felt nothing like a human tongue.

It was better in every way.

I moaned around him, body shaking as the weird texture invaded my mouth and pulsed.

Mine. The word formed in my mind as all other thoughts fled. My human.

I wanted to object, to fight, to resist. Well, no. That's not really true. I should have wanted that, but my body was already a melting puddle of desire, and my mind overwhelmed by the waves of powerful sensation crashing through me.

Instead of arguing, I groaned and pulled him closer. If I'm doing this, I'm doing it all the way, I thought.

My alien monster's hard carapace was strange against my skin. It looked smooth, but it was rough to the touch and felt so, so good. My nipples hardened against him, and my pussy throbbed with need.

Strong hands gripped my hips, lifting me against my monster. It was only when more hands traced their way down my back, sharp talons scratching deliciously, that I looked down.

Tyr stood on his hind legs, his forelegs doubling as powerful arms to lift me up. That

left him free to explore my body with his clawed hands, scratching across my breasts with just enough pressure for his talons to bite. The pain blended with pleasure, and I moaned as he withdrew his tongue from my mouth.

Amusement filtered through the mind link between us, and a blush spread down my body. With jaws capable of crunching through bones, he planted delicate nibbles on my shoulder, my neck. Lifting me higher, he left bite marks across my breasts, then down across my stomach. He kept lifting until his mouth reached my pussy and stopped.

I groaned and grabbed his head, trying to pull him to me. My fear of him vanished under the aching need he'd awakened, and I no longer cared if he knew it.

But he didn't shift. It would have been easier to move a statue. Three pairs of intense eyes stared at me as I panted with need, and the multicolored frill around his neck vibrated.

Submit. You are mine. Yes/No?

"Oh, fuck you," I shouted, frustrated need overwhelming me. "Yes, god dammit, yes."

I didn't get time to say more. He pulled me to him, his flexible tongue parting the folds of my sex and sending a shudder through my body. Its weird texture made me squirm and squeal as he devoured me hungrily.

Needle-sharp teeth scraped across my sensitive skin, making me arch my back and cry out. That long, flexible, amazing tongue lapped at my lower lips, circled my clit, pushed into me. He was exploring, discovering my human anatomy for the first time, and doing a fucking amazing job of it.

My breathing ragged, I panted for oxygen in the thin, frozen air. His clawed hands grabbed my breasts, tweaking and scratching, driving me closer and closer to the brink of a monumental orgasm. His lower, stronger hands held my hips motionless no matter how hard I tried to struggle.

The alien menace wouldn't let me off that easily. As I reached the ragged edge of my endurance, he withdrew his magical tongue and lowered me to a bed of soft black grass. I bit down on an urge to beg him for more, my body screaming with need.

Did it matter, when he was in my thoughts? Probably not, but it was the one shred of dignity I had left. Nope. I would stick to my guns.

My fierce determination was immediately undermined as my alien lover reared up over me. Chitinous armor plates parted on Tyr's abdomen, revealing an appendage that made me pale and gasp.

His cock, if that's what it was, looked like nothing on Earth. It was as long as my arm, thick bulbs swelled along its length. A strange, swirling texture of red glowed under midnight-black skin. Like lava flowing under an obsidian surface, I thought, mesmerized.

It ended in a bulge larger than the rest, flared and terrifying. I whimpered at the sight. What would that be like inside me? His size was terrifying, and I had no desire to be ripped apart.

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The waves of his desire pounded through my mind, a hungry need that he wouldn't easily sate. My body wanted him as badly, but I didn't let it override my survival instincts. I scrabbled backward, babbling as I retreated.

“You can't be serious, that thing will kill me. Please!”

No fear. No death. Only joy.

Was that supposed to be reassuring? I shuddered, but it wasn't entirely terror shaking me. My body, traitor that it was, wanted to experience him no matter the cost.

With powerful hands, Tyr pulled me back to him and parted my legs. The head of his cock pressed against my wet, eager pussy, and a wave of alien satisfaction washed over me.

I braced for what I half-expected to be my death by fucking. And damn me if I didn't think it would be worth it.

His upper hands closed on my wrists, pulling my arms over my head and pinning me down, helpless and exposed. My breathing quickened, chest heaving, as he lowered his face to me, long tongue extending to trace a pattern across my breasts. Wherever it touched, my skin tingled, sensations running through me.

When he licked my nipples, it was enough to make me cry out. Pleasure shot through my nervous system like lightning.

That was the moment he thrust, strong and slow. His giant cock stretched me, the

pain mingling with pleasure, a whirlwind of sensations making me scream up at the watching jungle of alien plants.

Endorphins flooded my system as he pushed that first massive bulge into me. It was hot, burning hot, and my body welcomed it. But it was so wide, and his slow thrust stretched me further than ever before. I whimpered and bit my lip at the pain, reflexively pulling myself away.

He didn't let me move, not an inch. And my helplessness sent another flood of wicked desire through me. I wanted this. My body ached for it, needed it.

God, I'm so fucked up. I squeezed my eyes shut, letting the feelings overwhelm me and trying to relax. To let him take me. He pressed harder, and my slick pussy stretched a little further, letting him in. The bulbous head pulsed as it pushed inside, and I fell over the edge into an orgasm like nothing I'd ever experienced.

It hurt, yes, but the pleasure was more than worth it. My body shook, my heart raced, and the world dissolved around me. Everything collapsed in on itself, leaving just me and the Tyradyn warrior, our minds and bodies pressed together until we might have been one flesh and one soul.

Nothing in my life had prepared me for this, and I don't know how long I was lost in it before the feeling shattered, dropping me back into the real world.

My lover pushed forward, and the second bulge of his cock pressed into me. I threw my head back and screamed again, but this time it was pure pleasure.

My alien lover's mind battered against mine as he thrust deeper, and unearthly emotions filled my soul. Some I could translate—savage joy, fierce desire, eager need. Others were a mystery to me, but all gave me a taste of Tyr's heart.

I thrashed in his grip, struggling as he pushed deeper, deeper, deeper. His tongue explored my body, rasping over my nipples as I shook under him, and I lost track of how many times he pushed me into an orgasm. Each one was powerful enough to leave me a whimpering mess, but never enough for him.

Pulses ran up and down his cock as he buried himself in me, deeper than I'd ever imagined I could take. Words lost, I thrashed under him, struggling to reach him, to touch him.

He lowered his head, and I lunged up, sinking my teeth into the softer tissue of his neck. The effect was incredible. He tensed, a vibration running through his blue-carapaced body. Three pairs of eyes went wide, and the pulses along his cock sped up, his entire member swelling inside me.

The pressure from his mind changed too, losing all subtlety and becoming a tsunami of pleasure that swept us both away. As I tipped back over the edge into the wildest orgasm of my life, he bit down on my shoulder, sharp teeth digging into my skin and claiming me.

We came together in that moment, both our bodies shuddering as he emptied himself into me.

10

MONSTER

I'd never heard a mindsong like Myra's after our mating. Her mind awash with pleasure, she held me close and accepted me in a way no alien should be able to. Was she some distant kin, a descendent of the Hive?

No. No connection. Home was certain, which meant I was too. Home wouldn't make

a mistake about that.

But my frills twitched with the thrill of contact, of connection to a mate. If her species wasn't part of the Hive, how was that possible?

It didn't matter. She was mine, I was hers, and what more could the universe offer? Stroking her warm, smooth, soft skin, I marveled at how vulnerable she was without her suit. I both admired her bravery and despaired of her foolishness at venturing into space with so little protection.

I will keep her safe, I promised myself. Watching her chest rise and fall, I swore I would never let her come to harm. I just didn't know how.

The human could not share Home with me, because Home was dying. Her mindsong faded and stuttered, and in it I heard the truth I'd been avoiding. Home burned carefully gathered resources with reckless abandon to keep the Garden alive for me and Myra. Long-hoarded energy radiated out into nothingness, and ice crept up her veins.

Home's life faded faster than I'd imagined as she threw everything into keeping Myra alive. A deep urgency crept into her thoughts, pushing me to get her to her ship, but I hesitated. How could I abandon Home?

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“What’s wrong?” Myra’s words vibrated in the air, and I plucked their meaning from her mind. Our mating had sealed us closer together, close enough that she felt my distress and I understood her speech without effort.

Home is dying. She is sacrificing herself for me. Myra tensed against me, holding me close, and the warm vibrations of her breathing soothed the pain. She cared. She didn’t understand, but she still cared.

“That’s awful,” she said. Pausing, she looked around the garden. I wondered what she saw with her human eyes. “Is there anything we can do?”

The question hung in the air for a moment as I thought. The problem was too big, and Home was no help. She sank back into her fading song, content that she had saved me.

“There has to be something,” Myra insisted as the silence stretched. “Home...you mean the ship’s AI, right? We can save that, pull out the computer and bring it somewhere else?”

The strange concepts battered my brain, giving me a headache as I forced them into my frame of reference. Home is the ship. Home is everything here. I am Home, this tree is Home. No one part is more Home than any other.

Myra sat up, her mind churning through ideas that I could not grasp. I stroked her back and waited, hoping her alien mind would find some possibility I’d overlooked.

“There has to be something. If not Home, then a part of her. This ship is biotech,

right? Is there, I don't know, a seed? A cutting we can plant somewhere?"

Fierce, angry at the injustice of the universe, unwilling to allow entropy to triumph. Given the choice, Myra would stay here until she solved the problem—or died trying.

No. I responded without thinking. We had little enough time and wasting it on forlorn hopes would save no one. But I could not keep the truth from Myra. A moment later, I amended my answer. I do not know. Home has always been. How she grew is a mystery.

Myra's mind flickered, fast and beautiful, her breath frosting in the cooling air. "You said every part of Home is Home, right? And you're part of Home? So...you're a cutting. Sort of. In a way. We can try to regrow her from you, anyway."

The idea tasted bizarre and seemed unlikely. But it wasn't impossible, and that put it above any other options I had. Perhaps it was a foolish hope, but it was all I had—and to grasp it, we had to survive.

Home was failing. I felt it all around us—air leaking out into space, lights dimming, water reservoirs freezing over. The light from the human's spacecraft had never been enough to sustain Home, and soon she'd be back to drifting in the endless night. Only this time, she wouldn't wake up.

Ignoring my human mate's protests, I threw her over my shoulder and leaped into motion. As I carried her through the Garden, I saw frost forming on the leaves and flowers, and Myra shivered violently in my arms. The temperature dropped fast, already below the freezing point of water, heading for the freezing point of carbon dioxide. I didn't know what temperature would kill a human, but we were obviously plunging below it.

Ahead, the wall vines uncurled from each other, letting in bright light from Myra's

ship. The path to the human vessel was open, but the crossing was airless and frozen. Home had concentrated on giving us time in our garden idyll and sacrificed everything else.

Locked in Myra's embrace, lost in claiming my mate, I hadn't noticed how far things had gone. Now we had an abyss of vacuum to cross, one that would kill my fragile mate if I made a single misstep.

11

MYRA

The lights faded around us as Tyr carried me through his dying ship. I clung to him for dear life, my eyes squeezed shut and curses falling from my lips. The speed a Tyradyn warrior could manage on four legs was terrifying.

Closing my eyes also spared me the sight of the ship dying around us. Part of me insisted that there had to be a way to save it, but that was stupid. It was far more advanced than anything I'd worked on, and thousands of years old. If a Tyradyn didn't know how to save it, and it didn't know how to save itself, then what use would I be?

Saving Tyr would have to do. Together, we could try to grow a new ship, and even if we failed, we'd have each other. Better that than dying here in a futile attempt at saving this ship.

I was still trying to convince myself of that when Tyr slammed to a stop. Opening my eyes, I was half-blinded by the shaft of light we stood in. Overhead, Myra's Joyhung in the darkness, her spotlight illuminating the surface of the Tyradyn ship and shining through the breach in the inner hull. All that separated us from the safety of my ship was about twenty yards of hard vacuum.

“Now don’t you wish you’d given me a chance to undress rather than tearing my suit off?”

No. Take too long. Needed you naked. The voice in my head sounded smug, but I felt worry leaking around that. New problem, new solution. You are safe.

I glanced around at the freezing darkness, goosebumps rising on my skin as heat escaped into space. “You could have fooled me, Tyr.”

We are safe. Bound together. Tyr will not allow harm to come to Myra.

Worry clouded his words, but so did determination. He drew himself back, all four legs bracing, and I realized what he was doing just in time to scream as he leaped.

He wrapped around me like an armadillo, his segmented carapace forming an airtight ball with me at the center. Bruising pressure crushed the air from my lungs in the tiny space, but the vacuum didn’t reach me. It felt as though we floated across the void for an eternity, though it couldn’t have been longer than a few seconds before we hit something.

That had better be the Joy, I thought. If Tyr missed his mark, I’d be dead in minutes, if not sooner. My thoughts were already fuzzy, unclear, and my consciousness faded.

Airlock. His psychic voice sounded weaker too, though perhaps I imagined it. How open?

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That was question was easy, though the answer slipped from my mind as I tried to focus on it. As darkness gathered around my thoughts, I did my best to visualize the instructions as clearly as possible. All he needed to do was find the emergency release and pull it...

I woke, gasping and naked, cold hard decking painful under me and the harsh light making me cover my eyes. The burned plastic smell of the air, the unsteady feel of the artificial gravity, the flickering lighting, all let me know I was aboard Myra's Joy. The thought that I'd been aboard a Tyradyn bioship seemed ludicrous. Like a dream, or a nightmare.

Wasn't it more plausible that the malfunctioning airmaker had pumped some toxin into the air and I'd lain here, hallucinating? I groaned and struggled to open my eyes, hugging myself against the chill and wondering about oxygen deprivation.

Whether from the airmaker's fuck up or an unprotected leap from ship to ship tucked into the hollow of a Tyradyn warrior's body my brain felt like someone had stuffed it with cotton wool. My body ached and tingled, bruised and satisfied, and as my mind began to clear, I recognized the feeling. I'd definitely had sex.

Foggy memories insisted it had been with a six-limbed alien warrior. But common sense reminded me I'd shared my ship with two men. The thought was enough to make me sit bolt upright—sleeping with Volkov or Hess was not part of the plan.

The cabin spun around me erratically as I looked around for them. Instead, standing beside the airlock, I saw Tyr. My heart skipped a beat.

Somehow, it was real. Hewas real. Tyr stood there, unmoving, one pair of eyes open and watching me, the other two shut. Motionless, his carapace gleamed in the flickering light, he might have been a sculpture.

But as soon as I met his alien gaze, the multi-colored frills flicked open around his neck. His thoughts surrounded me, pressing gently against my own and filling me with warmth and love.

“What the hell am I going to do with you?” I asked, pulling myself to my feet. “Importing Tyradyn tech is illegal enough, now I’m coming back with a living Tyradyn warrior? Customs is going to pitch a fit, then throw the book at me.”

Despite my grumbling, I couldn’t keep the smile from my face. It was real. Hewas real.

I kill Customs. Tyr’s answer echoed in my skull, making me snort a surprised laugh, though I wasn’t sure he was joking. Protect you from anyone who throws things at you.

He came to me, limbs clicking on the metal deck as he moved with precision and lifted me in his arms. Tyr looked out of place in the Joy, his strange techno-organic carapace a wild contrast to the messy, worn-down old ship. But in another sense, he fit perfectly, as though he was the element I’d been missing to turn Myra’s Joy into my home.

“No killing law enforcement, Tyr,” I told him, throwing my arms around his neck and kissing him. In the bright electric light, his fanged mouth looked even more terrifying than before. But that just sent a frisson of desire through me—I was safe, I knew I was safe, in his arms.

Maiming? Light mauling? I caught the amused tinge to his thoughts. Thank god, hewasjoking. Probably. I hoped so, anyway. They will not harm my Myra.

Okay, maybe not joking as much as I'd like. But we had weeks to sort out how to smuggle him past customs before the Joyreached settled space. Weeks to get to know each other and come up with a plan.

And we'd start planning as soon as I finished welcoming Tyr to his new home. I kissed him again, feeling his lust building as I cautiously stroked the frill around his neck. His tongue pressed against mine, his hands explored my naked body, and my brain shut up as he squeezed me to him. Desire sparked desire, the feedback loop leaving us both desperate for each other.

With the last of my willpower, I guided him toward my bed. It was no grove of black flowers, but we'd make do.

The End