



When The Monsters Come

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Description: When the Standing Ones sent us on a journey to explore the darkness far from the sun's light, I never expected to find monsters there.

Like something out of the scary tales my son so loved, they captured us while I slumbered. I woke with my crew, locked away in a cold thundercloud colored cage. The others looked to me for escape but all my plans had ended in failure and pain, so much pain. At the same time, the monsters began to take them away one by one. Pushing past those failures and the pain, I plotted my escape, I was born problem solver after all. I needed to warn my people of what awaited us among the stars and to see my boy again.

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Chapter 1: The Undercage

I wasn't always so alone. When we set off, we were a group of twelve, not counting the ship itself. The... I hesitate to call them monsters, something out of the scary stories about brutish and vicious animals I used to share with my son, but the name fit. They were monsters, and they captured us, all of us.

Never in all my days would I have thought it possible to find monsters, little more than animals, of all things in space, at least not ones that could harm us. The histories spoke of creatures like that, living their short and brutish lives on Achila, killing each other and our ancestors for sport. The Standing Ones bred the Guardians to protect us from such things, to keep the lesser beasts that still roam the wilds at bay. The idea that similar monsters could travel the dark beyond the light of the sun made me question everything I knew. Given the situation we found ourselves in, I had little time to worry over such things.

When I woke up to find myself in this unnatural cage and not my chamber on the ship, the others shared what happened. The Tall Ones didn't choose me for the mission to tend the ship while it floated through space or to protect the crew. In transit, I saved my energy, slumbering in my chamber until needed. The others didn't have a chance to alert me before it became too late. The monsters captured us and stuck us here.

According to the crew, the monsters struck like lightning from their gleaming vessel. When one of our guardians claimed the monsters used a lance of light to cut into our ship, disabling its ability to move, I didn't believe him. Guardians were not bred for their intelligence after all, but their size and strength. They fell into flights of fancy

from time to time.

“Light gave us life,” I scoffed at him. “It couldn’t hurt us.”

Langlo, the lead ship tender confirmed the Guardian’s story, leaving me with yet another fundamental belief in question. I’d ponder that after I found a way for us to escape. Things were different then, when they didn’t know what we were. All twelve of us were still together in the unnatural cage, life-giving light bathing us from translucent enclosures on the ceiling.

The others called it the Undercage with good reason. Gray material, hard as granite but completely smooth and cold to the touch, it covered three of the walls and the floor. It was as though the monsters carved the room from a single block of the odd material. Vertical bars made of the same thing covered the other wall.

Bars covered the ceiling as well, but right above them sat a honeycomb of the same gray material: the floor of another chamber. This earned it the name Undercage from the crew. The monsters plodded up and down that chamber, their long black hooves clanking against the floor with each thudding step. It caused dust to fall into our cage, smelling of ozone and tar. Even their dust seemed unnatural.

We stilled whenever we heard the sounds from above and watched them go by while they barked and gurgled at each other. As shocking as I found the idea, I realized they were communicating. It seemed like such a ridiculous idea. Animals didn’t have that kind of intelligence, but these animals traveled space, too. I’d be foolish to underestimate them more than I already had. The others looked to me for a plan to escape and I didn’t intend to let them or my son back home down.

Several boxes were stacked beyond the bars. Unrecognizable symbols covered them, likely more proof of these monsters’ intelligence. Past them, another gray wall, this one with a door, stood tantalizingly out of reach, at least for most of us. After probing

every other surface in the Undercage and finding no other possibilities, the door became our best option for escape.

The bars were not much of a barrier to me. The monsters must not have realized I could slip through them. Unfortunately, the Guardians were not bred with my limberness, nor the Tenders. They were both way too thick. I'd need to discover a way to get the Undercage's door open for all of us to escape.

Before I had the chance to even think up my first plan, the door opened, and I got my first good look at one of the monsters. It walked on two legs like the Guardians, its long black hooves shining in the light with each of its plodding steps. Oddly, its hide didn't match the hair covering its pale face and head. Instead of brown and oily curls covering its body, the hide shimmered in the same gray as the walls, glittering as it moved.

I turned away the moment I looked at its face. I'd never seen an animal like it, so pale, bulbous and ugly. It grunted, speaking some unknown words in its language as if we'd understand. A foul stink hit me, but it told me little, not even adding any nuance to its off-putting speech.

It approached the bars and held out a rod in one of its hairless paws. More words came from its mouth, the scent of death on his lips. The stick in his hand crackled, lighting erupting from the tip with a flash. The thing's smile widened before it caused its stick to erupt in lighting again.

All of us in the Undercage leaped back from that. For me, it confirmed what the others had explained. The monsters had turned light into a weapon. Its teeth showed when it smiled even wider. Not as sharp as I expected, the sight still sent fear through me. From the scents coming off the others, I was not the only one of us who found the display so frightening.

The door to the cage opened when the monster pressed its pudgy finger on a small box hanging from its hide around its middle. One of my crew's scent changed from fear to rage. Before I could command him to stop, Nol, one of our guardians, barreled toward the monster. I should have expected as much, but not what followed.

The monster stepped a few feet past the door and waited. Nol readied one of his thick stalks to skewer it. Before he could, the monster poked its stick out. The moment it touched Nol's side, the hulking Guardian fell to the floor, the stink of his pain flooding the room and keeping our other guardians at bay, stilled by their fear.

The monster laughed and the door closed on its own. It dragged the still Nol from the room. We never saw him again. When the monster returned the next day, he smelled like pain and anger, Nol's pain and anger.

That added urgency to our escape plans. Nol might have been dead already but if not, we needed to find a way to save him and get home. When the monster left us alone again, I approached the bars and reached out to touch one as lightly as possible. The Poker's stick captured the power of lighting, the bars might have been able to do the same.

Lighting did not strike me so I bent myself until I fit between them and slipped through. The others watched, their anticipation filling the air and feeding my confidence. The Standing Ones didn't send me on this expedition to execute a prison break but I'd been bred for my mind, for my ability to find solutions. I hoped the others couldn't smell my fear.

Unfortunately, that first attempt ended in failure. I found no way to open the door to the cell or the door out of the room. With the others guiding me, I searched the area outside the cell, but I couldn't even open any of the boxes. In the end, I waited behind one of those boxes for the monster, the Poker, as the crew referred to him, to return.

The remaining Guardians tried to instruct me on how to attack it, but they didn't understand that I lacked their power and abilities. I was not bred for violence, my stalks were not weapons. The others gave better advice, but when the monster returned, it was not enough.

I leaped from my hiding place, landing on its back. Ignoring the sme

lls and the wave of disgust that hit me upon contact with its oily skin, I tightened a stalk around its neck. Lightning buzzed and I felt pain unlike anything I'd ever experienced.

By the time I recovered my consciousness, the monster had taken another of the Guardians. The animal stink of the beasts filled the room. Several of them worked on the other side of the cage, adding horizontal bars. I wasted my only chance at surprising them. When they finished and left, the lights in the cell and room shut off, robbing us of its life-giving rays. They must have performed an autopsy on Nol, learned about how we lived.

Since then, the Poker returned, each time taking another one of my crew, smelling like fear and pain from the last and smiling the smile of a predator, a killer. We tried to escape again, to trick the Poker into entering the cell, to take his Lightning Stick, but nothing succeeded. The monsters only turned the light on for a short period at a time, keeping us weak and unable to fight back.

I didn't know how long it had been since they took Oln, the last of the Ship Tenders but it felt much longer than with the others. Were they waiting for something before they took me to be tortured like the rest of my crew? Why?

These thoughts and my failure to protect the others plagued me while I sat against the far wall, still as a stone to conserve as much energy as possible. I needed to escape, to get home to my son, to warn my people of the horrors that lay outside the light of our

sun. I might have failed my crew, but I would not fail my son or my people. Warning them would be the best way I could honor the dead, the ones I let die. Once the Poker returned, I'd put my last plan into action.

The monster didn't leave me waiting for long. Like the sun's rays each morning, it returned regularly to rattle the cage and mock me in its barbarous language. Since it took my last crew member, I'd stayed far back in the cell, not even moving when it came in to taunt me. This time, I rushed forward, darting to the side of the door.

Exactly as I expected, the Poker brandished its Lightning Stick, rapping it against the bars. It followed my movements until its arm slammed into one of the boxes close to the Undercage. I scrambled back, acting cowed by his weapon. I'd accomplished my goal and had no need to further the confrontation, not yet.

Well after he left, I moved again. Once I reached the bars next to the container the Poker slammed into, I slipped a thin stalk through them until I reached the strap sitting on top. I'd noticed it before but once they added the extra bars to the cell, I couldn't reach it. Now, thanks to the monster, I could.

After my first escape attempt ended in failure, I tried to snake a stalk around the Poker through the bars. It panicked for a moment when I wrapped around its leg but then it slammed the Lightning Stick into it and I curled up into myself, losing my grip on it. I hoped the strap might allow me to do the same without getting shocked.

I found out during its next visit. Before it arrived, I arranged the strap through the bars to snare him. The monsters always turned the lights on when they entered and the strap's bright red color stood out on the gray floor. In order to keep the Poker from seeing the strap, I needed him to look somewhere else. I had a plan for that, too.

The lights flickered on and the door opened. The Poker's plodding steps sounded before he called out, the noise grating to me as all his vocalizations were. His steps

hurried to the bars when he noticed me hanging from the ceiling. Were any of my crew still here, they'd smell the exhilaration I sent out when his feet crossed over the strap.

I dropped to the floor and yanked the ends with all the power I could muster. The Poker's feet slammed against the bars and in its panic, it dropped its Lightning Stick to grab them to stop its fall. If only I thought of this plan when my crew was still with me.

Shaking the thought from my head, I hurried to the bars before he realized his mistake. One of my stalks grabbed the Lightning Stick, holding it out of his reach. At the same time, I sent more through the bars and wrapped around the Monster's arms and legs, holding it in place.

The Poker screamed in its guttural language. I should have silenced it, wrapping over its mouth but I hesitated. The thought of touching it that way, touching its mouth that always smelled of death revolted me. Instead, I followed the instructions the Guardians gave me, wrapping around its neck and tightening.

This silenced the Poker, its already bulging eyes widening in fear. I smelled it, rank and biting. The monster deserved so much more for what it did to my crew but I wasn't a monster. I didn't kill. When the Poker's eyes closed and it fell slack in my hold, I released its neck. It still drew breath.

One of my stalks found the box that controlled the door. With a click, it swung open. I dared not move. Instead, I opened my senses as far as I could. Nothing sounded out of the ordinary, no shouts or pounding hooves. Panic filled the air, both the Poker's and mine, but nothing distant. Its screams did not alert the other monsters.

I lowered the Poker to the floor, slow enough not to waken it. Every moment of contact with its waxy skin disgusted me and I almost dropped it. To be safe, I should

have moved it into the cage, locking the door behind it. The thought of touching it again horrified me.

Panic and shame bubbled through me whenever my gaze neared its face. It smiled like a predator while it dragged each member of my crew away. I failed them and that monster's smile already invaded my resting thoughts. I couldn't even look at it. After I picked up the Lightning Stick, I left the animal there.

My crew might have died, but if I returned home, they might not have died in vain. I could warn the Standing Ones. They could make us ready, keep the rest of our people from suffering the fate of my crew. And I'd get home to my boy.

Selfish, I know. Unusual for my people, but a side effect of my specific breeding. Guardians had their strength, the Ship Tenders their ability to keep our ship healthy, the ship was the ship, and me, me they tasked with thinking differently. I found solutions to the problems the others couldn't deal with, were not bred to deal with.

The Standing Ones cursed me with a little selfishness compared to the rest of our people. Right now, I thanked the deepest root for that selfishness. I wanted to escape so my crew's deaths were not meaningless, but I wanted to get home to my boy more. In the end, I just wanted to survive.

With the Lightning Stick ready, I crept to the door and used the Monster's device to open it. I didn't have time to wait until morning. I had to act now or suffer the same fate as the others.

Chapter 2: The Steel Chamber

I stilled completely when the door opened, not even letting my fear or adrenaline lead to shaking tremors, despite how much I wanted to give in. My senses focused, widening to hear any sound or smell any scent that might signal more monsters

nearby. All I heard was the low rumble and constant hums in the background. They'd been present ever since I'd woken up in the Undercage.

The panicked and pained scents I'd been wallowing in before, lessened with the door open. In the background, I still smelled death and rot, as ever-present as the hum. It kept me on edge or at least more on edge. Either the monsters couldn't smell it or it didn't bother them as much as it did me. They might have even liked it. They were only animals, after all.

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The door opened into a long hallway made of the same gray material as the Undercage. Doors lined the hallway, each with several of the unknown symbols over them. They had to mean something to the monsters, but I did not understand what. As with their vocalized language, if I could call it that, the symbols were so foreign to my understanding that I had no idea of how to even begin to even try to understand them.

My innate curiosity, one of the gifts the Standing Ones bestowed me with, wanted nothing more than to understand them, to learn the monsters' secrets. Not only would it make my escape easier, but it might give my people an edge against them, should they find Achila. Knowledge was power.

The rest of me revolted at such an idea. I could barely look at the face of the Poker, the fat lips that stretched and curved in its pre

dator's smile, its bulging eyes, its sneer. Everything about these animals and what they did to my crew disgusted me. I feared being contaminated by them in some way, as if learning more about them would turn me into one of them.

A ridiculous thought, but one that plagued me. My fear, amplified by the panic and pained scents of my departed crew, held sway in my mind. Even though I'd been bred with the ability to understand and ignore this response, pushing past it was no easy feat. That fear might have been illogical, but I had plenty of other reasons to fear these monsters. My life and with it, possibly the lives of everyone back home, my son included, were at risk to them

Bright life-giving lights flooded every corner of the hallway. In addition to the doors

with their strange symbols, a few small square tables draped with white coverings sat to the sides of the hallway next to the doors, including the one I moved through.

Soft to the touch, the cover billowed when I brushed against it. I lifted the closest corner, curious to discover what they hid. The table had a hollow area in the middle with a lower platform near the floor. its legs ended in wheels.

Before I had time to consider what the monsters used these tables for, thumping hooves echoed down the hallway. At the far end, shadows danced on the floor. Monsters were coming and if they found me here, my escape attempt would end.

I turned to the cart. I'd fit underneath it and knew how to stay as still as the grass on a windless day. But I didn't know what the monsters used the tables for. No, that would be a big risk, one I wasn't ready to take. What about the other doors? Also a risk, but with the Poker's Lightning Stick, it would be a risk I'd confront face to face, not hiding under a monster's mystery table.

My decision made, I quickly moved to the next door down the hallway. The door to the Undercage required the Poker's little box to open, but the other doors along the hallway each had a panel to their sides with a glowing grass-colored button on it. I took a chance on it, assuming they were the controls. Sure enough, the door silently swung open when I pressed it.

A cloud of death and rot hit me through the door, like the Poker's breath amplified a thousand-fold. I should have chosen the cart or one of the other doors, but the monsters hoof sounds grew louder with each of their ponderous steps. Their harsh and guttural language carried to me, less wet sounding than the Poker's. One of them laughed, and it didn't heighten my fear as that animal's vocalizations did. With more monsters so close, I had no other choice than to enter the chamber filled with the scent of death and decay.

The door silently closed behind me and I examined my new surroundings. Like the hallway and the Undercage, the walls of this chamber were gray. Instead of the same dull appearance, these walls reflected the light of the chamber. Not perfectly. Scratches and pockmarks pitted the surface, distorting the reflections.

At least I hoped so after catching my own reflection in one panel. My time in the Undercage left me too thin with a sallow color. I hoped I had the energy needed to escape. The excitement I'd felt upon defeating the Poker added to these hopes, but seeing what captivity had done to me did not fill me with confidence.

Thankfully, despite the scent of death and rot, the chamber appeared empty. It extended down the hall so far that the next door down lead to it as well. Large shelves rose to the ceiling near my side of the room. Beyond the shelves and the other door sat a tall box flush with the wall. Gray tables extended on each side, covered in an odd assortment of... I had no idea. I wasn't a monster, and the Poker was the only one I'd seen on a regular basis. His tool I understood. He'd demonstrated it enough. The items on the table were a complete mystery.

If the chamber did not reek of death, I'd have given in to my curiosity and approached the tables, exploring the odd devices they held. There might have been something there to aid in my escape. Those scents kept me lurking on the far side of the chamber, waiting for the thunderous hooves to pass so I could escape it and continue down the hallway.

My poor luck returned. Instead of passing, the monsters stopped at the chamber's other door. It opened, letting me hear their words unmuffled. As quietly as possible, I shrunk into the corner, behind one of the tall shelves. The monsters' conversation ended and one of them entered the chamber.

Taller and thinner than the Poker, it had a different patterned hide as well. Instead of the reflective grey legs, torso, and arms, this monster only had grey legs. Its arms had

the same pale color as its paws and head, extending to its shoulders. Here its hide turned white, covering the rest of its torso to its waist.

A hum emanated from the monster while it approached the tables. Unlike the noises made by the Poker, just hearing it did not spike my fear. Were it not coming from a monster, I'd have even called it melodic. Was this a different breed of monster? A better one?

I wouldn't let it get my hopes up, but between its different hide and seemingly different demeanor, I wondered if it really was a different type of monster, maybe less monstrous? The Poker might have been like our Guardians, protecting the others. Being monsters, that protection might include torture and murder. If so, what was this monster and its purpose? Despite my desire to return to the now-empty hallway, I waited silently, watching to see just what this new monster would do.

It continued to hum and picked up one of the strange items on the table. Seemingly made of the same shiny gray material as the walls, it formed a long, flat triangle with a curved side, extending from the black handle in the monster's meaty paw.

With that tool in its paw, it opened the tall box. The scent of rot and decay billowed through the chamber intensely when the Box opened, my fear joining it just as suddenly. From my position at the far end of the chamber and with the monster blocking most of my view, I couldn't make out the items in the box to learn exactly what produced that revolting scent.

The monster grabbed several items from inside the box, each one dropping to the table between the monster and my side of the chamber. The first, a yellow brick, thudded against the shiny table showing its weight. A bright red cylinder joined it next, followed by another cube, this one white. The final item the monster took from the large box was a thicker, much darker red cylinder.

When it closed the door, most of the rot smell dissipated. The monster paused and breathed in noisily. It turned to face my direction, its beady black eyes narrowing while it bent closer to the items on the table. It breathed in again, its nostrils flaring.

It smelled each of the items and shook its head before its eyes surveyed the chamber once more. My fear, I realized. It smelled my fear. This monster must have been bred with a better sense of smell, though the rot and death apparently didn't bother it. It was still a monster, after all. Not all of those foul scents disappeared when the door to the box closed. The items on the table smelled like decay and salt but not like the oceans back home. If the monster smelled my fear, it must have smelled those as well.

Thankfully, I realized I might have overestimated this monster's sense of smell. After another loud sniff, it turned its attention back to the items on the table. Its free paw wrapped around one of the cylinders, lining it up parallel to its body. It placed the tool in its other palm against the cylinder at the very edge. With a single motion, it pushed the tool through the cylinder until it clanked against the table.

The salt and rot smell grew as the monster continued its work. With each strike of its tool, another leaf-thin slice fell to the table. When he had a small pile, he set his tool down, placing it lightly, almost reverently against the table. Next, it grabbed a large white platter from the other table and slid it in front of itself.

With grace I did not expect from a monster, it held one of the thin rounds it sliced off the cylinder and twisted it to resemble a flower. It carefully set it on the white platter and moved its paws away with a nod. I watched as it repeated this process four more times. This monster had to be an Artist.

When it picked up the sixth round, half of it dropped to the table. The Artist shrugged its shoulders and popped both parts into its mouth. Its jaw jerked up and down, filling the chamber with wet smacking sounds. With the scent of death and decay coming

off the things it took from the large box, I never even considered the idea it might have been food.

What should I have expected? These were monsters, after all, little more than animals. Animals ate other animals. I knew that at an intellectual level even if I'd never seen or smelled it. I wished I never had.

The Artist, unaware of my disgust, continued its work. More rotting salty flowers joined the others before it moved on to the next cylinder, making smaller flowers. My disgust lessened the longer I watched, and I wondered why they went to such trouble. Animals ate to replenish their energy, they ate in order to survive. The Artist turned their food into a work of art, deliberately placing each decaying piece in its place.

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Were they really monsters? From everything I knew, monsters would simply eat to stave off their hunger. They didn't waste an inordinate amount of time arranging it before they ate it. Finished with the red cylinders, the Artist moved to the cubes. Its tool slowed when slicing into them, clanging against the table with each stroke. The slices stuck to the side of its tool, toppling into the pile when it cut the next one.

A small window I hadn't noticed opened up behind the Artist and the ugly face of another monster appeared on the other side. It grunted something at the Artist who jerked, obviously startled by the interruption. The Artist's eyes narrowed and the pale skin tightly wrapping its face shifted to blotchy red before it turned and bellowed in the grating monster language I still couldn't believe existed.

The scenery might have been alien to me, the players monsters I could barely stand to look at without flooding my fear into the air, but I understood their actions. I loved my son more than anything in existence, even the Standing Ones, not that I'd admit it. That said, he'd interrupted me during my other duties a few times and once, I'd reacted exactly like the Artist: with anger. These monsters found us in the dark, away from the su

n's light. They had language and captured us. The Artist had spent the last half hour chopping and arranging a platter of food. I'd been denying it, thinking it such a ridiculous notion, but I had to admit these...things were more than just monsters.

The platter rose from the table in the Artist's paw. With a shake of its head, it turned and slammed the platter down in the window, causing the thing on the other side to flinch back. The window thudded shut and the Artist's shoulders slumped. It stood there, muttering in its language. Before, merely the sounds one of these things

produced turned my innards, but now I almost empathized with it.

I understood what it felt. The annoyance of being interrupted while working on something, its anger at whatever the other thing said to it and now, the mix of guilt at its outburst and resentment aimed at the one that pushed it to blow up.

After a few moments of more muttering, the Artist's shoulders dropped and it returned to the large box. The scents of death and rot billowed out as before. They didn't turn my senses as much this time. Had I grown accustomed to them or had my realization lessened the sense of disgust and otherness these animals gave me?

The artist's shoulders strained when it pulled out a black bucket as wide as its shoulders. It moved slowly while turning, taking great care to keep the bucket level. When it slammed against the table, water sloshed out of its open top.

This didn't smell of death, but of the ocean and its life. Not clean by any sense. Life was messy after all: living, vibrant and growing. While I took in this new smell, the Artist grabbed another bucket, this one silver with a black handle. It filled the new bucket with water using one of the many tools I'd not recognized.

This water didn't smell like the ocean. It held an acrid tang I'd never encountered from water but without any of the other things I expected to smell. Water was life and it teemed with millions of tiny living things. This water didn't smell of death, but it certainly didn't smell like life, either. The Artist moved this container to the table. After a few seconds, vapor rose from it, the temperature in the chamber rising slightly.

I'd visited the volcanic springs near my home on Achila once and watched the scalding water bubble, deadly yet oddly beautiful. It didn't smell like life, either, though the water the Artist poured lacked the spring's sulfur smell. I did not understand what this had to do with their food.

As if reading my mind, the Artist gave a demonstration. Its paw disappeared into the wide black box full of seawater with a small splash. It emerged holding a an animal with a sky colored shell, some giant insect. The Artist's paw covered its wide body and three spindly legs poked out of each side of it. They flailed erratically, trying to find purchase in the air. Along with these legs, two large claws, held closed with silver bands, tried in vain to pinch the Artist's skin and free itself.

The Artist ignored these attempts and tossed the creature into the pot of bubbling water. The water hissed while the creature died and I flinched in on myself. I'd almost emphasized with one of these monsters, thought them more than simple animals, yet for all their advances, that was what they were: animals. Only animals killed their own, murdered other animals for food.

No wonder the Poker's breath smelled like death. The other food the Artist prepared smelled the same along with rot. I should have realized it sooner. While I contemplated my horror, the Artist used tongs made of the gray material to grasp the dead animal from its boiling grave.

The now deep-clay-colored creature dropped to the table with a wet thunk, unmoving as steam rose from its curled-in legs. The Artist tentatively touched one of the claws with the tip of its finger and a smile that reminded me so much of the Poker's predatory grin grew on its face. It latched its paw around the claw and yanked it away with an audible crack.

It brought the dismembered claw to its worm-like lips and slurped its contents. I couldn't keep my disgust and horror from flooding the chamber. The Artist sniffed and looked around. The monster might not have understood what it smelled, but it dropped the half-eaten claw and peered toward my side of the chamber.

I couldn't wait any longer so I slinked down behind the shelf and moved to the door. It slid open and I crawled into the empty hallway. I relaxed the moment the door

closed behind me but my relief was short-lived. Several of the monsters' hooves sounded around the corner of the hall. I wouldn't be alone for long.

Seeing as much as I had of the Artist at its work, I wanted nothing to do with any of these doors. Despite not knowing what the monsters used the tables for, I chose that as the best option. I folded in on myself and huddled under the table, replacing the coverings.

The sound of their hooves grew louder and louder, their guttural voices turning into a cacophony. Shadows appeared through the table's covering, the only thing keeping me from discovery by the herd of monsters. The weight of the Poker's Lightning Stick comforted me even though the sheer number in the hallway would likely overwhelm me were I spotted.

As quickly as the group of monsters came, they left, moving down the hall. Silence reigned, leaving only the ever-present buzzes. I waited, safe in my hiding space before extending my senses, searching for anything out of the ordinary.

Hearing and smelling nothing unexpected, I lifted the covering and slipped out from under the table. A high-pitched gasp sounded behind me. A monster stood in one of the doorways down the hallway, one paw over its mouth and another pointing my way. Shorter than either the Poker or the Artist, this monster had long clay-colored hair but shared the same silver hide as the Poker, from its long black hooves to its neck. Its trunk curved in at the sides, widening above its legs before narrowing, widening again toward the shoulders. Despite the other differences, seeing its pelt color sent me into action.

The Standing Ones didn't breed me with speed in mind, but when in need, I could move. The monster's eyes widened when I rushed it, the Poker's Lightning Stick cracking at the ready. A piercing scream escaped its mouth just before I hit it with the Poker's weapon.

The scream warbled and fell silent. The monster froze, its arm trembling before its eyes rolled into the back of its head. It crumpled to the floor in a heap. Thunder rumbled down the hall, so many pairs of monster hooves. Time to see just how fast I could move.

Chapter 3: The Dream Hall

I scurried down the hallway as fast as possible, unable to keep from clattering against the hard floor in my haste. My desire to get away from the monster I knocked out beat my desire for stealth. Once I got far enough away, I'd worry about hiding again.

The end of the hallway approached, and I opened my senses. Other than the constant background buzz, nothing sounded down the new hall. No thudding hooves against the floor or the monster's braying guttural voices assaulted my hearing. That was good enough for me. I kept going.

Remembering a game of hide and seek I played with my son, I darted down the next hallway. We'd spent the day in the petrified forest near our home in the highlands. The first time he hid, he simply rushed down the nearest line of trees and huddled behind the first stump. I told him the best way to hide in a place like that was to get lost yourself. If he kept to a random pattern, darting in different directions through the trees, he would be harder to find. It took me almost half an hour to find him after that. I actually began to worry before I finally sighted him.

The monster's ship might not have had the same layout as the petrified forest but the same idea would work. If I took a random route, they would have a much harder time following me. It wasn't like I could get more lost than I already was.

This hallway differed from the others. Colorful panels of sky and dandelion covered the gray walls, and the lighting warmed. It reminded me of the rays of the sun back home. I didn't have time to study the differences further or reason out why in my

hurry.

Moving in front of a large door on the side of the new hallway, it opened automatically, silently sliding into the walls to its sides. The low lighting in the hallway beyond it

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caused me to stop.

Whenever the Poker came to the Undercage it turned on the lights. The Monsters must have needed light to see but thanks to the Standing Ones, I didn't. Problems seemed to happen more often when the sun hid itself. I'd always had the ability myself and given our mission took us outside the light of the sun, the others in my crew received it as well.

I crept into the darker hallway and let the door close just as silently as it opened behind me. Instead of rods in the ceiling providing the light, in this hallway, the dim lights flickered from transparent cubes hanging along the sides. These were spaced equally above the doorways that lined the hall. The lights appeared to be flames, but they gave off no heat or smoke.

Small tables stood in between the doorways. The nearest one held a clay bowl with a flower growing out of it. No, not growing, it wasn't real. It had no scent, at least no recognizable one, nothing natural. Even lower plants like simple flowers communicated their pheromones to the air. I'd have easily detected that from far away. Why would monsters decorate their ship with fake flowers? Yet another question to worry about once I escaped.

Beyond the low light, this hallway came with another benefit. The monsters had covered the hard flooring with something soft, plush like a bed of fallen leaves in the autumn. It muffled the noise of my movements.

Before moving away from the small table with its fake flower, I extended my senses and explored these new surroundings. It took me a few seconds to realize why, but

the sound seemed off initially. It was too quiet, the constant buzz I'd been hearing since waking in the Undercage had disappeared. The monsters must have dampened the sound in this hallway.

Few other sounds came to me, none from beyond the doors. They must have dampened them as well. The only sound to concern me came from the far end of the hallway. A monster's hooves plodded on the floor, its soft covering absorbing most of the noise. They got quieter with each step. I smelled the monster faintly along with the ever-present scents of death and another scent, almost floral.

I saw it in the distance. Like the monster I zapped with the Poker's Lightning Stick, this one wore its hair long and tied into a tail at the back of its head. It had a silver hide and its trunk curved in on the sides like the last one. I again wondered why, but the Lightning Stick in its paw drew me into action.

While it still had its back to me, I scurried to the nearest door, pressing against it. The buzzing returned through the door's vibration, but no other sounds came. The door slid into the wall once I pressed the button to its side. The tang of a monster enveloped my sense of smell, causing me to tense.

The monster in the small chamber laid unmoving, sprawled out on a low platform built into the wall. Like the wheeled table near where I encountered the Artist, a thin covering draped over it, wrapped tightly over its bulging middle. Its breathing came slowly, snorting each time it inhaled. It was asleep.

Darkness descended when the door to the hallway silently closed behind me. I'd be safe from the guard here. But why did they need a guard to watch them while they slept? What did monsters do in their sleep? Maybe I wasn't safe here.

I examined the sleeping monster. With its eyes closed and the relaxation of sleep softening its features, it didn't seem as monstrous as the others. The gurgling snort

with each of its breaths turned my insides in disgust but it was the only really monstrous quality about it, at least in its sleep.

It jerked in its slumber and I pulled away, freezing, ready to pounce with the Poker's Lightning Stick. Did monsters dream? Was the guard a Dream Keeper? They talked and had the intelligence to build ships to explore the darkness. Why wouldn't they dream too? What else had I been wrong about concerning them?

The covering over the monster shifted when it jerked, exposing one of its hooves. No, I was wrong about that too. Instead of the long and shiny black hooves all the other monsters had at the end of their legs, this one's matched the skin tone of its face and paws. The bottom looked like skin instead of a hardened hoof and it ended in five little stubby appendages just like its paws. The monsters covered their feet like they did their bodies in sleep.

As misunderstandings went, this was hardly an important one, but with everything else I'd learned about these monsters, it made me pause. I thought of them as monsters because they appeared and acted so different from any of my people. They were animals, monsters like from the tales but they didn't act like monsters.

Yes, they did. This entire ship smelled of death and decay, at least in the background. They killed and ate other animals. They killed my crew after torturing them. Those were all monstrous acts yet they seemed capable of so much more.

These were questions to leave for later after I escaped. I pushed them to the back of my mind and pressed against the door, feeling for the vibration of the Dream Keeper's steps. They grew in intensity as the monster neared before lowering when it moved away.

The door slid open and I crept back into the hallway, silently following behind the Dream Keeper. Oblivious to my presence, it marched along, the tail of dark hair at the

back of its head waving back and forth when it looked from side to side.

What was it looking for? The monster in the last room seemed sedate in its sleep but could that change? Did monsters dream about such horrors that they needed the Dream Keeper to protect them from the other monsters or themselves? If so, I hoped to avoid it.

Nearing the halfway point of the hall, I slowed to a stop. It was time to find another room to hide in and let the Dream Walker pass the other way. I pressed against the closest door, listening for sounds from within. The voice of a monster vibrated the door slightly, the gurgling wet quality of its voice thankfully didn't travel through it. I moved across the hall as quickly as possible when its hooves, no feet, thumped against the floor, vibrating the door even more. The monster behind it must have been leaving its sleep chamber, maybe in a dangerous dream?

With no other option, I opened the door to the chamber on the other side without even listening first. I ignored the smells of the two monsters along with the acrid cloud of their sweat and slipped into the dark room silently, closing the door behind me.

The monsters laid on the platform together but instead of unmoving in their sleep like the last one, these two writhed under the covering. Were they wrestling? Their breaths came in pants and a high-pitched grunt sounded from one of them. Was this why they needed the Dream Keeper?

One of them rose to its shoulders, and the covering dropped to its waist. Instead of the silver hide of the Poker or the white hide of the Artist, this monster's hide matched the skin of its face and arms. The others' hides were coverings the same as their feet. Why would they need to wear covers? What else had I misunderstood about these monsters?

The pinned monster cried out in a deep bark and the one on top turned and stared at

me, its bulging eyes widening. It fell down to the spongy platform they laid on, holding the covering over its body. Both of them shook and panted while they stared, their pungent fear filling the room.

The Poker had stank of fear when I trapped and choked it into unconsciousness. It had good reason to fear me. Even a monster fears its own death. The monster I shocked with the Poker's Lightning Stick had good reason to fear me too. I did shock it, after all. I moved my weapon behind me before these monsters noticed me, but even though I was outnumbered, they were paralyzed with fear. They were monsters. Why would monsters fear me like that?

The door to the chamber opened, robbing me of a chance to ponder that question and forcing me into action. The Dream Keeper stood on the other side, its Lightning Stick crackling in its slender paw. It lunged, aiming the weapon toward me.

I bent out of its way, the crackling lighting buzzing inches from me. My own Lightning Stick whipped toward the monster. It leaped back into the hallway, then immediately lurched forward, aiming its weapon at mine. I backed deeper into the monster couple's chamber to avoid it but bumped into the far wall.

Trapped, my fear bloomed, and I readied for another strike by shifting the Lightning Stick and another stalk behind me. The Dream Keeper sneered and gurgled what I assumed was an insult in their brutal language. It rushed forward, holding the crackling stick in front of it.

I whipped out an empty stalk, aiming low toward its legs. Seeing my attack, it stabbed at my stalk with its weapon. I flicked the empty stalk away from its attack. At the same moment, my Lightning Stick slammed into its shoulder.

Bellowing in pain, it shook before dropping to the soft floor with a dull thud. Its shoulder twitched but it otherwise remained unmoving. One of the monsters in the

bed cried out and they shifted to get as far away from me as possible. Their acrid fear overcame my panic and the exhilaration that filled me at defeating the Dream Keeper, pushing them from the room.

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The Standing Ones didn't breed me as a killer but they left me the option, should it be the only way to succeed. But I wasn't a monster. I didn't kill the Poker even after what he did and I wouldn't hurt these two. What would I say to my son if I did?

"I do not mean you any harm," I said, even though I doubted they'd understand. At the same time, I flooded the room with my calm, hoping they'd understand that.

One of the monsters cried out again and hid their head in the arms of the other, weeping. I flicked off the Lightning Stick and crept out of their chamber, closing the door behind me. I wished I could have communicated with them but more monsters had to be on their way and I needed to be gone before they arrived.

Chapter 4: The Chamber of the Wheel

I fled down the plush-floored hallway of the Dream Keeper, barreling toward the door I entered

from. It opened when I neared, sliding silently into the wall. Instead of the bright lights that lit the main hallway when I left it, they had darkened by half. Every second they flashed bright red and when they did, a loud grating horn sounded.

The monsters and their ways might have been a mystery to me still, but I didn't need to understand them to know what this was: an alarm. The whole ship knew I'd escaped and would be on guard, ready for me.

Thunderous hooves, no feet, sounded down the hallway toward where I'd encountered the Artist. I rushed the other direction as fast as I could manage. Escape

seemed almost impossible with all the monsters ready for me. The Standing Ones had given me another option but as they also gave me a desire for self-preservation, I'd only use it as a last resort. As long as I still had a chance, as small as it might have been, I'd keep trying to get home to my boy, to warn my people.

The hallway ended up ahead, separating in two directions. Symbols in the monster's still indecipherable language covered the wall with arrows pointing down each way. Thankfully, I recognized one symbol. Instead of the lines and squiggles of the others, it consisted of a sky-colored blob in the shape of a raindrop with two sticks extending out of it past the drop's tail.

Before the monsters had taken the other members of my crew, the Ship Tenders shared all they knew of the monsters and their attack on us. The symbol on the wall looked like their description of the Monster's craft. I turned down the direction indicated, hoping it might lead to freedom.

At my speed and away from the plush floor covering of the Dream Keeper's Hall, I couldn't help but click against the hard surface. I kept all of my senses wide open, searching for any evidence of nearby monsters. The air reeked of fear and unlike that wafting off the Poker, it hadn't come from my crew. It was monster fear.

The klaxons and my clicking along the hallway limited my hearing. I had to depend more on my vision. Side passages shot off of the main hallway but the monsters' arrow along with the symbol of their ship continued to point straight. Other than looking for more monsters, I scurried past these passages

My own fear spiked when I passed the last of them. A whiff of monster stink hit my senses, tinged with rage. I shifted the Lightning Stick I'd stolen from the Poker in front of me and rushed past.

Two monsters burst from the passage, dressed in the silvery covering of the Poker,

each armed with similar Lightning Sticks. The first one to enter the hallway saw me, its eyes bulging wide. It held a finger from its paw over its worm-like lips and stared at the other monster who shook its head up and down. They ran in my direction, gaining on me fast. If I escaped, I'd have a long conversation with the Standing Ones about speed. It shouldn't have surprised me that people who no longer moved would discount the benefit of it.

Every instinct I had screamed at me to respond, but I ignored them all, continuing down the hallway as if I hadn't seen them. I had an advantage these monsters didn't know about, not yet. I studied them every moment I spent around them, learning more and more of their ways. Their sight limited their thinking. They saw through a pair of eyes facing forward and assumed I did as well.

Problems came from all directions, so the Standing Ones needed problem-solvers to see in every direction. The monsters grew ever closer and the screams of my instincts became harder and harder to ignore. Just a few more feet.

The first monster reached my go point, its meaty paw rearing back with its Lightning Stick ready to strike. I twisted to the side and its Lightning Stick struck the air I'd occupied a moment ago, its tip crackling. The stalk I had wrapped around the Poker's stick snapped at the monster, jabbing it in the side.

The stricken monster gurgled and stiffened, its arms shaking while the lighting disabled it. The other monster bellowed and thrust its stick at me, rage practically oozing off of its pale skin. I folded in on myself, twisting, but not far enough.

The familiar pain cascaded through me and I flopped to the floor, rolling away. Even after escaping the Lightning Stick, the pain continued, leaving several of my stalks stiff and unusable, including the one wrapped around the Poker's stick.

The remaining monster hadn't finished, it stepped over its fallen comrade and lashed

out again with its stick. I scrambled out of the way, only just, the lighting tipped stick slamming into the floor. Movement slowly returned to my paralyzed parts, and I stopped backpedaling.

A smile so similar to the Poker's I almost quaked in fear upon seeing it, spread on the monster's face, showing its teeth and stretching its skin. It barked words in its horrible language, likely nothing kind.

It stopped its advance and held out its weapon. Lighting crackled on the end for a moment while it jabbed it forward an inch. I flinched and the monster barked a laugh. When it tried to get me to flinch again, I acted instead.

It enjoyed my fear and its power over me, wanting me to flinch. The second time it jabbed the stick forward and activated the lighting, I dropped to the floor and shot toward the monster. It leaped back and swung its crackling Lightning Stick at me but it sailed right over. The monster stabbed down with it, but by then it was too late.

My stick shot up, catching the monster between its legs. Its free hand slapped against my stick a moment before I activated the Lighting. It howled in pain, wrenching the stick from my stalk in the vice-like grip of its paralyzed paw when it fell to its back.

I stood and before I'd even pushed away the fear that blossomed from the confrontation, I grabbed all three Lightning Sticks. With my new weapons at the ready, I skittered down the hallway, continuing to follow the directions on the wall.

The hallway ahead took a turn, opening up to a large set of double doors, their frame colored gold. Did that colour mean something special to the monsters? My senses hadn't picked up any nearby pursuers, so I slowed as I approached the double doors. Unfortunately, before I neared close enough to extend my senses past them, they slid into the walls, opening.

A monster stood on the other side, freezing with wide bulging eyes when it noticed me. It wore a gold color covering from its neck to its black-covered feet. Its mouth opened and I lurched forward, jabbing it with one of my Lightning Sticks and moving into the chamber.

Oval in shape, the chamber had a domed ceiling. Several gold-covered monsters sat in front of ornate tables filled with glowing buttons and what appeared to be small windows embedded in them. Several larger windows lined the curved wall at the far end of the chamber, each showing the darkness, twinkling with the light of distant stars.

The Chamber reeked of monster fear and the remaining monsters inside huddled at the far end as far as they could get from me. It seemed the gold-covered monsters were not fighters like those clad in silver. Except for maybe one.

In the center of the chamber, one of the monsters stood in front of a large wheel, its meaty paws wrapped around it. Our Ship Tenders used a similar device to guide our ship. Was this their leader? If I had it, I'd have leverage.

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With that in mind, I rushed forward. One of the cowering monsters yelled to the Wheelmaster in warning, but it came too late. The monster dodged the first Lightning Stick, but it had been a feint. When the monster jumped to its side, I wrapped a stalk around its neck. Ignoring my disgust, I pulled it closer, yanking its arms behind its back and slithering a stalk around its wrists.

“Release me or...” I began before the doors behind me opened.

Several silver-clad monsters thundered into the room, their Lightning Sticks at the ready, rage wafting from them. Behind them, more followed. I stopped counting at twenty. With three weapons, I might have been able to take a dozen of them, maybe. The Standing Ones made me a realist so there were limits to my wishful thinking and I’d more than reached them with that estimation.

I had a hostage though, and I held it in front of me, waiting for the monsters to attack. Instead, they filled the room, lining the walls and watching me. When the last of them entered and flanked the doors, a monster clad in black from its neck

to its feet stepped through the doors. The cowering monsters at the other end of the room calmed when this one entered.

Instead of the dirt or clay colored hair that covered the other monsters’ heads, both long and short, the one in black had hair the color of clouds. Wrinkles crisscrossed its tan-colored face. It walked slower, holding its head tilted up, looking down on me with its beady but intelligent eyes. It held its paw up in the air and the silver-clad monsters lowered their Lightning Sticks, still staring their hatred at me.

With so many monsters in the same chamber, I had difficulty discerning their scents. Fear, anger and horror filled the air but with that came a hint of calm, the leader I assumed.

It snapped its fingers and a shorter monster, covered in a loose white wrapping, open at the front, hurried to the leader's side. Sweat dotted its forehead, and it reeked of fear while its eyes shifted between me and the leader. I couldn't decide who it feared the most.

The leader barked a word and the smaller monster held up a shiny silver case, opening it. The leader pulled a device from inside. Black as its covering, it looked to be shaped to fit over the monster's muzzle, with a smaller device connected to it with a curled vine. While the nervous monster spoke, the leader held the device over its nose and mouth and then jammed the smaller device into its ear.

"Can you understand me?" it asked, the gurgles and grunts of its brutish language replaced by words and scents I understood completely.

"I can understand you, monster," I replied, trying to keep my fear from spreading. Even for an inquisitive mind like mine, ignorance can be bliss. I judged these animals as monsters for what they had done to me and my crew. With an inability to understand them, I could only guess as to their motives. What if they were worse than I could imagine?

On the other hand, hearing it speak in the language of my people made it more difficult for me to think of it as a monster. Along with the fear the gold-clad humans and the couple in the Dream Keeper's hall had toward me, I worried they saw me as the monster as well. These doubts might have lead to weakness so I tried to push them away.

"Remarkable," the monster replied, shaking its head before nodding to the small one

in white, “I can’t believe you R and D guys whipped this up so fast. We’ll be able to learn much more about these things now.”

“Let me go, monster,” I demanded.

“Monster?” it replied, turning its attention back to me. “Oh, we are not monsters, we’re humans, explorers of the darkness between the stars. We seek to understand.”

“You can call yourself whatever you like,” I said, trying not to think of the fear almost everyone in the room held for me, “I know you tortured and killed my crew. That makes you a monster to me.”

“The lives of a few individuals mean little compared to the advances we can gain from studying your anatomy,” the human said, waving its hand to dismiss what I’d said as if my complaints were minor. “We have already learned so much from the others and my people tell me you are even more remarkable than them. Why are you all so different from one another? You especially? Our researchers are very excited about learning how you tick.”

“And you don’t think you’re monsters?” I muttered. If I’d worried hearing it talk in my language would force me to empathise with them, the words it spoke removed those concerns. There was always Plan B. Sure, I’d be dead by the time they cut me into little pieces but they’d pay the ultimate price as well. I could do it now, end this all before the torture. The Standing Ones might not have bred me as a killer, but some problems were too big to be solved by conventional means. That was what Plan B was for, though I wouldn’t survive it.

“There are diseases,” the black-clad human said, pausing for effect. “Diseases that have ravaged our species since the beginning. We’ve gone so far, extended our lives longer and longer but still these diseases, these cancers, they plague us. My team of researchers believe that the key is within you. You can call us monsters but with that

information, with that cure, we could save trillions of lives.”

That I could understand, to a limit. What would I do to save my son’s life? Anything, I replied to myself easily, but that wasn’t true, not exactly. I’d already refused to kill the most monstrous of these humans, the Poker, because I didn’t think I could live with it when I returned home to my son.

“Saving lives is a noble goal, but at what cost?” I replied, tightening my grip on the Wheelmaster’s neck until he struggled, I’d only get one chance at this and the odds were not in my favor. The silver-clad monsters readied their Lightning Stick at my action, “I could have killed several of your crew already. I could kill you all right now. I doubt I fear death as much as you if you are willing to torture and murder others to stave it off but there is a line!”

I tossed the Wheelkeeper at the silver-clad humans closest to the monster in black. They tumbled to the floor, their limbs tangled. The leader’s eyes widened and he scrambled back, almost falling over the researcher. I sprang forward, brandishing all three of my stolen Lightning Sticks.

The rest of the silver-clad humans rushed me while their leader fled further down the hallway. I jabbed the first to reach me and it fell to the floor, spasms racking its arms. Two more ran in from the side, their sticks poised to attack. The first dodged my jab while the other thrust its Lightning Stick my way.

I saw it coming and shifted just enough for it to hit only air. Three more came at me from the other side, a fourth rushing from the front. I whipped one of my weapons toward the three, forcing them to leap back, but more followed.

Pain lanced through me and I lost sensation to half my body. Two of my weapons clattered to the floor, my stalks unable to hold on to them. I folded down and tried to scurry between a pair of silver-clad legs, dragging my unresponsive body behind me.

More pain hit and I flopped to the ground, unable to move at all.

Plan B? If they would kill me anyway, why not go out on my own terms? My thoughts turned to the couple I'd interrupted in their sleeping chamber. They didn't seem like monsters to me. Should they suffer the ultimate fate because of their leader's choices? Did I want my last act to be mass murder, even of animals?

No. I wouldn't do it. If they killed me and cut me up looking for their cure, they'd likely trigger it, but I wouldn't have their lives on my hands then. The pain multiplied as more and more of the silver monsters struck me with their Lightning Sticks. At some point, my senses retracted and I fell unconscious.

Epilogue

The pain woke me, that and the smell. Every inch of my body pulsed with pain but something prevented me from moving at all. The dark chamber reeked of fear and suffering. I didn't even need to extend my senses to know where I found myself: the Undercage.

The lights blinked on, bright and harsh as the desert sun and a familiar monster bellowed in its horrid language. Of course, the Poker would be back. It banged its Lightning Stick against the bars before opening them and walking toward me.

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Like the sleeping human, I'd been placed on a horizontal platform with thick bands holding me still, sticking to me and preventing me from slipping out. They must have perfected restraining me from their experiments on my crew.

The Poker leaned over me, the predatory smile wide on its face. Its breath still smelled of death. Had it eaten part of the shelled animal killed by the Artist? The smell enveloped me while the monster gloated about my predicament. My escape attempt might have delayed my fate, but it couldn't prevent it. The poker waved its Lightning Stick over me, repeatedly flicking it on, letting the lighting crackle.

Just as its arm rose up to slam the weapon into me, the door to the chamber opened. The Poker stepped away and gurgled something at the newcomers. It blocked my view, but they smelled familiar, even the fear that wafted off them. The couple from the sleep chamber, I realized. The Poker brought on their fear. That I understood. It was the scariest of the monsters I'd seen.

I wished they all had translation devices so I could understand them. Rage came from the Poker, maybe for interrupting its fun. The others spoke in hesitant but insistent tones. Finally, the Poker yelled, and I half expected it to attack the other two. Instead, it lowered its weapon and walked to the chamber door, muttering things that sounded unkind, more unkind than the rest of these human's guttural language.

Once the door closed, the couple stepped forward. I'd seen them with only their sleep coverings before. Now they both wore the same white wrapping as the researcher from the wheel chamber. A small smile grew on the face of the one with long hair, not predatory like the Poker's. It would have put me at ease had I been able to move.

It leaned forward and spoke a few words, barely above a whisper. I hadn't realized these humans could vocalize so quietly. The other added a few words of its own and the long-haired human shook its head, its eyes rolling.

Without another word, the short-haired one stepped behind me and pushed my platform toward the door to the Undercage. Was this it? Were they taking me to my torture and death, just like the rest of my crew? I'd been fighting my restraints since I woke up and I continued.

They wheeled me into the empty hallway and down the direction I hadn't gone before. The further down the hallway they took me, the stronger the scents of pain and fear grew. Old scents, those of my crew.

I gave up all pretext of hiding my attempts to break from my restraints. The long-haired human placed its paw on me, whispering words I didn't understand. From their body language and scent, it didn't seem like they meant me harm, but that didn't mollify me much.

They continued to wheel me down the hall, the scents of my crew's pain and terror growing. With it, came my recrimination. I'd failed them and now I'd share their fate. When these humans cut me up, they'd more than likely trigger Plan B.

We reached an area where the scents of my crew became overwhelming. The wall of the hallway turned see-through. Beyond it, several humans in their white covers worked at long tables strewn with pieces of my crew. The trunk-like leg of one of the guardians lay in front of a human who dug into a large wound o

n the top of his knee. Behind that human, another sliced open the stalk of one of the ship tenders. I almost triggered Plan B right then and there.

Instead of pushing me into the room where their ghoulish researchers picked apart my

crew, they continued down the hallway. The one pushing me kept looking back as if expecting someone to follow us.

Finally, they stopped the cart and both of them began to undo the restraints. Whatever kept them sticking to me, ripped some of my outer layers with it when they pulled it away. With all the pain I'd been in and the shock of being released after seeing my crew's grisly grave, I felt nothing.

The short-haired human pulled the last restraint away and jumped back, pulling the long-haired one with it. I stretched and rolled off the platform, shakily standing. The humans flinched back, their wary eyes following my every move. The long-haired one pointed behind me at a smaller door with rounded corners. It waved its hand as if shooing me toward it.

The door led to a small circular chamber with several seats, each with restraints hanging from them. At first, I stood my ground before noticing a tiny round window at the far side with distant stars twinkling through it. These humans were giving me a way to escape.

"Thank you," I said, before holding one of my stalks forward. Their leader and humans like the Poker might have been monsters, but not all of them were, not these two. Despite what the other humans did to me and my crew, I had an opportunity here to make a connection.

The long-haired one stepped forward, shaking off the restraining arm of the other. It extended its paw, shaking while fear filled the room. Not just it or its companion's, my own fear joined theirs. I wanted to trust these two but looking past what happened to me seemed impossible.

Its paw reached my stalk and its fingers wrapped around it, shaking it slowly up and down. It replied to my thanks, maybe repeating my own words in its strange

language. I snaked my stalk around its hand before pulling it away and stepping through the door. The long-haired human nodded and waved its paw at me before closing the door with a loud click. An explosion sounded and I slammed against the door I'd just stepped through. The tiny ship they'd placed me in shot away and I got my first look at the human's ship, all gleaming silver with blinking lights.

I couldn't see our ship anywhere. Hope blossomed inside me. Had it escaped? Could it find me? If it did, would I be able to get us both home? What would I tell the Standing Ones about the humans? How could I show them that they were more than just monsters, at least some of them? I didn't know the answers to those questions, but I was free and at the moment, that was enough.

A Word from The Author

I hope you enjoyed the adventure of our protagonist, the twist in the high stakes action climax and the glimmer of hope at the end of the story. Let me know what you thought about it, and did you figure out and have an idea of what the monsters were? Send me a message by joining my mailing list and let's chat about it, I always love to hear from new readers and fans.

<https://kennedykingauthor.com/join-my-newsletter/>

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I've also attached a preview of my SkyLine series. This is the first episode, the Dragon Commander. For being an awesome reader, I'm giving you the chance to either purchase it on Amazon <http://mybook.to/skyline1>, or you can get it for free by joining my mailing list as well <https://bookhip.com/WHNNLW>. You get a great story and even more awesome recommendations from me. It's a win win.

* * *

Yours Truly,

Kennedy King

Preview of SkyLine - The Dragon Commander

Chapter One: Colliding Worlds

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The first time Finch's shimmering station pass beeped in rejection, he attributed it to the Precinct he'd been assigned. Everyone in Shanghai and the surrounding metroscape knew what kind of shape Precinct 117 was in. The recent influx of those crazy nanotech sentries from the WCC helped, and there weren't many fringe extremists against them this side of China, but Finch was getting ahead of himself. He needed to get inside first. He swiped the card three more times before he thought it might be another test. Between his new partner and his rumpled old supervisor, the tests had hardly ended with his graduation from the academy. The door beeped back the red shut-out light every time.

"Just my luck..." Finch muttered, seemingly to himself. The wall-mounted speaker crackled alive.

"If you're going to fall back on luck, you might as well leave your badge on the step, rookie," grumbled the doorman. So he was listening.

"Door lock still busted? Or is it my card?" said Finch.

"Probably both," laughed the doorman. The door swung out with a push from another rookie from his office. It was the young man only a few years Finch's senior, who held the desk directly across from his. Of all the people Finch had met in his three weeks on the force, Greg was the only one he could form a remote connection to.

"We've got bots that can be a table or a gun, but no functioning door," Greg shook his head while he let Finch in. He sucked down a deep breath of cool, pure air. Finch was still adjusting to the transition from the overcrowded, humid haze of Shanghai's regular atmosphere to the filtered inside of a WCC-supported Precinct.

“So why didn’t you send your Squire to let me in?” Finch raised a sandy blonde eyebrow.

“New ordinance. Costs the Precinct millions more to pay for the Squires than it does for us. They don’t lift a shapeshifting finger unless it’s something we can’t do ourselves,” said Greg.

They headed through the glum halls to their office. The shimmering teal track of tube lights overhead made everything visible, but in such a drab light it made the Precinct even more depressing than it was by default. Sure, some Precincts in India and Afghanistan saw action, but 117 was a relic of times before the WCC, before the SkyLine changed everything. A time when law needed enforcing, when the life of the planet wasn’t at stake.

“While we’re on Squires... how are things with your new partner?” asked Greg, while they paced. Finch took a glance down every crossing hallway before he started.

“Strange. Really strange. I mean - I knew it’d be weird, with his... what’s-it-called, a personality matrix?” fumbled Finch.

“Yeah. I could hardly believe it when I heard. A drone with a heart of gold,” said Greg.

“Don’t know about gold... but he does apologize for everything. And he’s a little... clingy? Always asking me if I’m alright, or if I need anything. Wouldn’t be surprised if it was him driving the Precinct bills through the roof,” Finch marveled. That was around the time Finch and Greg made it to their office. A grid of cubicles adorned with glowing instant-coffee canisters and splayed manila files made it more their homes than their tiny, stacked one-room apartments.

“Well, the software is in beta. Poor guy is just a kink to be worked out,” said Greg.

He sunk into his worn, swivel office chair. “Didn’t they give him a human-sounding model number too? No wonder the thing’s confused.” Greg spun in his chair to face his desk just before a digitized voice piped up behind Finch’s head.

“Mr. Finch!”

“Ah! DA-Vos, too loud!” Finch gasped. He wheeled to face a black onyx oval, the faceless face of his partner. Finch could see the whites of his own eyes in the reflective surface inches away. “And too close.”

“Sorry, Mr. Finch! I am still adjusting my proximity settings for appropriate socialization,” said DA-Vos. The jet-black, seamless, man-shaped machine took one small step back.

“How about one more step? Let’s say... two feet between us, at all times?” said Finch.

“Yes, very good, Mr. Finch,” said DA-Vos, the glossy black of his face lighting lavender when he spoke. Purely for human convenience, the chief had explained, Squires with a personality matrix were assigned a gender. According to this odd rule, DA-Vos was officially a “he”. First it made Finch laugh, when it was so common for people to change genders as they grew into themselves. Then the less humorous idea of rights for thinking

machines poked into his mind.

“And drop the Mr. too. Just Finch is fine,” he forced himself not to mumble for the fifth time.

“Yes, of course, Mr. Finch,” said DA-Vos. Finch groaned. Greg’s chuckles, while his own Squire sat silently beside him, didn’t help. Finch almost jumped back when DA-

Vos jerked up his arm. His shapeless, metallic tentacle reformed itself before Finch's eyes into a perfect imitation of a human hand. He sighed, and took DA-Vos' glossy new fingers for a firm shake.

"DA-Vos, I... appreciate the gesture, but handshakes are typically at the beginning or end of a conversation. And maybe a little less abrupt? You're going to scare someone if you do that outside the Precinct," Finch told him. A long breath escaped him when he remembered he hadn't even clocked in yet. Finch's brother was off in a lab somewhere developing faster Fusion jets for magnetraains, and here he was parenting a gigantic, robotic man-baby in the slums. Just my luck, he thought, and this time he meant it.

"Understood, Mr. Finch... apologies, but my analytics show that after three weeks as partners, we should be more closely bonded. I was only extending a friendly gesture," said DA-Vos. Then the light on his face glowed blue. Sure there was an AI in there, running the whole nanotech show. Sure, Finch knew some immeasurably complex code was calculating the closest thing a computer could simulate to "emotion". Still, he couldn't have been prepared for the words that came through that blue glow. "Why do you not like me, Mr. Finch?" Finch could only stare into the radiating metal, in search of the mind inside.

"DA-Vos... it's not that I don't like you," said Finch. How best to say this, to so new a psyche, natural, or artificial? "Humans don't run on analytics. And... you can't force a bond. It just has to happen. It's part of being partners."

"I see..." DA-Vos' face glow returned to its neutral lavender. Then the door from the main entrance slammed shut, marking the Chief's entrance. Every officer, human and Squire, straightened up before his procession.

"At ease, you beanbags," the Chief grumbled. "Office meeting in five. Time for your new route assignments." On his way, he took a deep glowing pull from his cigarano.

The health benefits of vaporized sage and chamomile filled the Chief's chest with each deep breath. He disappeared behind the door to his office with no further word. The office resumed its previous casual shuffle.

“Think his blood vessels would burst if we hid that thing from him?” whispered Greg, about the cigarano. Finch turned to answer, but stopped when he noticed a color he'd never seen before, on DA-Vos' face. His light smoldered yellow.

“DA-Vos?”

“Do... do you not hear that?” murmured DA-Vos.

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“Hear what?” said Finch. Greg turned full around to face both man and Squire.

“Do... do robots understand humor? Is that a joke?” said Greg.

“No... no joke... it’s...” DA-Vos’s yellow tint deepened, brightened, to show his concentration on something unheard to the others. “Do what? You want me to... no. I said no!”

Greg’s hand flew for his pistol too late. The sharpened spearhead arm of his own partner pierced him through. The Squire pinned his gushing back to his desk. When Greg slumped away, it turned its light, now crimson metal face on Finch, too shaken to move. It’s arm reconfigured into an open-ended barrel, swimming with prismatic light. DA-Vos’ body opened as a black steel blanket around his partner just in time. The Squire fired three shining lasers before it moved on to another officer, at another desk.

“Remain quiet, and still, Mr. Finch,” said DA-Vos’ voice, inside the black dome of his reformed mass. His purple face-light glowed in the dark.

“A-alright...” Finch whimpered. His partner’s body kept him safe from the Fusion rays, but only muffled the screams. He could still hear every last one of his fellow officers blown away, skewered, and incinerated by their Squire partners.

In the lavender dark, Finch felt every word about the bond between partners like a knot in his stomach. He felt rather differently about his luck, too.

Major General Christopher Droan. It sounded so impressive. It sounded so profound. Just what his dad would have wanted for him. What it didn't sound like was just what it was: a magnetrain ride from the literal and figurative forest of high-rise towers in Beijing to a pointlessly huge office. It wasn't always this way. There were times, before man-machine partnerships had become standard, before the WCC supplied their Precincts with Fusion equipment, when Major General meant what it sounded like. Missions. Firefight. Eradication of the last few fringe groups still that opposed the World Crisis Council. Still, Chris left his desk full of cases to manage, with a certain skip in his step. He hung by a muscular arm from the overhead rail of the speeding magnetrain with a grin on his face. He would trade it all again, for what he had now. The Precincts and their Squires could have the sprawling cityscapes of layered apartments, offices, and vertical garden terraces. He had his apartment on the sixteenth floor, where he raced to now, and his apartment had the only thing he really needed.

"Sheba!" Chris popped the lock on their apartment door with his key card. "Did you get my message? I'm so sorry I'm late!"

"Late?" Sheba cut him short. He followed her voice with a chuckle, to their kitchen. "This show doesn't play without the both of us. You're never late."

"I'd consider myself lucky to be your stagehand," Chris laughed. Then he turned the corner, saw her, and the words ran right out of his head. Her dark, smooth skin shone a mixture of silver from the Fusion tube lighting overhead and orange from the candle on the table. When she stood, dark curls spun around the, rich golden-brown rings in her eyes. She gave Chris a spin of her fierce ruby dress. The fabric swept up to flash her full thighs. She opened her arms to the chair pulled out for him.

"Oh Sheba, you didn't have to..." Chris struggled to find anything he could say to feel he deserved this.

“Of course I did! We never had our proper engagement dinner!” said Sheba, “Now sit. I’m sure you’re starving, and I’m itching to get out of this dress.” Another wink was all it took to pin Chris to his seat. He wasn’t even sure what it was she’d made, with how quickly he inhaled it. It was delicious, though.

Around him and Sheba was a vortex of colliding worlds. This was a newer apartment complex, wired with Fusion tubing for all the modern commodities a young couple could want, in 2350. After relocating to an office to get an apartment away from the barracks, though, Chris and Sheba could only just afford furniture and decorations. The two found themselves unexpectedly grateful for the storage locker of collectibles Chris’ father had left them. His love for antiques had passed to his son but created a jarring visual as decor in their apartment. Silver food storage units defrosted and froze food in seconds, beside an old clock that still ticked. An oven could cook a piece of meat through in four blinks while a deep-cushioned rocking chair creaked in the living room. Anything beat the barracks, though. Over these past months, Chris and Sheba had even come to love it - differences had never been an obstacle for them.

“I hope you aren’t too tired,” said Chris, when at last he wiped the corner of his mouth.

“Not if you’re willing to do most of the work, after your long day,” said Sheba, red-lipped smile glistening. He’d been excited since he walked in, enthralled since he saw that dress; Chris couldn’t wait another second. Sheba leaned back in her chair, feigning the helpless damsel. “Oh, Major General, please whisk me away,” she moaned. Chris hoisted her up in both arms and carried her to their bedroom.

“Consider yourself whisked,” he whispered. He caught a glimpse of himself in the glass panes of a window on the way. His hazel eyes jumped out from the sharp lines of his face. His tufts of auburn hair swayed across his tan skin, already glinting with a certain thrill. The briefest thought crossed his mind: what did I do to deserve this? He followed the teal glass tubes of Fusion lights down the hall and laid his fiancée on

their bed, beside another candle. He flipped the lights.

Chris crawled over her and slipped his smile between hers. Warmth bound them together, then wetness. Their lips locked, loosened, and grazed. Sheba's legs slid apart so Chris could take a knee between them, like he'd taken a knee for her in their favorite park. He worked his mouth down her neck, feeling the pores prickle alive. He kissed the ridge of her breast, her stomach, all the way down to those dark thighs. With her heat still on his face, he slipped the skirt of her dress up. The arch of Sheba's shoulders to help get it off told him she was ready. She snapped up and seized his clothes into two claws of long nails. She tore them off and tossed them away with deft grace. Sheba's arms locked around his neck and pulled him down. She reached for the pulsing muscle between his legs, and put it against her. Chris pushed gently inside.

Chris and Sheba let out a deep breath together. The next minutes, hours, bled together in a churning sea of emotion and physical sensation. Tense muscles. Warm skin. Lips. The graze of fingers across nipples. Sheba crossed her legs behind Chris' hips to take him in as deep as she could. She arched her back again and clasped her fingers with his. Their love yanked the bed from the wall before Chris gave five last deep rocks and the two shared moments of climax, seconds apart. Bursts of colors played behind the closed eyes of concentration while they gasped and throbbed and groaned. Almost immediately, Chris collapsed beside his fiancée.

"Amazing..." mumbled Sheba, legs still trembling with aftershocks of pleasure.

"I know... and I don't even have to try," Chris joked, to a slap on the arm. He rolled over on his side, to gaze into big brown eyes. He and Sheba worked together to unwrinkle the sheets over them both.

"Are you... excited?" asked Sheba, to break the amorous silence.

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“Not quite so much as I was minutes ago,” said Chris. Sheba’s eyes went wide with disbelief, but he had to get it out somewhere. The others at Chris’ office were hardly the humorous type, at least around the Major General.

“About the wedding, Chris!” said Sheba, which of course, he knew.

“You mean the wedding planning. And as a matter of fact, I am,” Chris assured her. He sat half up when he realized his mistake. “Not that that means we have to figure it all out tonight.” Sheba laughed at the honest panic in his voice. He knew they could, too, if he gave Sheba the reins. Two of her favorite things: planning and a wedding, especially her own? But Chris wanted to be part of it, too.

“How about a location?” Sheba prompted. Her eagerness was irresistible.

“How... specific do we need to get?” said Chris.

“Let’s start with which planet,” said Sheba. Though he’d grown in a life with two worlds, Chris had never left Earth, and so the notion was still a culture shock for him. When he and Sheba were dating, and she first told him she hailed from the big red marble, rather than the blue one, he couldn’t believe it. She seemed so human - more than that; charming, provocative. Before he met her, Chris had believed his father’s old prejudice that people born in Mars’ colonies would be more... alien.

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“What do you think?” said Chris, “No matter where we plan it, one of our families will have to cross the SkyLine to get there.”

“Maybe we should have it somewhere out there, then?” said Sheba. Chris snorted.

“On the SkyLine? Please, I don’t need to seem any more like an Earthlocked tourist than I already do,” Chris waved it off. Sheba’s eyes glossed over.

“Then... you’d go to Mars? You’d drag your whole family out there?” said Sheba.

“If you were set on having the wedding there.” Chris knew it was so much easier said than done. His father’s prejudice against Cold Fusion technology, the resultant AI-driven robots, and just about everything else that came from the mines on the red planet, ran deep in their veins.

“Chris... I love you. I don’t know if I can ever tell you how much,” said Sheba, “Which is why we’ll do it on Earth. Your family might be more... receptive on their own turf.”

“I love you, too,” smiled Chris. They leaned for a kiss just before the shrill ring of their ancient phone rattled its hook. Chris had to have a special port installed for the land-line they inherited from his dad, since affording Fusion phones was entirely out of the question for them now. Chris would have let it ring itself out, but for the fact that there were only two other places connected to their house on the archaic line. It was either his job, or a job offer for Sheba. “Hello?” he sighed into the receiver.

“Who is it?” murmured Sheba, while Chris’ face darkened.

“WCC,” he whispered, still listening. Each word seemed to yank his heartstrings tighter. “I... are you sure? Yes, I know you wouldn’t call if you weren’t... yes... I understand...” Chris reached for his pants.

“Good Lord, what is it, Chris?”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can,” Chris said, before clicking the phone back down. His eyes fell heavy on Sheba. “I have to go to the WCC consulate... there’s been an attack.”