

Undergrowth

By H.E. Roulo

"Don't cut me. Don't cut me anymore. It's eating me! Please, no more."

Torsten snipped the drooping head off another faded perennial. Within the conservatory no animal sounds joined in the rustling chorus of tropical leaves and dripping water. It left an absence one felt rather than heard; as if the oppressive humidity suppressed all sound of the living.

Gravel crunched.

Sharon pushed through jagged leaves to join him, dressed neatly in a business suit and carrying an expensive square briefcase in one hand. She watched his quick hands seek through skeletal stems for a knobby joint. The snipping continued with sharp clicks.

Torsten spoke without looking up, "I didn't hear you come in."

"If I hadn't I would never see you. You're as rooted as these plants," she said. He pulled soggy dead leaves from the base of the plant. They clung like brown leeches as he scraped them from his knuckles. "Sometimes I forget that you're even back," she finished quietly.

Torsten's hands stilled. He finally looked up. Her eyes dropped away from the hollow stare he'd developed.

Sharon lifted the large case she carried. It wobbled and she used her other arm to lift it the rest of the distance, while he watched. She set it onto the work bench. Her hands lingered on the expensive leather exterior and her eyes flickered between it and him, "The Scillians have agreed to show us the source of the Lumenteras. You're the one they want."

He stepped closer, stooping. Sharon smoothed dirt away from the base of the case with her free hand, drawing out the moment as he stood attentively at her shoulder. They both held their breath when she gingerly slid back the cover, leaving behind a transparent box. Inside, the Lumentera sagged lifelessly. As they watched it swelled with life and scarlet tinted the edges of petals and leaves. The flower twinkled with vivid flickers of incandescent light.

"They say it senses the people around it and responds," Sharon whispered.

Torsten leaned in to hear her. The flower turned brown and dryness curled the edges of its fronds. He tapped the glass with the back of a dirty finger that left a smear of rotten leaf. "A telepathic flower?" he laughed, "They also say it gives off powerful hallucinogens. No wonder it's the most expensive commodity in the universe. Imagine fields of these-- so beautiful."

"We're told that they only grow in the wilds of Scillia. For the first time they've set aside a spot for a small party of off-worlders to land and study the plants." Sharon's cheeks were pink from the heat and her blond updo was starting to wilt, giving her an unusual softness. He turned back to his plant and clipped.

She cleared her throat, "But I don't think you should go. You aren't recovered from the last mission."

Torsten stopped pruning, leaving a spiky crown of headless stems. He clenched the pruners so the sharp hook met its flat mate and parted with a faint click, "It's too good to miss. I will go alone."

She inhaled sharply, "Alone is no good. After your last outpost . . ."

"I wasn't alone!" he clicked the pruners shut, nicking his finger and drawing blood. She gasped but he waved her away as he held the cut shut. "That was the problem, wasn't it? I watched Lenora die, cutting off parts of her to keep her alive until rescue could reach us."

“She knew the risks.”

“I pruned her all the way back, following orders of the autodoc, but we never got ahead of the disease and it kept eating. She begged me to stop but I was going to save her.” He closed his eyes and leaned forward against the potting bench.

“I know.”

She reached out.

He shied back.

She took the old-fashioned pruners from him, knowing why he refused to use the laser bright ones that had been his best tool then. She took one hard brown hand and turned it over. Blood dripped where he'd cut himself but she ignored it to touch the stump of his ring finger, “They could regrow this.”

“It's hardly a loss.”

The flower burned more brightly and danced as if strong winds whipped it. Sharon reached around Torsten to slip the cover over the passionate dance.

He shoved her back so he could reach a rag and wipe his bleeding finger. “I will use my own ship and attach this conservatory. It will die without my care.”

Sharon nodded, blinking rapidly, “I already asked.”

He turned his back so she picked up the case and pushed away through the undergrowth. An elephant palm leaf snapped on its thick stem as she shoved it aside. She looked back where he frowned after her. The door to the conservatory acted like an airlock, keeping the humidity constant within the tropical room. She stepped outside, hesitated, then spun the handle that locked Torsten inside once more.

Torsten's small ship settled into the narrow glade indicated on his maps. Masses of tangled jungle covered the alien ground as far as his eyes could see. “I'm the only human on the planet,” Torsten observed to himself, and twisted his lips into an approximation of a smile.

The controls folded away to make space for the living quarters. He rose and passed down the narrow passage, through the all-purpose dining/living room to step through the airlock attachment into the cloying conservatory. Touching and stroking as he went, he unconsciously checked for pests, soil moisture, and signs of disease. Large trees sheltered smaller plants in a pleasing artifice of nature. From a panel beside the door he gathered together his supplies; sample bags, and digging implements.

He stopped at the exterior door of his ship, sensing the otherness of the ecosystem. The last alien ecosystem had taken hold and eaten Lenora starting from fingertips and toes. He scraped dirt from under his nails and slid the door back to step into the clearing. A few feet from the craft vegetation began in overgrown profusion. Thick air, warm with perfumed notes of evergreen and decay stung his nose as his eyes adjusted to the gloomy haze that was the unending standard on this cloudy planet. Large conifers sheltered smaller vegetation and played host to pale fungus.

Torsten spent the day writing notes, taking samples, and studying the light and water requirements of plants he found together. All the while his experienced eye searched for signs of his goal.

As he walked further into the dark woods the rustle of animals passed nearby and he hesitated, broken from his familiar focus by a small furry creature. The creature was shaped much like a rabbit except the soft antennae of a moth took the place of ears. The moth-bunny nuzzled the earth, and a shimmer of light alerted Torsten that he'd found the elusive Lumentera. Now revealed, it glimmered in the light and the tight flower unfurled. A puff of yellow startled the moth-bunny. It hopped several

paces then hesitated, closing large eyes. The blinking slowed as the yellow powder danced on the tips of its dappled fur.

The open flower sagged to the side and something tumbled out. Torsten began recording, speaking softly to himself in the gloom. The small thing fluttered like a newborn butterfly then expanded. Folds of petals and stiff leaves shaped themselves until the outline of a moth-bunny trembled. It hopped forward as if shoved by an errant breeze, twirling toward the moth-bunny with a graceful dance of air. Enticed by the approach and retreat of the dancing flower the moth-bunny lowered his face and nudged the moth-bunny shaped flower. It hopped away and paused attractively. They played together and disappeared into the brush.

Finally releasing his breath, Torsten knelt down to examine the empty flower that still sparkled in the planet's endless twilight. The inside of the flower remained open, and viscous digestive saps filled the interior like saliva in a mouth. Torsten prodded the shell, finding it hollow and hard, "Too bad for you. He got away this time."

He noted the location of the pod and checked his timepiece. In the unchanging grayness time had slipped into featureless uniformity.

When he returned home a message from Sharon waited, "Well, at least I'll get a receipt message when you play this. Leave your new toys long enough to contact me every once in a while?"

Torsten pulled down the portable bed. He slid one nail under the other, seeking the grit. He forced himself to lie down.

"Don't cut me. Don't cut me anymore. It's eating me! Please, no more."

He sat back up. Did he ever sleep, or just remember with his eyes shut?

He got up. The vines had grown closer while he slept, and the glade shrunk. He noted the locations of the plants, settling posts into place as markers, and then passed into the forest. Near the Lumentera he settled down. He dozed.

A tattered flower-bunny drifted out of the undergrowth and limped a little further forward. The moth-bunny appeared behind it, anxiously circling. It nuzzled at the flower-bunny, who shook herself and staggered toward the open flower. One long frondy antenna seemed to beckon the reluctant moth-bunny. Unable to resist his playmate, he followed her into the open flower pod. The pod closed around him. Torsten shook his head, astonished. He knelt and touched the pod. A long back leg covered in soft dappled fur still stuck out between the lips of the pod and flexed its toes. Torsten pushed his finger into the hollow where the lips were held open. His fingers brushed the hard ridges of the plant's strong serrated edges. A drop of the interior liquid dripped onto his finger. He jerked back with a surprised curse. As it dribbled down the back of his hand it left an acidic burn trail.

He wiped his hand off on the ground. Reaching for the plant once more Torsten pried gently and tucked the warm foot within.

Hours later Torsten rose, his fascination broken by the stiffness in his knees. He walked back to the ship, his hand tracing the sandpaper-rough vine that housed the parasite that made the pod. Like the corpse flower of his own world, the threads of the parasitic flower settled into the host vine and swelled forth. Its flower was deadly and its lure unique.

The vine had entered the flat green glade. He considered it in the eerie half-light that never changed. Uncertain whether it was evening or morning he wandered to his bed. Outside, the vine stretched further. It mounted the smooth ship but failed in its viney embrace and slid into a tangled pile

at the base of the conservatory module's smooth wall. A pod swelled as Torsten slept, its small glimmers a visible lightshow to accompany the dreams of the man within.

"Don't cut me anymore. It's eating me! Don't cut me anymore."

Torsten slept. When he left the ship he saw the pod cuddled to the side of his ship and pulled out his notebook. A flower burgeoned into purple glory and began its sensual incandescent dance. He watched it develop and lengthen until the shimmering folds reached to his chin. Tantalizing whiffs of chocolate and vanilla made him step unconsciously closer for more, and he knew that the time was close. He rose, slid open the door to his ship, washed, and sat down to breakfast. There was a rustle outside the doorway.

He had deliberately left it open.

She wafted into the room, her petals rustling as she crossed the room in a graceful flowing tumble. Pale petals with a pansy face stared at him from shadowed folds. The collection tumbled into the dining room seat. She pantomimed his motion, bobbing as if bringing a spoon to the dark folds of her pansy face.

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Sharon called his name from the other room.

"Torsten? They finally gave me clearance to land and see what's going on. It's been weeks!" She lifted a shaking hand to guide her down the long darkened hallway from the control room, under her breath she added, "Don't be dead."

She called his name louder. Rounding the corner she saw them. In the half-light one shaggy form was barely recognizable as Torsten. He rose, knocking his chair to the ground. The other figure rose as if lifted by the breeze from his chair's fall. She gathered her skirts as she flitted behind him. Sharon put a hand out to steady herself. "Dear God, what is that thing?"

Torsten blinked, "Sharon, is that really you?" He looked at her and then at the thing that leaned limply over his shoulder.

Sharon nodded and took one cautious step, "Yes Torsten, of course it's me."

The thing lifted its head and hissed. Sharon shied back. A yellow haze drifted from the hidden face, coating Torsten's thick beard with a light coating of the hallucinogenic pollen. The thing drifted back, waving after itself in an unmistakable come-hither gesture.

Torsten followed.

Sharon ran up to him and grabbed his arm. The flower wafted into the conservatory and lingered, waiting. Sharon gasped. A huge Lumentera stood glowing deep within the interior of the strangely gloomy conservatory. She covered her nose at the cloying smells of chocolate, vanilla, and musk. The walking flower drifted to a fresh pod that glinted wetly and waved once more before gliding inside. Torsten turned to Sharon, his eyes wide, "She keeps trying but I can resist. I know plants. I've pruned her before." He laughed and looked admiringly toward the flower where colors flickered back at him.

Sharon shook her head, "What was that thing? Why does it look like me?"

"Like you?" His hollow eyes swept to her with burning intensity, "Like you? Like you!" He went to the sink and bent over it, washing his face and eyes, "I didn't see it. I assumed and didn't see it." His

head rose, “but you’re right. The flower knew and I didn’t. I was so cut up about Lenora that I denied what I was feeling.”

She took a step away. He stumbled toward her, the unwashed smell of him competing with the plant’s perfume.

“Stay back,” her voice shook, “You’re not yourself.”

She shook her head and stumbled away from him, her skirts flapping. He reached for her and she fell, knocking her head against the narrow counter. Blood flowed down her cheek as she scrambled up. He slipped on the blood, falling long enough for her to scramble forward into the conservatory. She slammed the door shut, pressed the airlock closed and leaned against it.

Torsten pounded on the door. He patted at the glass and shook his head then he left sight and returned with a broom in his hands. He snapped it over his knee, his eyes loving. “I know how to settle this.”

She fell back. The door remained silent. Eventually she rose. Through the glass she could see where he’d used the broken handle to jam the door mechanism. She was trapped inside. She looked over her shoulder at the new bud that pulsed and swelled.

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Torsten went to the glass. He called to Sharon. His head was clearer. Finally Sharon answered. The slippery pulse of blood had slowed and she’d wrapped a gauzy strip of fabric around her head. She looked strange in the pale lighting he’d prescribed for the Lumentera cuttings. Transplanting a vine into the conservatory had supplied him with an endless stream of companions. *How long had it been?*

He winced at the blackness of one eye, “I’m sorry, Sharon.”

“Let me out, Torsten. Let me out! The flower is about to open.”

He laughed a little, “It can’t hurt you. I want you there to see it. I love you Sharon. I must—the plant saw what I couldn’t.”

She took a deep breath, “Let me out, now, please.”

“You’re angry with me. You don’t understand yet. The plant gives us what we most long for. I thought it gave me Lenora, but it wasn’t her. It was you. It read my mind. It’s telepathic.”

She looked over her shoulder before pressing herself against the glass to speak to him. She held his laser pruner awkwardly in her hand between fingers made bloody from fumbling against the glass. “Let me out, let me out, oh God, it’s opening.”

Torsten’s sweaty forehead touched the glass, “What do you see? Is it me? IS IT ME?”

“Of course it’s not you, you idiot! Maybe it could have been but you scared me! You trapped me! All I’ve longed for is a way out, a way past you,” she sobbed, “I didn’t know you wanted me to love you. I just wanted you to suffer.” Still crying, she slid out of sight.

Torsten grabbed the broom stick and yanked it free; he spun the wheel and pushed, shoving Sharon where she sobbed against the door. He slipped in and joined her on the jagged gravel floor, their weight causing the door to clang shut once more. He cradling her, and looked up at the vision she’d created. It hulked in the shadow. Torsten couldn’t make it out. It inched toward them, staying in the thickest vegetation. All he could hear was the rubbing of leaves and drip of water.

Sharon shivered and jumped to her feet, “Don’t let it get me!”

In a panic, she ran into the deeper tangle of vegetation where only the light of the Lumentera flared. He leapt after her, grabbing for her skirt. She crashed forward screaming unintelligibly. He entered the darkness around the plants. He called her name.

"Here! Let's hide in here. It'll never find us," she whispered. Her pale arm beckoned him toward an empty pod. He grabbed for her, "No!"

She stepped inside, "Torsten, come quick. Torsten?" The pod started to close. She shoved her arm out, "Torsten?"

"That's how they feed, Sharon." He shied back and horror filled her features.

"Then help me. Help me! Don't leave me in here. At least free me first. Torsten! Torsten, I can't get out!"

He crouched down, crying, peering through the dusk. Were those pansy features? Was the pale arm really plant fronds?

"Let me out Torsten. It's eating me! It's eating me!"

He wiped his eyes, feeling a sticky smear. He rubbed his fingers together and studied the blackness coating them. He put it to his lips. He'd gotten her blood on him. Blood. The copper tang tinged the sides of his tongue. Plants didn't bleed.

He rose to his feet, calling her name. She no longer answered. But the rustle of leaves answered, and it grew closer. He dashed to the flower and shoved his arm inside, feeling the scrape of sharp plates as the plant bit down. Her hand met his, holding tight. A tingling began where the fluids began to digest. He pulled, but she wouldn't come. He yanked and the plant clamped shut. He couldn't move, and his arm was trapped within.

The thing in the darkness hissed. Leaves rattled against leaves. He pulled desperately, pounding and kicking at the fleshy flower that held him clamped in place to wait for the monstrosity formed from Sharon's fear. He sagged against the plant's side.

At his feet he spotted the laser pruner that Sharon must have dropped.

Of course. He threw his head back and laughed, stopped to study his arm, then laughed again; *Of course of course it came to this.*

He lifted the pruner with his free hand and extended the blade. It glowed faintly. The muscles of his arm bunched where the plant clutched it as he planned his stroke.

The heavy uneven rustling drew closer.

But wait! He shook his head. The drugs still slowed his thinking but *there was another way!* He considered the armored plant that roiled and seethed from within like a python feasting, seeing how the blade could slice into it. To open it. But he would cut her. *My arm or her? My arm or her?*

He hesitated, able to hear her screaming the words in his mind, *"Don't cut me. It's eating me! Don't cut me anymore."*

The smell of rot reached him. He sagged and would have fallen but his trapped arm held him up. The corruption drew closer and Sharon's concocted horror humped grotesquely out of the shadows. He knew the smell of her rotting flesh, the harbinger of more pleading.

She lay in front of him, her limbs limp and rotting as if he'd never severed them; never removed inches of flesh in cinnamon-roll slices. He buried his face against the plant but could hear the whisper of her movements. She brushed his shoes, clinging to him with fronds that oozed stickiness. Another rustle beside him. More fronds touching. *How many of these half-formed horrors had it made?*

The laser pruner dropped from his hand. He nodded to the large flower. Sharon had stopped moving and he'd lost the power to hold onto her any longer. The serrated petals relaxed, letting blood rush back into his arm in a painful wash that lit the half-digested skin with sensations of fire. As it opened, Sharon's liquefied remains sloshed around his feet and drained outward. He stepped in, dragging the half-formed Lenoras with him. Their limbs clung to him like wet dead leaves and pulled off, leaving them limbless and thrashing. He reached out and scraped them in with him, creating a pile like autumn leaves in the bottom of the large flower as it slowly closed around him.

For more information on the author and her other works, including the full length novel Fractured Horizon, go to www.fracturedhorizonnovel.com