

Monster

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Monster

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Summary

If anyone can survive torture with their sense of humor intact, it's Riker.

Right?

It always started with a clattering noise.

When he was fifteen years old, William Riker walked home through the melting spring snow with a stick in his hand. He'd been playing with his best friend Rosa's sled dogs, trying to teach them how to fetch. A lost cause. But now he was on his way home, past dark, and every time he passed a snow fence, he ran that stick over the boards and listened to the near-musical clatter.

"And what was in the house when you arrived there?" his captor asked.

Riker's mouth was dry. His eyelids were glued closed by dried blood from the wound over his eyebrows. He could smell himself, unwashed and caked with sweat and other stuff he didn't even want to think about, hair singed from the electric shocks. But through it all he could still feel the crunch of snow beneath his feet, the ice-cold grip of every breath clutching his lungs.

"Where's the other guy who was in here with me?" he asked, his voice cracked from exhaustion.

"There was no other *man* in here," said his captor, with a special contempt reserved for the word 'man,' as if humans were inferior to him. But Riker knew the captor was lying. He'd seen the other captive die, though his mind balked when he tried to remember how; he'd smelled the stench of death filling the air in this cell for days.

Don't think about it. Think about snow. Think about winter on Betazed, that inn with the old-fashioned fireplace, that too-big sweater you wore to bed. How much Deanna liked it. How her hands snuck up beneath the wool to touch your bare skin, and her palms were like blocks of ice against your stomach, and you held her close until her skin was warm again.

"What was in the house when you arrived?" his captor pushed.

Riker swallowed against a throat full of glass. Back to Alaska. Back to the clattering of the stick.

"Nothing," he said.

Because when he arrived home that day, Kyle Riker and all his earthly possessions were gone. Fifteen or thirty, in Alaska or in an alien brig, it didn't matter.

Will Riker was alone.

There was a specific taste that, for the rest of his life, would remind Riker of his time in captivity. It was sour and metallic, the kind of smell that burned your nostrils and left the back of your throat raw. Like vomiting without the muscle strain or mess. The smell emanated from a rubber gas mask they affixed over Riker's nose and mouth, tight enough to leave angry red lines in his flesh.

And it only took four or five lungfuls of that gas before he started to see things that weren't there.

White knobs of diseased bone protruded from his pores like a child's nightmare of cancer. Like *his* childhood nightmare of cancer, born

from his mother's obituary taped to the fridge door and the medical textbook definition he read when he was seven. Then those knobs would twist and the color would change and before Riker there would be a massive alien creature, insectoid and deadly — a worm with plucking, grasping hands on the underside of its body — a mantis with jaws dripping acid saliva that ate right through Riker's skin, exposing muscle and bone.

He "saw" that he was being whipped. Each lash struck so hard that it exposed yellow globs of fat beneath the skin. He "saw" that he was being raped, and felt it too — rough alien hands bending him over a rack, a sharp cold drill-bit spiraling into his body and leaving him bloody and raw. He "saw" a blowtorch coming toward his eyeball, heard the pop and sizzle, felt the bubbling white gore seeping down his cheek and drying in his beard. Larva nestled into every wound, their gaping fleshy mouths sinking into his muscle, his organs. Feeding off him while he was still alive.

He saw *everything*. Some of it came from the gas. Some of it was real. He woke to find his arms still raw and burning, the top layer of skin peeled off by acid, and he wondered if the monster, the mantis, had really been here, if it was what killed his former cellmate. He couldn't think beyond the agony. He couldn't move.

And all it took was that sour metallic smell — that clattering noise of insect jaws or a wooden stick against a snow fence — to send him back.

They started every session with a clattering noise.

It took Riker two days of torture to understand what he was hearing. It was the pump on the gas tank, old and loose. The hood smacked rhythmically against the pump, a sound of metal on rubber that perfectly mimicked a stick against a snow fence. The sound made his muscles tense against his will. Every time, he arched his head back, trying to avoid the mask. And every time, that noise made him think of coming home after dark to an empty house, only his father's least favorite furniture left behind. Even Mom's obituary was gone, leaving a pale rectangle on the fridge door, untouched by years of dust and discoloration.

It put him in a bad frame of mind, that clattering noise. It made the hallucinations worse.

It broke him. Somewhere along the line, the haze of agony lifted just enough for Riker to know he was alone. The stone floor was cold and wet beneath him, and he couldn't tell if it was blood or urine — and didn't really care. He was curled up tight, knees to chest, his entire body screaming and his muscles too stiff to even relax his legs. He could hear sobbing. Broken. Weak. Was there someone else here? That other captive, the one he couldn't think about, was he crying? No.

He knew it was him. He knew there was no one crying in the cell other than himself.

He knew it had been going on for a long time.

And that was when he felt it: an alien touch of warmth in his mind that made him jump and wrenched a startled cry from his lips. A dash of golden light that smoothed its way over the coils of his brain. Cold water on a hot day, washing the dried sweat from his skin and soothing the sunburn. A warm fire in the middle of winter, Deanna's hand pressed flat against his stomach, the flames reflecting off her dark eyes....

Deanna.

Imzadi, she said, her voice full of pain, and he finally recognized the alien touch in his brain as *her*.

Will was half-dead when they found him, and the stink of infection and decay was thick. Some of his wounds had turned white, layers of flesh stripped away and holes eating at his wounds. The manacles had rubbed his wrists raw and left his fingers unusable. His right eye was missing, the skin around the empty socket tight and hot, a lurid green-purple that had nothing to do with bruises. And when the med-team lifted him from the floor, the dried fluids underneath him, blood and pus and human waste, ripped the skin clean off.

"These wounds are too old," one of the medics said, his voice grim.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning cellular regeneration won't work." He passed a hand over Riker's face with a wet rag, working at the dried blood that kept his good eye shut. "He'll be fine, Counselor. Eventually. But these wounds will have to heal naturally."

"For the most part," the other medic agreed. He straightened Riker's legs on the stretcher and nodded to his team.

"Beam us up," Deanna said, touching her communicator.

Light danced all around them and time froze. When they materialized, the medics' words were churning in Deanna's head. Natural recovery. Long and painful and humiliating, all his wounds on full display. She could tell Riker was thinking the same thing, imagining the averted gazes, the concerned whispers that would come his way.

Still, he turned his head to search for Deanna. Still, his one remaining eye lit up when he saw her. His cracked lips split into a bloody smile.

How do I look? he asked as the medics wheeled him forward.

Beneath the humor there was an unending wave of panic ebbing and flowing within him. He didn't seem to notice it. Maybe he was so used to it that it never went away.

Handsome? he asked, and Deanna's heart twisted. She took his numb fingers and squeezed them tight.

Always, she said.

He had a temper now.

Okay, he'd always had a temper, but he'd been damned good at hiding it. Now every little thing made him irritable, even habits and idiosyncrasies that would have made him laugh before. Once he'd been fond of Data and his refusal to use contractions. Now that calm and even voice gave him a headache, and the "I will not"s and "he will"s were driving Riker insane. Worf, too, with his rigid Klingon honor — Will had found all that endearing before captivity. Now it made his chest tight and he found himself avoiding Worf's piercing gaze, his rumbling voice.

Sometimes it made his hands shake.

Did hands shake because of anger? Yes, Riker decided. But he crossed his arms tight to hide the trembling when Dr. Crusher looked his way.

"Alright, Will?" she called.

The biobed flashed red. He closed his eyes — eye — against the glare. "Fine," he said.

"You're almost done."

Good. They'd had to laser off the top layer of his skin one piece at a time to help him heal. It was a technique used on burn victims, Beverly said. And Riker certainly was a burn victim. And a victim of just about everything else, he supposed. And that thought made him angry, too. He kept his eyes closed and gnashed his teeth, relishing the ache in his jaw.

Imzadi.

Not now.

I can feel your anger from ten decks away, Deanna said.

The biobed whirred and clattered. Another layer of Riker's skin tingled and abraded, a nerve-deep sensation so painful he couldn't process it. Suddenly, gravity tilted, and in his head there was a white light chasing all his thoughts away, and he couldn't feel the biobed beneath him or see the red light flashing through his eyelids.

But he could feel the crunch of snow. He could hear the whip of a wooden stick against a snow fence, see the mantis looming over him, acid saliva dripping into Riker's skin. Aliens holding him down, pushing into his body. Whips. Electric prods. Chains.

His stomach twisted. He pulled a wall down between himself and Deanna. He heard the surprise in her voice echoing through his own brain as she said, *Will!*

And just for a moment, he hated her. Just for a moment he imagined her in his place: the manacles, the filth, the acid dripping on her skin. That would show her what real empathy was. And then he realized he was looming over her in his vision — that he was the monster, torturer, executioner — and the twist in his stomach became a full-blown lurch.

He vomited all over the biobed, and he couldn't even tell Beverly why.

Deanna didn't know what he wanted to hide from her. He was more skilled than most humans at blocking telepathy — her own fault, since she'd been the one to teach him. But for days afterward, whether he was alone or with her, on the bridge or in medbay, she could feel his anguish. His rolling anger, and underneath it, all his pain and fear, the near-constant anxiety that wouldn't let him sleep, play music, relax.

And she felt his guilt. His self-loathing. His memory of the empty house in Alaska. His mother's obituary. The extended family that left him to fend for himself as a teenager. The crew that left him to rot in an alien prison for weeks on end.

The conviction that he must have done something to deserve it. The childish voice, a two-year-old's voice, telling him that if Mom died such a painful death, it must have been because of him, because he'd thrown that fit the week before, because he'd wailed over having to share his toys. Circumstances changed, but that voice in Will Riker's head never got any older. She could hear it in his mind at night, him and not-him, clawing at his aching, empty eye socket when he tried to sleep.

Saying:

You were reckless. You weren't vigilant. If you hadn't been distracted on that mission, you would have seen this coming.

Saying:

You got yourself into this mess. When you insulted the prince, when you broke up that fight. You made yourself a target. You practically begged them to punish you.

Saying:

It's your own fault. You knew better. You were briefed again and again, and still, you did exactly what your captain warned you not to.

And then, when the anger flared, when his chest grew tight and his breathing shallow and weak — when reflexive, grieving rage filled his body and he dug his nails into the acid wounds along his arm, when he had to bite down on his own shoulder to muffle a cry of pain, a sob:

You're just as bad as they are.

You're a monster.

And underneath the voice was a sound Deanna didn't recognize, a clattering, like a broken gas pump rattling against the hose. Like a stick drumming on a snow fence or an insect's mandibles clacking together, ready for its next meal. In Riker's head, the clattering resolved into an image. Something he didn't want to see. Something he couldn't acknowledge.

What happened to the other guy who was in here with me? he asked the aliens.

And Deanna's heart sank.

He'd only been in captivity for two days, and during that time, they'd raped him — really raped him, not an illusion caused by that strange gas — so many times that he lost count. He was sore and raw between the legs, his lips swollen and cracked. The stink of sex filled the room, but they hadn't started torturing him yet. Not really. And his hands were manacled, but two days in, they hadn't yet chained those cuffs to the wall.

He could move his arms and hands. He could walk around the narrow cell. He was strong, still being fed and provided with water, still unbroken.

And he couldn't take a minute more. He knew what he had to do.

He had to kill the next person to come inside his cell.

It was the only way. He'd taken a hostage his first day and it had only gotten him punished. He had to prove he was dangerous. So dangerous that they would let him go or put him down. Leave him alone, afraid to touch him. His breathing was too fast, too shallow, when he thought of being raped again. He couldn't bear it. Couldn't stand the way his body responded: fear, bucking and squirming away from their touch, or even more humiliating, arousal — when they touched him gently, made him lean into their hands, and then they laughed at him when he gasped or trembled, when he got hard.

No. He couldn't do it. And he couldn't think straight. And he couldn't last another minute in here. Murder was not acceptable but it was the only option that stayed in his head, loud and bold enough to drum out every other thought. He would use the chain between his manacles. He would trap the next person to walk through that door. He would snap their neck.

Do it, he told himself, sweating now. His legs trembled as he positioned himself close to the door, out of sight. *No hesitation. No weakness.*

Kill.

So when the door opened — when someone fell to their knees just inside the cell — Riker was on them in a flash. It was only after the bones snapped that he saw this man was wearing manacles too. It was only when he turned the victim's face to the light that he saw it was a child, a boy, no older than Wesley.

They started gassing him after that.

Late at night, trying not to spy on Will, Deanna felt it.

She was used to the background noise of pain, both physical and emotional. He'd been back on the Enterprise for two months, and in that time, he'd done his best to never open up to her. His mind was closed, but pain leaked through. It hit him hardest in Ten-Forward, where the noise and brightness mixed together to spike his adrenaline — and a new instrument from Jonilu hooked up to the drums and made a clattering noise that left Will shaking, sweating, desperate to get away.

Now, hours later, he was in his quarters. She could feel him vaguely, in the back of her mind. Trying to sleep. Pressing his palms against his eyes, both the real one and the new synthetic, until the sockets ached. He'd developed a bad habit of grinding his teeth, and he did it so hard sometimes Deanna feared his jaw would shatter. But she'd become accustomed to that type of pain. And she'd become accustomed to the self-recrimination, the despair, the flares of anxiety and temper that left him feeling even more alone, unloved, unworthy.

But today there was something new. The emotion washed away into weariness. Riker crossed from his bed to the bathroom and sat in his pajamas on the edge of the tub. He curled his arms around his stomach, where a dull knot had settled against his spine, and he looked at his hands — fully mobile now, fully functional, and so despicable to him — and he saw himself at two years old snatching his favorite toy starship out of another child's hands just seconds before thick dark blood started gushing from his mother's nose. Her first hemorrhage, the beginning of the end. And he saw these hands stained with debris from wet wood and melting snow, from playing with Rosa's sled dogs when he was supposed to be at his private orbital mechanics lessons — shirking the advanced program developed for him in elementary school, seeking out fun and friendship instead. Only to come back home late and find his father gone.

He saw these hands wrapped around a teenage captive's neck. He clenched them into fists. In her room, Deanna sat up slowly, her heart pounding, certain that now he would claw at his own throat or strike himself in the face or something worse — something more deadly— but—

But all he did was cover his eyes and start to cry. Silent, undramatic weeping, just a few tears squeezing out of the corners of his eyes. He wiped them away before they had the chance to fall. He took a steadying breath, a little shaky, almost inaudible. And then, his voice miserable, he said:

Deanna?

Her heart skipped a beat. *I'm here*, she said.

Can you help me?

She was already standing — slow and dazed, like she was in a dream. *Help you with what?* she asked, slipping into her shoes. Alone in his quarters, Will hid his face behind his hands and choked on his own breath.

Help me stop, he said. *Stop being a monster. Stop...*

Everything. He didn't project it, but she could see the word circling in his head. Now that he'd admitted it, the draw of suicide was almost overwhelming. He sagged beneath the weight of it, his self-loathing mitigated, just a little, by an unexpected wave of relief. He liked the idea of stopping. Of sleeping. Of never thinking again. But...

Deanna, he said again, and this time he was begging her to come to him, to come fast.

I'm on my way, Deanna said.

And in the time it took her to get to his quarters, she concentrated all her mental effort on one image, an image she wanted him to see. Betazed, its sky a beautiful wintry mix of purple and blue, the indigo fir trees like velvet streaming overhead. The blinding sparkle of snow, the sound of his laughter mixing with hers, the surge of unwarranted affection when she met his eyes for the very first time. Like she had known him, all his faults and insecurities, all his nobility and compassion, since the day she was born.

My hand, Deanna said to Will, *in yours*.

No blood. No tears. Just winter on Betazed and a warm fire. Just Will's sweater and his skin, hot to the touch, and his gentle fingers coaxing her hand closer, holding her palm in place. Letting her warm herself against his body, never flinching. Willing to endure it, happy to endure it, so long as he could make her comfortable. Alone in his quarters, still drained and tired, Will accepted this image and turned it over in his head. Faintly, he heard that clattering noise again, but he was too exhausted to fear it. The hallucinations nibbled at the edges of his mind, flickering in and out, never fully resolving themselves. Not when he could see that winter on Betazed so clearly and feel Deanna's cold hand against his stomach.

My hand in yours, he agreed.

And when Deanna came through the bathroom door, he let her twine her fingers around his with a gentle squeeze.

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