

## FLORA

We were less than ten miles from camp when we ran across the alien.

It was an exceptionally hot day; the kind that favored the invaders, and we had been making our way home from a recon mission when we noticed the giant lotus-like plant in the ground. It seemed like it had been growing there for a while. And almost looked as if it was Terran. Three years of experience in the war, however, had taught me to regard any plant and plant-like thing with suspicion, so I approached with caution all the same.

Mira readied her assault blaster as she asked, "Is it one of ours?"

"Doesn't look like any earth plant to me." Mentally I was going through all the aliens listed and catalogued in the soldier's field manual, trying to remember if I'd seen this one in there. I hadn't, which made me nervous. It's never a good thing to not know what you're up against.

As if reading my mind, Mira voiced my own question out loud, "Should we just leave it and move on?"

I considered the possibility, but dismissed it just as fast. "No. Could be a new species. Get a sample."

"I'm not going near that thing." She declared, and wisely.

"Try shooting it first." It was, unbelievably enough, standard protocol; when in doubt, shoot it and see what happens.

The F7 blaster looks and works like a normal assault rifle, only instead of bullets it uses phosphorous shells, designed especially to destroy plant life. I had seen its full-automatic fire mow down and burn all but the strongest of the aliens as though they were made of paper; the only problem was getting close enough to your target to use it.

We both clicked our safeties off, and I had mine against my shoulder and was taking careful aim when it happened.

The world turned upside down. For a moment I had no idea what had happened; red-hot pain was shooting up my right leg, my head cracked against the ground, which was above me for some reason, Mira was shouting, and I could see something moving viciously out of the corner of my eye.

A vine, apparently, had sprung up out of the ground from under our feet and grabbed me by the leg. Its thorns had penetrated deep into my ankles and left a neat spiral of wounds snaking all the way up to my thigh. I didn't know it at the time, but I was never going to walk straight again.

I heard Mira's F7 go off like a jackhammer but it only served to agitate whatever it was that we were up against – the vines swung me around like a little boy spinning a sling around his head, and twice more my head cracked on the ground. The second time I was pressed against the dirt and dragged along at a speed I wouldn't have thought it possible to survive. I lost two teeth, half my left ear, and a lot of skin from my face. Then I heard a whip-like sound go off and was suddenly flying unsupported through the air: Mira had drawn her machete and cut me free.

The vines still wrapped around my leg, I hit the ground, skidded to a stop several feet away, sat up, and realized, miraculously, that my weapon was still clutched in my right hand. I had accidentally pulled the trigger though, and emptied the entire magazine during my mid-air adventure. That happens.

At least that settled the debate on whether or not the thing was hostile. Something had risen up out of the plant's centre and was snapping at Mira as she backed off, firing steadily controlled bursts.

About a minute and half and three magazines later, I had managed to get close enough to it to lob a grenade into the middle of the plant. Both my legs had gone numb by then, and I was dragging myself away by my arms and only halfway out of the blast radius when the explosion went off, and I blacked out.

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By the time I woke up, night had fallen over the moor, and it was raining. We were inside some kind of a shack, and there was a low but steady hammering of raindrops on the thin asbestos roof. Mira had managed to get a fire going, so it was reasonably comfortable.

I tried to sit up, which was when I realized that my body was in agonizing pain and promptly screamed, which in turn was when I realized I couldn't even do that: there was a

gash across my throat which I didn't even remember getting, and my lips, cut and bruised, had swollen up to an alarming size, both of which together meant I could only make a groaning sound at best. I tried to call out again, and that was when I realized most of my hearing was gone too. The only good thing that may be said about the situation was that at least my eyesight was intact.

"Are you all right?"

She had to repeat her question several times before I even heard her.

"Where are we?" Was my answer. It came out in a series of pig-like grunts, and I had to repeat that a few times for her to understand, too.

"Found an old weapons shed." She replied eventually, shouting over both the storm and my deafness, "Must have belonged to the Old Resistance. That thing busted up our radio, so we'll need to wait out the storm. With any luck, by sunrise they'll come looking for us."

"Am I badly wounded?" I grunted.

She looked down at me and winced.

"That bad?"

"Your leg's turned black. I think the whole limb's dying." Which explained why I was completely numb on my left side from the waist down, at least.

"I don't know what to do." She went on. "I cleaned the wounds and used just about everything on our first aid kits, but there's too much damage to your leg and face."

I tried to think of something to say but couldn't, so I leaned my head back and lay still. Several minutes passed in silence, the only noise being me shifting my head as I tried to shake off the pain. After a while she came over and sat next to me, pulling my head on to her lap, and gently began stroking my head and face. There was nothing romantic about the gesture; for all she knew, she was comforting a dying man. I tried to lay as still as I could with my eyes closed, concentrating simply on large, deep breaths.

Keep breathing.

Stay alive.

When she eventually spoke, she was staring at the rain with a hypnotic expression.

"What was that thing? Did you recognize it?"

"Nuh." I kept my eyes shut as I replied. "Think I've read of the defense mechanism, though. If I live long enough to make it to camp I'll look it up."

"How do you think it got all the way out here in the moor? Alone, I mean? Don't these things usually grow in bunches?"

"Spores."

"What?"

"Spores. Tiny little reproductive cell-clusters designed to spread and grow into independent organisms. The aliens spread them in the wind, hoping for some to take root wherever conditions are favorable. A tiny pond, a small oasis, or a little stream like the one we saw back there – the spore settles in, grows big and strong into a plant, and then it releases more spores, which our science boys now think may actually retain some information, meaning it's also a way of gathering intel."

"Spores."

"Spores. And that's why we're losing."

"What do you mean?"

"Because they think in terms of decades and centuries, while we can only plan for months or years." I didn't bother opening my eyes, but talking (even in pig-grunts), felt good, for some reason. Maybe I was trying to feel alive.

"You ever hear about how butterflies migrate?" I went on to explain. "No butterfly ever survives, because the journey itself takes several generations. It'll be the starting butterfly's kids' kids' kids or something that reach the destination. That's the way these things think; over entire generations. We're not used to planning a war like that."

She didn't comment on this particularly pessimistic view of the conflict. Her stroking slowed down a bit, however, and I realized that she was deep in thought.

"Have you, um, have you see their nest? The big one, I mean. Their underground valley?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Last year. It's pretty mesmerizing, isn't it? I served a few weeks in one of the snatch-and grab teams that run in and out collecting samples. I knew the place was large, and I expected it to be dangerous, but I, uh..."

"You didn't expect it to be beautiful."

There was silence for a while before she admitted, "No, I didn't. Is it true they're planning on nuking it?"

"It's being considered, yes. The valley's on top of a tectonic plate, or fault, or something. I don't know the details, but a nuke could set off a massive earthquake. Or even crack the earth. That's not to mention the environmental consequences. And we know from experience that nukes don't necessarily solve the problem."

"I remember when the meteor first came to earth." She said. "I was nine." I could tell, without opening my eyes, that she was smiling at the memory. "I remember our class held a little party for the occasion. We drew pictures of humans shaking tentacles with aliens."

I remembered, too. The meteor had been predicted to hit somewhere in South Africa—I don't recall the exact place—and entire cities had been evacuated in anticipation to the crash. However, the day the large asteroid hit, the world was in for a big surprise.

It slowed down.

Most of the planet's population watched it live on television and still was unable to trust their own eyes: The meteor actually slowed down during its descent, and landed, landed, softly, without making so much as a thud, on a sunny afternoon in June.

It would be several years before scientists understood the complete ramifications of what had happened, but less than thirty-six hours after the impact we knew three things for certain: One, the 'meteor' was partly made up of some sort of propellant, which explained why it was able to slow down and land safely; Two, this meant that the giant chunk of rock, while not exactly a spaceship, certainly served as one, and its purpose had definitely been to transport sentient beings from somewhere in the universe to the Earth. Three—last but not least—inside the rock scientists found nothing but fungi, which baffled them for a while. If a species had actually advanced far enough to send a transport to another world, why was there nothing inside? The Pioneer plaques and the Voyager Records both hold information about Earth and the human race, in spite of the fact that neither was designed as a first contact device. If sentient beings had actually meant for this transport to reach our planet, why would they bother to send nothing but fungi? And if there was no sentient being (and no autopilot, no computer) on board, then how had the meteor known to slow down after it entered our atmosphere? It didn't make sense.

Unless, some argued, the fungi were a means of storing information that we didn't know about. Others believed that whatever extraterrestrial beings had done this were simply trying

to see if they could send live matter safely to Earth, which meant that a bigger expedition would soon follow.

Both sides were wrong.

Less than four days into their stay on our planet, the fungi went into a highly accelerated evolutionary cycle. Less than two weeks later they had become actual plants, growing safely and independently in the soil. It was incredible; it was breaking every known theory we had had in evolution, a process that we believed had to take place over millions and millions of years, and yet, right in front of our eyes, a few handfuls of moss were transforming into several species of plants.

Many believed it to be a miracle, a gift from the Gods – and why not? It had fallen from the sky, without explanation, and at a time when pollution and deforestation had pushed Earth's ecology to a devastating brink, mankind suddenly found itself presented with plants that grew ten times faster than normal, gave ten times more oxygen, and adapted themselves. Fast. The seeds of one plant could grow up into whole different one, defying everything that we knew about both evolution and reproduction. Soon there was a species that gave off ozone and helped curb the greenhouse effect, another that grew underwater and absorbed nutrients from impurities around it, basically acting as a natural water-purifier, and a third that grew exclusively in garbage dumps and could accelerate decomposition of waste products.

Within a matter of years, the alien plants had evolved into eight hundred different species, each serving its own specific purpose, and they had spread over the entire planet, both by themselves and aided by mankind. Soon entire forests of exotic growth began to show up on earth. Earth plants began getting wiped out in many parts of the globe, making way for the new, improved, alien ecology.

They were taking over the planet.

No one expected it, no one saw it happening. After all, the idea that plants, no matter how exotic, could be capable of space travel and had sent themselves here was completely absurd. It wasn't until several Terran species had been pushed into extinction by the invaders that scientists realized what was happening, and by then it was too late.

Their story, as far as has been theorized, is terrifyingly close to that of mankind: they had been the dominant species of whatever planet that they had once called home, and it had become so overcrowded that they had started seeking out different worlds for occupation. How they had figured out how to send chunks of rock across the vastness of space, no one ever found out, but the fungi inside had been some sort of reproductive structure(similar to the aforementioned spores) designed to grow and evolve upon finding a habitable world.

Earth.

And we, humans, so arrogant in our believed superiority, had simply assumed that they were harmless plants and had actually helped in their spread across the globe.

By the time organizations began actively fighting the spread of the aliens, we received another surprise.

The plants fought back.

At first it was simply evolving better resistance to the toxins and chemicals used to kill the alien ecology, but soon, perhaps as soon as they realized that Earth's dominant species had declared war on them, the fighting came up to a more literal level. Rapidly moving, actual fighting plants began to appear on the outer edges of dense growths, protecting the more vulnerable species inside. Branches that could move and strike, and with enough force, easily kill a large-sized man.

This part, at least, wasn't that absurd. After all, rapid plant movement is not an unknown concept, even on Earth. The Venus flytrap closes its trap fast enough to catch insects and arachnids. A touch-me-not produces sudden, very fast movement in response to external stimuli. It wasn't implausible that a species could develop the ability to fight off its attackers.

It didn't stop there, though. The invaders' defense mechanism began getting more and more sophisticated; within the year there were plants that grew hard spiked fruits which exploded when you got near, like a ball-bearing-loaded mine and driving the sharp needles deep enough to kill. Another's leaves grew large enough to trap human beings and suffocate them to death. There was one that released a large, hydrogen-filled stalk, which could fly hundreds of kilometers through the air before dropping its fruit, yet another exploding one, into densely populated areas. Both sides were gearing up for battle.

At first it wasn't taken seriously; how much of a threat could plants be, really? That attitude didn't change until the battle of Greenland, where a gathering of nearly eight thousand humans had attacked a forest, and had promptly been wiped out to the last man. Soon, without exception, an all-out war was raging across the blue planet.

Things grew very serious very fast. Eventually there were species that could use biological and germ warfare, releasing chemicals and viruses into nearby areas and wiping out entire human settlements. By the time a nuclear option was put forward, no nation opposed the extermination of the aliens.

But things weren't that simple. The denser forests could be wiped out via bombings, but most of the alien flora was spread around among humans and animals alike. Nukes couldn't solve the problem completely. They were unnaturally resilient – you could take a hundred troops into a densely grown area, burn the entire thing off the face of the planet, but six

months later there would be more plants shooting up in that exact same place. As I said, they thought in terms of decades and centuries, and didn't care how long they had to wait or how many generations had to be sacrificed to win. More importantly, since the majority of Earth's plant life was now extinct, the invaders were now the major source of oxygen and an integral part of the new eco system. Even now, more than a decade into the war, we needed them.

"And that's why we're fighting a losing war." I declared, snapping myself out of my chain of thought. Mira, who seemed to have fallen asleep, woke with a start.

The world seemed strangely colorful to me; whatever toxin had been in my attacker's thorns was beginning to get a good hold. I felt incredibly drunk.

"What?"

"Losing war." I repeated. "Heh. It's all very funny, if you think about it."

"It is?"

"Sure. We never saw this coming, get it? All those idiots running around making sci-fi movies. None of them ever saw this happening, did they? Hell, we dreamed up alien shape shifting robots. But not this. Bit of a shock for old homo sapiens, getting wiped out by a bunch of stupid plants."

"We haven't been wiped out."

"Not yet." The fatalism, I hate to admit, wasn't a side effect of the toxin; I'd been feeling this way for a while.

"You should try to get some sleep." She said, sounding worried.

That sounds nice, I remember thinking. It was warm and cozy in her arms, and I was already half asleep anyway. The last thing I remember clearly is the rhythmic music of raindrops hitting the roof, and then nothing.

Early the next day a buzzer scout (a small remote-controlled helicopter used for quick, fast scouting, especially in search-and-rescue) discovered the shack and the two of us: Mira slightly disheveled and feverish, me by then definitely dying. About two hours later a rescue team pulled us out of the moor and cass-evaced me to the nearest medical facility, where my leg was amputated to stop the infection and save my life. I went into a coma without ever waking up from the anesthesia, and by the time I opened my eyes my platoon had moved to another front. I never saw any of them again.



Seven months later, however, word reached me that Mira had been strangled to death by a plant during battle.

The war goes on.