

The Tomb

by

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Alec Phirth stared down the bleak, dim corridor as he meandered to his next assignment. Alec was an engineer on the Star Grazer, a cargo freighter transporting construction materials for the Gal Zinge corporation.

He used to work in a shuttle Bay on the planet Paltorra, doing maintenance on small transports. The work was fine, and it paid okay. But he felt like something was missing, like his life had plateaued. He wanted something more exciting in his life. He wanted to travel the stars, and see different worlds.

Alec made the decision to ask for a transfer to a star-ship. He requested a position on either a battle ship or pleasure cruise. Excitement or exotic locations, either one would work for him. What he got was the Star Grazer, a run down old cargo freighter that went back and forth between the same three worlds, towing the same damn cargo.

On top of that, he was a new crew member without seniority, and with nothing amazing on his resume, he was assigned to the ship's maintenance level.

Technically it was an important position. All the ship's power, computers cables, water, and air channeled down the length of the ship through his level before being routed to its destination on the upper levels. It was similar to the trunk of a tree splitting off to its branches. The functions of the whole ship depended on him. But all the same, it was a job no one wanted.

The maintenance level was made up of a single mile long corridor. The walls and ceiling were hidden by a stream of conduits, pipes, and ducts. There were no rooms except for his office, a few supply closets spread along the length of the ship, and hatches leading to more pipes and machinery.

He worked alone on the maintenance level, so amenities were kept to a minimum. This level was not brightly lit, and clean like the levels above. There was one light every few feet, the bare metallic walls were gray and grimy. It was cold too, the heat on this level was kept low to conserve power, or conserve money more specifically. There was no one to talk to, and it was silent except for the thrum of the ventilation fans, the drip of leaking pipes, and the crackle of flickering overhead lights. His only company were the vanta rats that managed to sneak on board along with the cargo.

It was for all these reasons the maintenance level was referred to as "the Tomb".

He hated the tomb. Hated the silent, windowless tunnel that had become his world. Hated the solitary, repetitive nature of his work. He desperately wanted to be rotated to the upper levels of the ship, a world he only got to glimpse in his off hours. But it would be at least 6 months before he was eligible to rotate part time to the upper levels.

He honestly wasn't sure he could last that long. But then he didn't have much choice. You couldn't just break your contract with the Gal Zinge, you had to wait for a transfer to another position within the galactic corporation. There was no 2 week notice or just walking out. Not if you wanted to work for the corporation again. That wouldn't have been such a big deal if they didn't own everything within 30 light years.

No he would have to bide his time. Wait to be rotated to the upper levels, or transferred planet side. In the mean time he would have to continue with his daily grind. 7AM, check power levels. 9AM fix broken ventilator in section E. 11AM, replace filter in water recyclers. Noon, have lunch top side and listen to the ships' other three engineers ask him "How ya enjoying the tomb, kid?" and "How's life in the underworld?" 1PM, check oxygen processors. 2PM replace breaker in section G. 4PM replace wires chewed by vanta rats. 5PM, check vanta traps.

The day went, on trudging up and down the long corridor of the tomb. The chores varied from day to day, but they all blurred together after a while. The only thing interesting that ever happened was

last week, fixing a small hull breach. A chunk of asteroid, about the size of a base ball slammed into the belly of the ship, hard enough to puncture the thick metal plating. The other engineers from top level had to come down and help. They all had to dig out their space suits and welding gear.

The odd thing was the ships computer didn't register the impact, only the hull breach. The tear was tear strange too. The metal wasn't bent inward like you would expect, it was just gone, like it was chewed away. Either way, it had to be moving pretty damn faster to puncture 6 inch, reenforced plating. And pieces of the asteroid were scatter on the floor. Weirdest damn rock I ever saw, he thought to himself. They were concave shards, smooth on the inside, with a film of green gunk on it.

After that patch job, everything went back to the same old boring crap. Actually, he recalled, one thing was different after that. Ever since, the vanta rats had been getting out of hand chewing on the power cables. Usually when he went to fix the cables, there were some fried vanta's sprawled out on the floor. But not lately. Just the chewed cables, and no crispy culprits.

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Alec was currently on his way to section I, something was blocking the air flow in the ventilation. He suspected a ceiling panel fell loose and was blocking the vent.

As he approach the section the sound of squeaking, and tiny claws click on metal made Alec look down. He jumped as he realized a dozen Vanta rats were scampering between his feet. He watched as the small red furred, ball-shaped creatures scurried past him and continued down the corridor. It was strange, they would normally run away from him when he approached, not towards him. Something must have spooked them, he shrugged.

He disregarded the vantas' behavior and began to set up the small step ladder he carried with him. He paused when he heard the clicking of more claws on metal, this time coming from the vent above his head.

More vantas, he wondered? But the sound had too much weight behind it than a pack of the

small rodents could produce.

For a moment Alec considered going to get someone. But then he had a vision of the senior engineers all having a good laugh at the new recruit for getting spooked by harmless vantas. No he was going to have to toughen up. After all the Tomb had a way of playing trick on you. The flickering lights, background symphony of dripping water and creaking pipes. They were all fuel for an overactive imagination.

Alec climbed the step ladder and popped the vent off the overhead duct. He reached up and hoisted his head and shoulders up into the darkened shaft. Alec groaned aloud as his hand touched something cold, wet and sticky on the floor of the duct.

Alec pulled a flashlight from his belt. The beam illuminated a kind of green slime covering his hand. There was a puddle of it at the foot of the vent. It seemed familiar, he tried to place from where.

Then a series of clicks from behind caused him to spin around on the step ladder and nearly lose his balance. He went to shine his light towards the sound, but before he could something rushed out of the shadows of the duct at him.

It slammed into him with enough force to knock him from the step ladder. Alec and his attacker fell from the ventilation shaft and crashed to the hard metal floor.

Pain shot through Alec's back and head, but he didn't have time to deal with it. The shadowy creature that knocked him from the duct was still clinging to his chest. Long spindly legs gripped his head, while two sets of pinchers reached for his throat.

He pushed and yanked at the creature while rolling across the floor, but it refused to budge. Staving it off with one hand, his free hand reached to his tool belt for a wrench. He struck at the creature with the heavy tool and sent it sailing across the floor.

Alec leapt to his feet and scanned the floor for his attacker. By the wall of the corridor, he

spotted it. The creature was on it's back. Six spindly legs flailed wildly in the air. With a jerk, it managed to flip over and right itself. For a second Alec got a glimpse at the creature, it had a black gnarled exoskeleton, 3 pairs of glowing green eyes, and a segmented body. Alec's brain was just starting to process what he was seeing when the creature darted towards him again, all six legs working furiously.

Out of fear, Alec pitched the wrench at the charging creature. His aim was good, but the vicious, and nimble alien dodged it with lightening speed. It simply hissed in annoyance at the failed attack and continued forward.

“Oh shit!” Alec spat out in surprise as he tried to run backwards away from the intruder. But the creature was too fast. It got within two feet and leapt through the air at Alec. Again it hit him in the chest and knocked him off his feet.

The pair rolled across the floor once again, while the creature's sharp, barbed legs dug into his shoulders and ribs. The attacker's double pincher jaws got dangerously close to his face. He felt the creature's drool running down his neck.

Alec reached for his belt, this time he managed to get his laser cutter. Switching on the tool, a thin red beam extended an inch and a half from the tip of the device. With a single swipe of his arm, he ran the laser cutter over creature. There was a hiss and a crackle, followed by two of the creature's legs, and it's head flying off its body.

Alec frantically thrashed at the creature's corpse, knocking it to the ground. He proceed to kick at it with his feet until the remains were a comfortable distance away.

Exhausted, he laid back down on the floor and caught his breath.

“The hell with waiting for a transfer. Thirty light years isn't that far to move.”