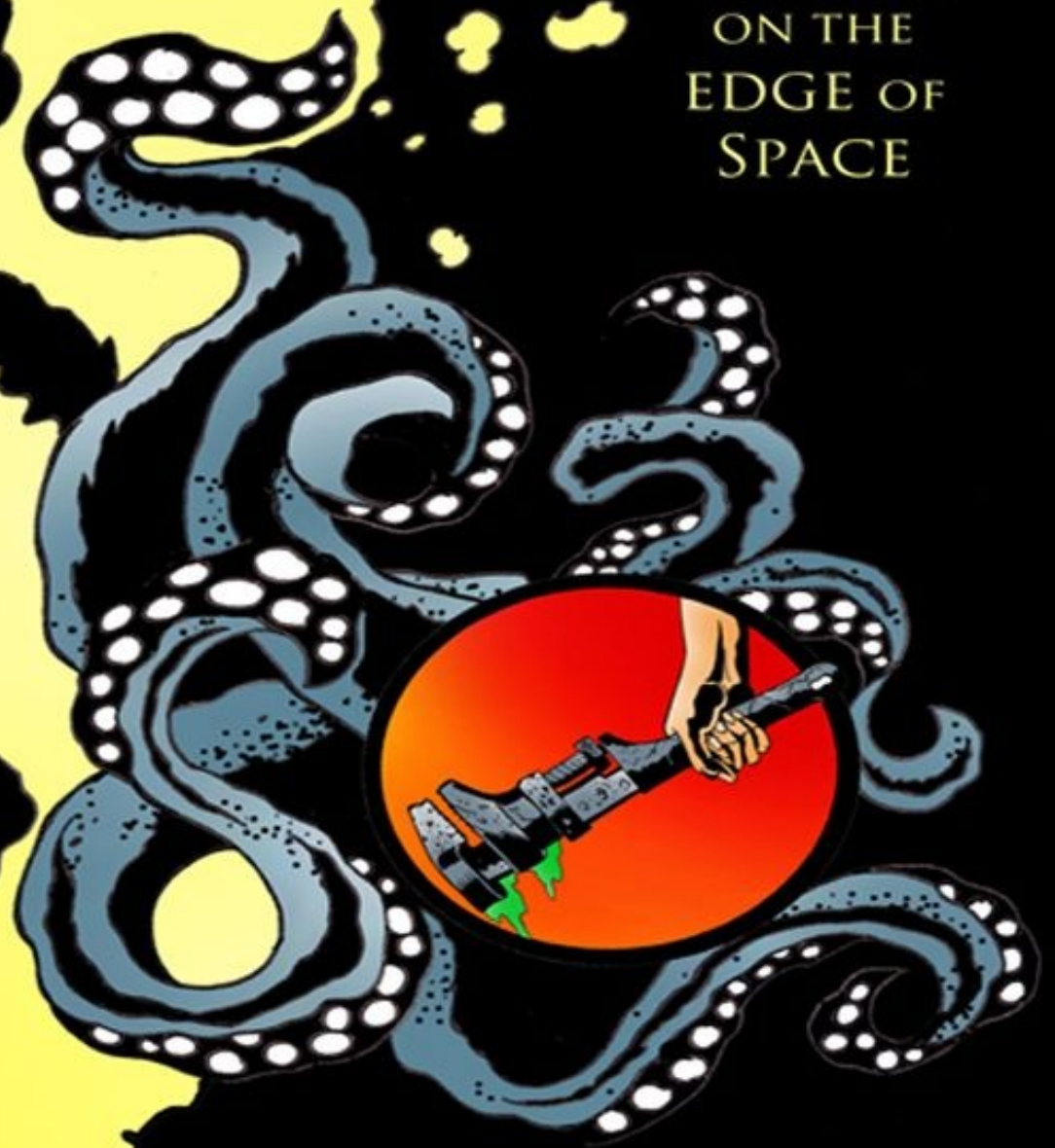


LOVECRAFTIAN
TERROR
ON THE
EDGE OF
SPACE



**THAT WAY LIES
MADNESS**

JAMES R. TUCK

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MADNESS**

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Blammo!

ALSO BY JAMES R. TUCK

The Deacon Chalk: Occult Bounty Hunter Series

THAT THING AT THE ZOO

BLOOD AND BULLETS

SPIDER'S LULLABY

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Thank you for respecting the hard work of James R. Tuck.

Dedicated to the Missus.
She keeps all the scary at bay.

Introduction

Deep space.

It's scary.

Like the ocean, which is the closest thing most of us can relate to, the void of space invokes a primordial fear. It makes us feel insignificant and completely helpless.

The unknowable nature of the void, the faceless apathy, of the thing is a stark reminder of our brief, fragile existence. We are nothing to the vastness of the outer universe. Insignificant. Tiny. Puny.

The same holds true for the Cthulhu Mythos. Elder Gods are alien and vast, so cold in their inhumanity, so unlike us in every way.

And they do not care for your worthless human life. You are nothing to them. At best you are a morsel, a thing stuck in their molars as they inexorably grind on through eternity and you blink out of existence.

It's frightening stuff.

Enough to give you nightmares and chills and keep you up through the empty night.

That's why I had to explore both.

The result is in your hands, waiting on you to turn the page, to get to it, to quit pussy-footing around and face the horror, the terror, of something that disregards you so thoroughly.

It's not personal.

But that just makes it all the more terrifying.

This book also contains my twisted zombie love story HE STOPPED LOVING HER TODAY. I love this story. It's the first thing I had published. The Deacon Chalk series had sold to Kensington but this story beat it to publication by months. The nice folks over at One Buck Horror put it in their collection ONE BUCK ZOMBIES. I've put a bit more polish on it, so it's not as raw as that first published version, but for all intents and purposes, it remains the same.

Enjoy these two tales of terror!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to The Missus, my stalwart companion in all things editorial.

Thank you to the folks at MassForward, my writing group (although that isn't our name I just cannot help myself) for reading the main part of this not once but twice.

Thanks to Ed at **Orson Scott Card's Intergalactic Medicine Show** for turning down the version of this story I sent him. It sucked then. I don't know what I was doing at that time with the POV shift. You were right.

Mega kudos go to the folks over at One Buck Horror for previously printing *He Stopped Loving Her Today* in **ONE BUCK ZOMBIES**. It was my first time being in print and really boosted my confidence. You guys do an ace product and are truly fabulous.

THAT WAY LIES
MADNESS

Chapter 1

I discovered blood and rust have something in common.

It's not the colors they share, rich dark reds and sunset-orange tinged browns.

It's not their smell, heavy with iron and hemoglobin.

It's that they taste the same in your mouth.

Metallic and slightly salty.

Where tang moves from being a sound or the hasp of a blade to being a flavor.

I pushed myself off the steel floor of the ship's hold, peeling my cheek free where dried blood had bonded it to the rusted surface. My tongue pulled in, shoving blood out from under and spitting it to the floor. It was gritty. Specks and pieces of rust stuck where it lolled out of my mouth while I was unconscious. That's when I noticed the taste.

I didn't like that.

My hand scrabbled around, fingers closing on a sprocket wrench. Tiny hatchmarks grooved in the handle bit my palm. I stood, ignoring the bruise that my body had become, and hefted the three foot hunk of rusted steel. The wrench was busted, the lower jaw and spring piston sheared away, leaving just the curved steel spine. It would never turn another sprocket. Without it, if the FTL Drive transfer went out again we'd all be stranded, drifting in the depths of space on the ass end of the universe.

I didn't care.

Conceptual death seemed far off the event horizon compared to what waited somewhere on the other side of the ship.

I took a step, tightening my grip.

It was time for some payback.

Chapter 2

Choking.

Gasping.

Throat burning.

No.

Air.

I jolted awake, acid burning the back of my throat, no oxygen in the capsule, polycarbonate lid opaque with condensation.

Tiny droplets of moisture clung, hung, and stretched; shaking as I struggled against the harsh imprisonment of the stability straps. Muscles *pulled*, strained to tearing. Eyes wide, I watched one droplet break free, falling away slowly in the low gravity of the cryo-capsule, tumbling and rolling through the vacuum. Tiny pieces of it separated, clinging in micro-orbit around the center.

It fell.

And kept falling.

My mind clawed at the fact that I was trapped in a coffin of technology while one tiny part of me was fascinated by that droplet, hyper-focused on its descent. Dark fuzz flickered along the edge of my vision, growing with a buzzing in my ears. As the droplet fell the inky blackness narrowed, closing to surround it, to lock my concentration on it and only it. I wanted to shut my eyes but somewhere inside I knew that once closed they would never open again.

Closer the droplet fell.

Closer the darkness drew.

Tighter.

Smaller.

BANG!

The drop slammed into my eye.

It flashed across my cornea, burning like saltwater as the lid sprang up. Condensation rained on my face, so cold it felt like sleet. Recycled air rushed into my lungs, swelling them and driving the darkness from my vision.

A face swarmed over me, surrounded by a mammoth tangle of wiry red whiskers. Shaggy, auburn hair in fat, knotted dreads swung into the cryo-capsule. They tickled my nose, smelling like roasted coffee. Smile lines carved deep beside green eyes and a mouth that split to show big, white, horse teeth.

"Holy hell Molly, how long're you planning on sleepin'?"

My voice lodged in my throat, hoarse from disuse. I swallowed and forced it loose. "Get me out of this damn box."

Hannigan smiled again, his head bobbed, making dreads jounce up and down. "Will do, boss."

There was a hiss as the hydraulics released the straps pinning me inside the cryo-capsule. I groaned as full gravity kicked in. All my muscles felt like they were being pulled off the bones. I breathed through it, capturing breath then releasing it slow and easy. The pain evened out, lessening to only a sick ache housed in my joints. Sitting up, I put a hand on my condensation spattered forehead.

The wet on my fingers made me feel dirty.

The sleep deck bustled with activity. Everyone was awake, the air heavy with ozone and enclosed humanity. The oxygen scrubbers could only handle so much at once. The meaty smell told me they were pushed to their capacity. They would catch up eventually, but my stomach still lurched.

Sleep sickness.

Everyone reacts differently to being cryogenically frozen. Some folks wake just fine, some are disoriented and sick as hell.

I dry heaved, vomiting the nothing I'd lived on while in suspended animation. I was one of the lucky ones in the second group.

I groaned again. "Somebody kill me now." The dry heaving didn't make my voice easier to use.

Hannigan belonged to the first group. The ones who woke up downright damn *refreshed*. For a split second I hated him. It hit me in a lightningstrike of irrational anger. He patted my arm with a freckled hand the size of my head.

"My mother always said, 'be careful what you wish for, someone might come along and grant it'."

"My mom used to say, 'fuck what your mother used to say'."

Hannigan's whisker bramble split in another wide grin. He helped me to my feet. "Click-Clack wants to see you."

Leaning on the side of the cryo-capsule, I rubbed the ache in my temples. "Don't start that shit. It's Pilot Klactac and you know it." My fingers stuck in tight ringlets of thick hair.

I'll have to get that buzzed again before I go back to Sleep.

Hannigan's laugh was a booming thing, rolling through the sleep deck and bouncing around off the steel walls. It felt like a hammer against my swollen brain. "I do, I do. But you know how I feel about that buggy little bastard."

I stood, stretched, and began walking towards the bridge of the ship without looking back. I did know how he felt.

I just didn't give a damn.

Chapter 3

“Good *-tik-* to see you awake Miss Muldoon.”

“Molly.”

Pilot Klactac turned his head, long neck twisting on its middle joint. The rest of his body remained facing the ship's console. Segmented eye globes didn't blink, lights from a multitude of screens shining off each little diamond shape on their surface. His mandibles swung back and forth. “Excuse *tik-* me?”

“It's just Molly. Muldoon was my asshole ex-husband.”

“I *-tik-* see.” He continued to study me, head tilted.

I shifted. “You wanted something?”

Klactac's body turned. Both sets of upper appendages rotated up and around to continue fiddling with the console behind him. “We have dropped out *-tik-* of hyperspace. I need you to check the FTL Drive and bring it *-tik-* back online.”

“Hannigan's on duty this quarter. He's capable.”

“Not as *-tik-* capable as you.”

“True.” I looked at the view port set in the nose of the ship. The sliding metal shutters were close tight against the vacuum of deep space. Rust patterns of swirls and whorls traced the surface, a delicate lace of browns and oranges.

The ship, my ship, was birthed in deep space, a wonder of organic steel, advanced science, and retro-engineered alien tech. It continually regenerated itself. Grow, decay, die, regenerate. Grow, decay, die, regenerate. Over and over and over again. It was how the ship could survive the rigors of deep space travel.

Cosmic rays and radiation were absorbed by the ship, protecting the people who symbiotically lived inside. The radiation killed it slowly, creating the rust that covered every surface. This sparked the continual regeneration cycle. The ship had no sentience, just memory of form, each part replacing itself from itself.

It was a damn miracle.

That, tied with the discovery of hyperdrive, had allowed mankind to take to the stars. To seek out new life.

New life like the Klatuu who lived on a world named Hove by our first explorers. They were a tribal society based on carbon technology and welcomed humanity to their corner of the universe. They introduced us to their neighbors in space and, being the only other star-traveling species, agreed

to partner with us to push further, to forge ahead, to draw up to the furthest edge of the known galaxy

My Klatuu pilot clicked to get my attention. I kept staring at the shutters. I hate it when I drift off

Damn Sleep sickness always made me fuzzy-headed.

"-tik- Molly? What are you waiting for?"

I turned to him. "I'm realizing that I'm doing you a favor."

"No, you are -tik- doing your job."

Lowering my eyes from the pattern on the shutters, I stared at him evenly. "I'm contemplating using my skills and knowledge *after* being pulled out of Sleep *early* by *your* order."

He nodded acquiescence.

I continued. "I *hate* being woken up early. Contractually I'm never supposed to be. So if I do my job at this time I'll be doing you a favor."

Klactac nodded again.

"Open the viewport shutters and let me see the stars."

He made a hissing buzz sound from his head. If bugs could sigh, that's what it sounds like. "We need to get -tik- back to hyperdrive. We are losing -tik- time."

I shrugged. "Time is relative."

Outside hyperspace three weeks would pass while we crossed the universe. Because of the weird physics of hyperspace, the common name for the pocket dimension we punch a hole through with the hyperdrive, inside the ship it would be twelve years. Crew worked one quarter each year and slept the other three. That way we come out the other side of return only six years older rather than near a quarter of a century.

I crossed my arms over my chest. "I'm still due for six months more Sleep. I can gladly wait to fix the damn ship then."

Klactac sighed again. This was a long one. It sounded tired even though it was a series of hisses tripped by the occasional click. "Molly. Every moment -tik- we spend out of hyperdrive extends the -tik- time away from our homes and family."

"Not a problem for me."

Long fingers came up and rubbed the ridge above Klactac's unblinking eyes. "That is right. -tik- I forgot. I did download your RFID chip's information. I am. . ."

My face tightened. The skin at my temples and the corners of my mouth pulled taut as my jaw clenched, teeth grinding.

My head began to pound.

Don't bring her up. Don't speak to me about her you bug-eyed fuck. Don't. You. Dare.

My hand curled into a fist. Every knuckle popped.

Klactac turned slowly to face the console. His scratchy voice was low, as gentle as it could sound. "We cannot -tik- take long. The view port glass can only handle the radiation to a level of 1912

Victorhess." Fingers on three hands moved over the console, dancing across switches, buttons, and knobs.

A crack appeared in the center of the swirled rust, splitting it like lightning had the old oak tree behind the house where my daughter had been born. I let go the breath I'd been holding.

My hand unclenched.

The shutters peeled back slowly, vibration grinding through the floor, rattling into my shinbones.

They moved like a girl undressing, her soon-to-be-lover watching for the first time. Unveiling slowly. Teasing. Parceling out the good stuff out one slow, shy inch at a time.

Stars spilled into the gap, shining with cold light. My eye couldn't fathom the depth of eldritch darkness even as it was punctured by those detached, unconcerned pinpricks. Strange constellations wove around the few planets there on the edge of the universe. My mind boggled at the sheer size of all, all thought shut down in the face of such sheer, primordial enormity. It stretched, vast and malignant; the void so unconcerned with fragile humanity that it would snuff out my tiny little life if it weren't for the tiny little ship keeping me safe.

There was no mercy in the void, just a vast, alien hostility to even the concept of my life. Dread clotted my throat at the very thought of that hostility turning in my direction.

Eyes slammed shut, I turned away, pushing out the breath held captive in my chest. I'd seen enough. There was nothing out there. Nothing past this.

"Close it. Just close it." I swallowed. "I'll get us online."

Klactac couldn't blink as I turned and strode away.

Chapter 4

"Somebody hand me the one twenty-five mill wrench."

The access port to the FTL Drive was narrow around my head, shoulders, and chest as I hung upside down. Sweat beaded, running down my face, dripping away and falling down the port. An itch burrowed under the band of my headlamp. My arm stretched up behind me, hand open and waiting for the tool I'd asked for. My fingers waved impatiently as I hung, feet dangling in the air outside the port opening.

"Anytime you want to get to it." Sarcasm cut my voice as I called out.

A familiar weight settled in my hand, a rusty steel shape, rough as the callouses it rubbed across my palm. My fingers closed around the handle of the sprocket wrench.

About damn time.

My arm moved but the wrench snagged, pulling in my grip. I tugged.

It tugged back.

Something brushed across my knuckles, something light, almost feathery. It tickled across the back of my hand and wrapped around my wrist.

Somebody's always got to be screwing around.

Kicking, I pushed out of the access port, landing with a thud of boots on the organic iron walkway. I still held the sprocket wrench, looking for the asshole who was playing jokes.

No one was there.

I looked down at the tool in my grip.

A creature curled around the end of it.

It was small enough to fit in two hands. A segmented, blue-black shell covered its back. A hundred tiny legs waved along the edge of the oval shell, moving in a ripple from front to back and around again. It had a tiny head with a tiny face complete with beaded black eyes and a button nose. Two long whip-like antennae sprouted from that head wrapped around my hand, slithering and undulating like some kind of obscene tongue.

Jerking the wrench popped it free of the creature's hold. Its antennae pulled loose from my hand, waving wildly in the air. Without thinking I swung, hitting the creature with the wrench. It flew across the FTL Drive bay, squealing like a warning whistle as it sailed through the air. It bounced off the side of the FTL transfer casing with a dull metal thunk.

Hannigan ran over, metal ramp banging with every heavy step. Long red dreads swayed around his shoulders, fwipping against his waist, as his bulk moved onto the walkway. Scooping up the creature,

he cradled it in big meaty hands. It cowered, burrowing against his chest. A wide crack gaped across its shell, pink movement like writhing worms deep inside the split.

I pointed the wrench at the thing. "What the *hell* is *that*!"

"Easy boss, easy." Hannigan had one hand out in a peaceful gesture. "It's a trillusk. It's harmless."

"Where the fuck did it come from?"

"We picked them up a few planets ago. The scientists got them to catalog, but they turned out to be smart. Not human smart, but trained monkey smart. They only want to help and they're good at it too. They fetch and carry, bringing us stuff we need." He held it out. "Here, make up to it. You scared the poor thing half to death."

I watched it, eyes narrowed.

It was curled in on itself, tiny legs interlocking, keeping its shell curved up to protect it. The small face watched me warily, quivering on Hannigan's palm. It *was* kind of cute, and it hadn't done anything wrong. My hand started to rise, reaching to touch it.

Something moved in the corner of my eye.

Turning ever so slightly, I saw another trillusk tucked behind a conduit cover. I scanned the FTL Drive bay. I knew the place like the back of my own hand. There were dozens of small, black-shelled creatures sitting in nooks and crannies, snuggled away here and there. All of them watched me.

My hand fell to my side.

"You keep that damn thing away from me or I'll do a helluva lot more than scare it half to death." Hannigan gestured with the wrench. The small creature hissed, turning its face away. Hannigan stroked its shell with his big, blunt fingers mindful of the crack I'd had made.

The trillusk turned, moving up his arm on a wave of tiny legs. The skin on my neck crawled as the creature wrapped itself around and nestled in the crook of Hannigan's shoulder. It peeked out underneath his mass of dreads. Its hundred tiny legs continued to trill along the big man's skin. His eyelids fluttered with pleasure.

Bile rose in my throat on a wave of revulsion.

"Do you two need a room?"

Hannigan's cheeks flamed scarlet above the wild beard. Veins popped on swollen temples, running over brow and up to red hairline. "You don't got to like 'em Molly, but leave the little fellas alone." His finger came up. "We're friends. I'm the only one who can handle your attitude since your daughter but if you go mistreatin' the trillusks it won't go well between us."

Cold washed over me. I took a step back. The sprocket wrench dropped to the end of my hand, its weight held behind my back, ready to swing. My voice was quiet, the words precise. "Are you threatening me?"

Go low. Take the knee. No matter how big a man is he can't hurt you if he can't stand.

Hannigan's palms rose. "Hey, hey, take it easy now. I wouldn't do that." His hands waved back and

forth, meaty flags of surrender. "You'd kick my ass. I'm just saying, everybody on board likes the trillusks, so you should be careful with them."

I looked around at the other crew moving about the FTL bay. Humans and Klatuu worked separately and in groups, swarming like bees over the building-sized FTL Drive. They were all still working, but I felt them watch me from eye corners and eye segments as they did.

Every one of them had a trillusk nestled against their neck or within arms reach.

Another shiver chased down my spine. I turned back to the access port I'd been working in, not looking at Hannigan when I spoke.

"Just let me get to work so I can get the hell back to Sleep."

Chapter 5

“What do you *-tik-* mean there is nothing wrong with the FTL Drive?”

“I mean exactly what I said. There's nothing wrong with the damn drive.”

“You must *-tik-* be mistaken.”

“I don't fucking think so.”

“Then why did *-tik-* we drop out of hyperspace?”

“It's not the FTL Drive so it's not my job to know. Can I go back to Sleep now?”

“No. Stay awake until *-tik-* we are sure you are not needed.”

“Whatever.”

Chapter 6

The cot was hard, the thin mattress doing little to cushion the organic iron shelf underneath it. The iron-rich scent of rust hovered in my nostrils. It would take several more hours for my nose to fill with it after the pure oxygen of Sleep. Hours before I stopped smelling it with every breath.

My eyes burned from being awake, skin jittering and nerves jangling from a stream of caffeine and swallowed amphetamines. The reason I signed on to this ship was the nine months of uninterrupted Sleep. There were no dreams in a cryo-capsule. Dreams were the enemy. Dreams were where memories turn sharp and barbed, snagging the skin of my mind like a fishhook.

Dreams were where I saw my daughter.

Sweet as rain during an Earth springtime and twice as bright as Sol, my daughter had been everything in life that was good. She had softened my sharp edges, given me a love for life that my own childhood had nearly beaten out of me. My daughter was an angel sent from Heaven.

And then came the cancer.

For all the miracles of traveling through the stars in living iron ships mankind still hadn't found a way to stop tiny cells from going wrong and killing wonderful, beautiful, innocent little girls.

I watched as Shania shrank, pain eating away her light. It had taken two slow, agonizing years before that bastard God finally said *enough* and took her away.

Shit.

Don't lose it.

My hands were wet and warm as I sat up. I took them from my face, wiping them on my pants. They left dark stains that would dry into a light salt crust unless they were washed.

I wouldn't bother washing them.

Tearing my mind away from painful memories I went back to contemplating the FTL Drive. It was in perfect working order. I adjusted and tuned it, but all the transfer sprockets that turned the photon blades were in good shape. The Core Sac had plenty of fission and the dampening rods were all in check. The ship didn't drop out of hyperspace because of my engine.

Anything outside of the engine I couldn't help with.

A low shishing noise drew my attention. It sounded a little like a pod door shooshing open, but quieter. Much quieter.

And it was inside my room.

Pulling my feet off the floor, I flicked the incandescent on the table beside the bed. Light splashed across the room, driving shadows into the corners and on the other side of the furniture.

A trillusk sat on the table watching me.

It was the same creature I whacked with the sprocket wrench, the crack still in its chitinous shell, pink flesh wriggling under the surface. It sat up as if on hind legs instead of a fringe of tiny, trilling fimbria. The upper fimbria were holding a small foil-wrapped package. The trillusk rolled forward, laying it on the edge of the table. Sitting back, its shell scraped the iron surface like a match being struck.

I stared at the foil square. It was a piece of chocolate.

Chocolate is next to impossible to have on a deep space trek. Every ounce and every inch has to be accounted for, luxuries quickly get replaced with necessities. I hadn't had a piece of chocolate since Earth. My mouth became moist with the thought of the rich sweetness, mind running to the sensual feel of my last piece of chocolate. Heavy on the back of my tongue, melting slowly, dripping down my throat in a thick, sweet syrup. The physical memory was so strong I could even smell it, like coffee with every trace of bitter pulled from it until only the ambrosia was left, luscious and toothsome.

I reached toward the candy.

My eyes fluttered just a little as my hand drew closer to the sweet, gold-foiled temptation.

The trillusk made a small cooing sound.

My hand stopped.

I remembered the way Hannigan's eyes had fluttered when the trillusk moved up to his neck. I thought of the candy held by tiny legs. Tiny legs touching it. Fondling it.

My stomach turned, acid spilling up onto the back of my throat, washing away the curdled memory of velvet sweetness. Slowly, I moved until my back pressed against the iron wall of the pod, eyes locked on the small creature in front of me.

The trillusk waddled closer, nudged the candy with its nose, and sat back.

"No."

The trillusk moved forward, picked the candy up and dropped it on the bed. It rolled toward me, bouncing along the hills and valleys of the blanket. My leg twitched, drawing up to keep that tainted sweet from touching me.

"Fuck you."

The trillusk turned to look at me with tiny beaded eyes. It lowered its head, looking hurt.

A small part of me softened.

It turned its back, hunched over, tiny body shaking like it was crying. I relaxed my leg, the softness growing inside me. I reached out. The trillusk shivered, segments of shell clicking edge to edge.

My hand stopped moving.

The trillusk was bigger than it had been a moment ago.

It wasn't much, but I could tell. I'm an engineer, trained to measure in tiny increments. The trillusk

had swollen, filling more space on the table. Wider, taller, thicker. I moved back, eyes casting around for a weapon while still trying to watch the creature between me and the door. Strain shot electric jabs of pain from the corners of my eyes.

Slowly, the trillusk turned. Air squeezed out of my lungs, a band of dread clamped across my chest as its head rotated. The face was gone. Cute beady eyes and button nose wiped away leaving only shallow indentions and a thin line for its mouth. It twitched. The line pulled apart in a sheet of mucus that tore into ribbons and shreds.

Teeth.

Sharp triangles of razored enamel jutted haphazardly, a hedge of murder and carnage. Yellow, putrescent ichor dripped off chitin edges and sharp points. Two sucker-filled tendrils flailed from the throat, waving pink in the air as both sides of the mouth yawned apart, opening wide. The body turned to match the head. I watched in horror as the creature's underbelly split open with a sound of tearing paper. Tentacles spilled out in a wash of sticky foam. They flopped and twisted, moss green and spotted dark with decay.

A putrid smell rode the air, smothering the breath in my lungs. Bile spilled over my gorge. I tried to hold it in, hot and sick behind my teeth, throat convulsing, mind screaming for me to swallow. My throat rebelled, spewing sickness out onto the bed. My eyes tore from the thing on the table as I turned away.

Looking back it was gone.

A trail of foamy slime smeared from the puddle on the desk. Wiping my mouth, I rocked to my knees. Slowly I peered over the edge, the floor revealed in inches. The trail ran down the iron table, puddling on the floor before shooting off by the bottom of the bed shelf. My spine grated on itself, tension singing in my shoulders as I turned, eyes following the frothy rut. It disappeared around the corner where the bed shelf met the floor.

Pain shot up my neck as I leaned, trying to stay on the bed but still see the trail. I leaned further. A small splash of vertigo slapped me and I felt like I would pitch headlong to the iron floor. Blood ran cold in my veins.

Slime puddled at the wall, streaking up.

Behind me.

I turned to see the mutated trillusk suctioned to the wall, tentacles waving, teeth chomping. Foul air flushed from it watering my eyes. With a high pitched shrill and a wet sucking sound it leapt off the wall towards my face.

I fell, arms crossed in front of me. The trillusk hit heavy, like a bag of dismembered body parts. My own fist smacked my nose, gush of blood hot and salty down my face. Obscene tentacles wrapped my arms, slapped my face, waved toward my throat. Blood smeared from my upper lip out across my cheeks.

Fingers clamped on smooth shell, the many-legged rim cutting my palms. Tentacles pulsed against my arms, rubbery skin gripping, tacky where it touched. They pulled, trying to break my grip and late on. The mouth shot forward, snapping the air in front of me. It hissed, spattering yellow ichor against my skin. The droplets began to sizzle and burn. One tentacle stretched under my arms, circling my neck.

It flexed, slithering tighter, squeezing my trachea. Breath was cut off by a sharp, shooting pain under my jaw. Choking. Fuzzy spots of light popped on the edge of my vision, becoming brighter as the tunnel of black closed around them. Coherent thought fled. Mindless with panic my fingers tapped a frantic rhythm on the shell. My arms began to shake with strain, growing heavy, falling down.

My finger found the hole in the shell.

Without thinking, I shoved it in.

Deep.

It was *cold*. My mind flew to the void of space as the shock of it painted my nervous system with adrenaline. My finger was numb except for the bone deep ache the cold brought. That and the feel of tiny things wriggling against my finger.

Crawling.

Moving.

Biting.

The trillusk screamed through a mouthful of murder.

The tentacle circling my throat whipped away, trying to flail at my hand. Sweet air rushed into my lungs, driving darkness from my vision. Anger surged, rushing after the adrenaline burn in my nerve endings. I whipped the thing in my hands around and drove it into the unyielding iron corner of the table.

It buckled with a deep CRACK! and a squeal from the thing that sounded like a steam whistle. Raising it over my head I drove it down again. Rage ran through me like rocket fuel as I smashed the thing into the table over and over and over again. I smashed it until the shell was pieces in my hands and tentacles hung and quivered. Slime coated my arms, spattered across my face and chest. Already drying into a shellac, it pulled my skin tight as it shrunk.

Strength fell away as rage dissipated. I cried between deep, sucking breaths. Disgusted, I dropped the shattered shell and its contents which quivered and leaked onto the organic iron floor.

I sat on the edge of the bed, the abomination steaming between my workboots. A whirlygig of terror, violence, and exhaustion lapped at me, threatening to pull me under.

I was reaching for my pillow when the door to the room swooshed open.

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