

The Machine

It was back in the old days. The days when I was an explorer – when we were all explorers. Explorers in a vast new frontier, each of us with a ship, a gun, maybe even a team if we were lucky. After all, it tends to get lonely sitting out there on the edge of space, trying to map and colonize and survive.

Family didn't mean much then, friends even less. You never knew if someone was going to turn around and put one in your forehead for some habitable piece of land you'd found. You didn't hear much about heroes. But I'll tell you – I'll tell you about Jack.

It was probably my third year out in the black sea. I'd seen some by then, learned some, even killed some. For a few days rumor had been floating around about a treasure in the north Castor system – some kind of magic machine. Naturally all of the braver ones flocked there like ravens to a feast. We were confident, fearless, greedy, all of us. What we didn't count on was the Laucenian militia getting there right on our heels.

Mostly it was gunshots and the hiss of leaking oxygen from breached field gear. A couple of ships blew before they even got on the asteroid. I'd luckily parked mine on the dark side, wary of other hunters after a recent treasure squabble resulting in a bruised rib and a bullet in the calf.

I saw him jump out of his ship right before a cruiser slug caved in its nose. He landed on a hill a few dozen meters out from me. We didn't have time to stop and shoot each other so we just kept moving, running into the cave on the surface of the asteroid. I think we were one of the only ones that made it inside. The ones that did ventured into the obviously man-made tunnel, another way out our only chance of survival.

We spent two, maybe three hours combing those endless tunnels for something that could save us. It seemed like the militia had stopped outside to regroup so we had a bit of a lead. He was the one who pointed out the door when we walked past it. It was ornate and heavy, and that made us all the more excited.

I won't tell you what the machine was. I'll tell you that it was powerful; that it was beautiful; that it was sacrilegious; that it was, above all, impossible. I'm not quite sure how we didn't all go mad the moment we walked through that door. I remember we all looked around – around, because the room *was* the machine – and then a few of us understood. And I saw the lights of greed light up in all their eyes like I had never seen before, and I saw hands drop to holsters.

It was too late for them by then, of course. I'll tell you with full certainty that rarely have I met the man who's matched me on my draw, but never have I seen anyone shoot like him. Barrels blazed and all that was left in the smoke after it was done was me and him. I think he could tell that I hadn't done it for the greed, because he'd

stopped with his gun trained on me. Then he lowered it and said the only words I'd ever hear from him: "Go." I asked his name, and he told me.

I gave him my field battery, since it only seemed right. And the last I saw of him, he'd settled onto the floor with a long range rifle aimed down the tunnel and the two fusion batteries wired into his det pack outside the door. I ran the other way then, away from the militia, the machine, and him. I got off the planet. He blew the pack, taking himself, the militia, and the doorway that could only have been made by hands greater than ours with him.

It wasn't much of a time for heroes. But there were a few. And then there was him.