



XENOS GENESIS  
THE STOWAWAY  
SHORT STORY

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It was the smell that Carrie noticed first – an organic scent, which clashed with the omnipresent chemical odours that seemed to emanate from the leaking pipes and dripping valves to taint the air in the access tunnels.

She was used to the chemicals. This wasn't her first stowaway, and she had long learned to locate, then avoid, the worst patches of a new ship such as this one, the Remus, where the air in junction 47 made her eyes water, and the atmosphere of junction 37 made her skin prickle and itch. She didn't like to think why.

But she wasn't in those places now. She was in her favourite hideaway, a dead end formed by fat pipes and wiring that ran through the belly of the ship and that, by chance, contorted and twisted in just the right way to provide her with a corner to live in.

She'd awoken from her light sleep, aroused by a sense that something was different. So she did what she'd learnt to do from a young age – listen, wait and observe. But all the noises were the same. The ship creaked, the pipes thrummed, and all sounded as it had when she'd nestled down on the pile of discarded industrial matting and cargo crates that she'd gathered there for a bed.

Then it struck her. It was the smell.

The soft, earthy scent was out of place down here among the hard machines and acrid smells. Carrie lay there, breathing slowly but deeply. Not moving, just sensing, as she had done years ago in another place, a place where monsters had stalked the corridors and good men died hard deaths. In that dark place, long ago, she had learnt the power of being still and the lifesaving value of knowledge.

Nothing moved. The tunnels did not vibrate with approaching boot or claw. But the smell... the smell lingered.

Carrie rolled gently off her makeshift bed, the crates shifting slightly under her as she crouched on the floor next to them. In the access tunnels, lit only by intermittent maintenance lights, she was virtually invisible. Except she knew not to rely on that. Not everything in this galaxy saw with the same eyes as humans, or even needed eyes.

She padded forward to a T-junction and turned left, towards engineering. Tracking by scent is almost impossible for humans, she knew that, but if she could move to a new area, pause and let the air envelop her, perhaps she could tell if this organic smell was getting stronger or not.

She counted off the junctions automatically. For a stowaway, getting lost was a bad idea. She went four sections, then stopped, underneath the main engineering section. Here the walls were especially thick with pipes, and the air thick with what her old friend Newt used to call 'engine smell'.



Ten feet ahead she could see an access ladder leading upwards to engineering, and she made sure she was in the shadows. This was one of the more likely places that people might venture down into the tunnels, although she remembered watching the crew when the freighter had been docked, and the pair she'd taken for the ship's engineering crew hadn't seemed overly bothered about working.

That was good though, because if they'd been paying more attention instead of smoking and complaining to each other about their salaries, she might not have been able to slip past them and get on board. And she couldn't have stayed on Genesis. Not after the incident with the governor.

Frowning at the thought, she settled back, closed her eyes and breathed in, trying to sense for the strange scent. It was hard, the engine smell was thick in the air...

Then she froze. Through her closed eyelids she could tell that the darkness in the tunnel had suddenly lessened. Heart pounding, she opened her eyes, and winced against the light shining down from the now open access hatch. Then came a voice.

'There you go,' said a man.

'Nope, this is your job. I'm just telling you we have warning lights showing and you need to go check it out.' This voice was female, calm but with an edge to it.

'Those are advisory lights,' said a different man, his voice more nasal. 'I'm just sayin''

'Well,' said the woman, 'I'm advising you to go and inspect them. It's also what the captain wants.'

'Captain?' said the first man. 'Well, why didn't you say that?'

'Because I outrank you and I shouldn't have to mention the captain to get you to do your job.'

'She outranks us,' said the nasal man. 'I knew that.'

'About all you do know,' the first man replied. 'But as you know so much, you go.'

'Pretty sure it's your turn.'

'Nope, I did it last time.'

'Last time was the cat. I went looking for the cat, remember? So this time it's your turn.'

'Okay,' said the woman, 'I'm going back to the bridge. I don't care who does it, but one of you check it out. Warning lights are on near hydroponics, the cargo bay and junction 23, which is pretty much under here.'

'You know the Remus well,' said the nasal man. 'Sure you don't wanna go?'

The woman's voice receded into the distance. 'Just do your job.'

Carrie moved back, careful not to make a noise, while muffled voices grumbled and legs appeared on the upper rungs of the access ladder, then she turned and hurried around the corner she'd just come from.

She knew junction 23. They'd most likely go there first as it was close to engineering. It would also take them away from her, which was good. And best of all, hydroponics was in the opposite direction, and she liked it there. The plants reminded her of her first home, with fields, trees and cattle. She only dimly remembered it, but sometimes she dreamt she was back there, in the good times, before the crops failed and the cattle died.

And just like that she realised she'd taken a wrong turning and needed to double back. She had to concentrate. You don't get a second chance to stay hidden, Newt had said that to her once. She hurried on.

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She was three junctions from the tunnels under the hydroponic section when she realised that the smell was strong enough now to overcome the usual tunnel odours and she didn't have to concentrate to detect it.

It smelt of damp, earthy vegetation, and again she was reminded of her long-ago childhood, particularly of harvesting time, when the crops were cut, and their fragrance would fill the air after the reaping. But there was something different about this, something she couldn't place. Although perhaps it was just the strangeness of the earthy scent in this jungle of metal walkways and pipes.

Then she saw the first leaf.

It was attached to a vine that had twisted around the pipework. It was hard to tell the colour in the tunnel light, but it appeared mottled, some areas darker than others. She reached out a tentative finger, then stopped. Something in the shape of the leaf gave her pause. It was jagged, curled inwards like a tube. Then it moved, a jittery motion towards her that made her jump back. And she realised it didn't resemble a tube so much as a claw.

The leaf kept juddering, then jerked forward towards her, the vine behind writhing as if fluid was being pumped into it.

Carrie bit her lip, not trusting herself not to gasp, and fished into a pocket. She had a torch. This was strictly for emergencies – torches were dangerous, they gave your position away – but she had to see more clearly.

She shone the light ahead. There were more vines, all now straining towards her, pulsing and jerking in an agitated fashion. But the vines only reached so far, and they weren't actually moving, at least not in a free-moving sense. It was more as if





the vines were fixed to a point somewhere back in the darkness and could only flex a little towards her.

She relaxed, fascinated but wary. The smell was strong now; it had intensified while the plants were moving. This was the source of it, she was sure. But that didn't make a lot of sense. Her hideaway was a fair distance from here. How was it she could smell this that far away?

A thought started to form in her head, then the noise of a thud made her snap the torch up and peer into the furthest reaches of the tunnel. Something else was there, something just beyond the reach of the torch, and it was moving.

Suddenly a mass of vegetation fell forward, slamming onto the mesh floor with a thud. Despite herself, Carrie let out a short shriek, then watched, open-eyed, as the vegetation started to unfold, branches jerking and stretching free from the central mass. It wasn't anchored to anything. This was a free-moving xeno plant.

As it raised itself upwards, a smaller bulbous mass formed on the top of the main body. This smaller mass rippled and swayed as Carrie took a half step back, terrified but mesmerised at this creature forming before her.

With a rip of vegetation and the snapping of branches, a jagged maw opened up on the upper mass – its head, Carrie realised with sick fascination. This head shuddered jerkily, then, without looking directly at her, the creature lurched towards her in a stumbling, staggered series of steps, each one a little more assured than the one before, its clawed upper branches slamming into the tunnel walls to aid its forward motion.

Carrie turned and ran, flicking off the torch and praying it wouldn't see her, while knowing that was futile. It was a xeno plant. It wouldn't need light to find her.

She careered off walls, running faster than the tunnels easily allowed for, then realised that her feet had automatically led her back towards her hideaway. The earthy scent was still strong in the air, but she couldn't tell if that meant the creature was close behind, or something else.

As she approached the final junction, she saw light in the tunnel ahead. And she could hear a person moving. Habit kicked in, and instead of turning left towards the light, she darted right. A man's voice called after her, but she ignored it, increasing her pace, her breath ragged. The man's voice faded away.

She ran on, dimly aware of more noise behind her and what might have been an abrupt scream, but she couldn't be sure. She was no longer thinking clearly, she was back in that other dark place all those years ago. A place of madness and death. She had to get out.



Slowing, her lungs labouring, she spotted an emergency sign signalling the way to the escape pod. She pushed herself on, panting with nervous energy as she clambered up the ladder and entered the main corridor. It was there, the escape pod. Six feet and she'd be safe.

She sprinted to it and slammed her hand against the opening mechanism, only to be greeted by a red light and a sign that blinked in front of her. It took her a moment to read it, and moments longer to understand it, even though it was only a single word. Locked.

She was trapped.

Again.

