

Ryan Veeder - "Where We Can Hear the Whispering Dark"

In this science fiction horror story, the player-character is the luckless research assistant of Professor Thezh, a tenured alien monstrosity. The assistant has just fouled up the procedure for rotating their secluded asteroid observatory, waking the professor from its hibernation.

Lounge

The stars above are still whizzing by wildly.

The couch has been torn apart: Slimy chunks of foam litter the floor. The TV and microwave have been smashed and tossed across the room.

Passages through the rock lead east, west, and south.

"I could hear everything. For months. All your snoring, sniffing, belching, crying, farting, *whistling*, muttering—whining about your cushy assistantship, whining that you had nothing to do—and when you finally had something to do, when you had *just one job*—"

The professor moans, and the asteroid shakes.

>clean microwave

Too late for that.

"The upside is this: As long as the change is happening, I can't be held responsible for my actions. The university has all the paperwork." Parts of the professor's mouth that aren't busy speaking English start purring greedily. "I've never eaten a human research assistant before—and it sounds like you've gotten fatter since I've been asleep. Am I right about that?"

You can hear the professor's bulk slithering through the tunnels to the west.

>east

Cabin

It should be safe in here; the professor can't fit through the narrow passages.

On your bed is a pile of clothes and trash. Your lenticular poster is glued to the ceiling. Tunnels lead east, west, and south.

>wait

Time passes.

The professor's heavy breathing—or whatever that noise is—filters in through the east tunnel.

>east

You enter the tunnel, and something squelches up ahead.

"Ah. There you are," it says, and you hear it scuttling down the passageway. In animal terror you retreat

—and the noise stops.

"Oh, don't be shy, you *blithering waste of air*. There's only one thing left for you. No point postponing it."

You hold still, and try to breathe quietly.

>east

You take a cautious step forward, and you hear the professor scurrying toward you again. When you rush back to safety, you hear it retreating as well. Then it emits a familiar screech, one you recognize as a sigh of frustration.

"Don't be an idiot—At least, try to be less of an idiot. I can hear every move you make. You aren't getting out of here alive. There's nothing to gain from screwing around—You're just making me angrier." Why won't it come out of those tunnels after you?

Because it knows that's the only way you could escape.

"I'm getting tired of waiting..."

>east

Professor Thezh is just down that tunnel. You can hear it rubbing against the walls. And you don't want to meet it face to face.

"If you stop being such a coward right now, I promise I'll bite your head off first."

>south

Telescope

The telescope seems to be intact, but you can't see much of it from in here.

Tunnels lead north, east, and west.

>examine alarm clock

The alarm clock is no longer set to anything.

>turn on alarm

You fumble with the alarm clock's screen, and set it for some random number of seconds. Then you toss into the the far corner of the room.

You'd better get a move on.

>north

Cabin

It should be safe in here; the professor can't fit through the narrow passages.

On your bed is a pile of clothes and trash. Your lenticular poster is glued to the ceiling. Tunnels lead east, west, and south.

Thezh sniffs: "Back in your hidey-hole? I wish you'd come out of there. Your uncooperativeness is tremendously frustrating."

>wait

A second ticks by.

>wait

Another second ticks by.

>wait

"Would you *stop that?*" Thezh whines. You realize you've been biting your fingernail.

>wait

Another second ticks by.

>wait

Another second ticks by.

>wait

Another second ticks by.

The alarm goes off. It beeps incredibly loudly.

"Will you please turn off that insufferable machine?" Thezh groans.

>wait

The noise is unbearable.

"Turn that off right now, or you will live to regret it," Thezh whines. The alarm keeps beeping, seemingly more shrill than before.

>wait

The noise is unbearable.

"Is this a trick? Are you trying to trick me?" Thezh hisses through the tunnels, struggling to be heard over the pings of the alarm clock. "You really are a stupid brat. And desperate. And cruel."

>wait

The noise is unbearable.

"This isn't—" Thezh wails in pain. "This isn't going to work. I'm going to outlast you. You'll turn off that alarm, and then I will find you, and then—" It howls again.

>wait

The noise is unbearable.

Its rage boiling over, the professor screams even louder than the alarm—and you hear it stampeding through the tunnels.

You strain your ears: The alarm goes on ringing, muffled by the limbs of something trying to rip it to pieces.

>east

Tunnel

The web of tunnels extends in all directions—but the shuttle bay is just north from here.

>north

Shuttle Bay

Professor Thezh's skiff is parked here, beneath the gigantic pressure gate.

>get in skiff

Skiff

You jump into the driver's seat.

The key is in the ignition. The garage door opener is just above the windshield.

>push garage door opener

The button clicks, and a shutter falls over the southern tunnel entrance to prepare for depressurization.

The pressure gate opens. Outside the skiff there is a horrendous sucking noise: All the air and dust in the garage flies out into space.

The stars revolve above you, ever so slowly.

>examine stars

You have a nice view of outer space now—but you can enjoy that later.

>turn key

You turn the key. The engines fire up—and then they sputter out. What's wrong?

Oh, the parking brake is engaged.

>pull brake

You push the lever down, and the skiff shifts slightly.

Then the whole asteroid shakes.
Something has collided with the shutter between the garage and the tunnels.

>turn key

You turn the key. The engines fire up. The skiff rises from the floor.

The shutter flies off the wall, and the professor bursts into the garage. The observatory's atmosphere spills out from behind it: Your poems, your watercolors, your origami, and all your laundry stream out and up through the open pressure gate.

You pull on the yoke to ascend. Professor Thezh crawls across the garage, extending a huge, thorny claw. The skiff lurches to one side; a shrill chirp indicates that something's wrong with the landing gear.

With one arm you yank as hard as you can on the yoke, and with the other you reach for the secondary thrusters—If you were just a little taller—

You pop the thrusters, and the skiff shoots up and out of the observatory, into open space.

As you accelerate, the craft rattles like it's about to fall apart. Then the rattling stops. All the instruments show up OK.

A shape moves in the rearview. Curiosity gets the better of common sense, and you adjust the mirror for a closer look:

The writhing form of Professor Thezh grows smaller and smaller, screaming silently at you across the void.

***** The End *****