

Through The Dragon's Eye

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I've decided to finally make a little section for my short stories, so here it is; a collection of shorts that are lurking in the far reaches of my mind. Descriptions etc, will go at the top of each submission. Enjoy.

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1 - Ghost Ship

This is last year's Halloween story, a two parter that I finally proof read and rolled into one story. It's a side story to my Shadow Stalkers series, using all new characters, so as to not upset the balance of the SS universe anymore than it already is. o.O

Everything (c) me (Amy)

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**ESC** = *Environmental System Circuitry.*

## **Ghost Ship**

The ageing star ship Atilk drifted helplessly through the abandoned outer reaches of Veneshian space territory. Lost after an age old battle, she and her crew were claimed missing in action and forgotten, although she had sent out a sub-space distress signal. And to this day, she is still afloat in the vast black sea of space, that very same distress call echoing out from her decaying and smashed bulk, seaking out help....

A warship by the name of Mendaris Fire drifted through the Veneshian territory on orders from General Newark to locate the source of a distress call that had recently been picked up on their newly re-fitted scan system. Captain Mekhi sat in the command chair on the bridge of the small warship, reviewing the data from the distress call. According to what he was reading, the ship had been knocked off course by some kind of spacial storm during the course of battle and had gotten lost. They'd been badly damaged and had lost four decks to decompression. That's where the call ended. Abruptly. Mekhi leaned back in his chair and rubbed a hand across his chin thoughtfully. There were no names mentioned, which was unusual for a distress call, but it all looked grim. Decompression, even if contained, can still cause damage for a ship. The stress put on the frame can be immense, especially if it's caught up in a storm or battle.

"Ten minutes until we arrive, sir." Said Ensign Karrogh.

Mekhi nodded at the Frilled Lizard and he turned back around in his chair and continued with his job. Mendaris Fire continued on at half speed, scanning it's surroundings, searching out the location of the lost ship, Atilk. Then it appeared. A wrecked hulk of a ship, drifting in the close distance. It's lower hull was ruined, showing the skeleton of this old ship, a gaping hole like a ragged metal maw. Mekhi leaned forward in his chair. He knew this ship. Had been on it when he was younger. His father's command, sent to it's death many years ago.

"Lieutenant, arrange an off-ship team. We're going for a walk." He grunted.

## **---Warship Atilk; Airlock One---**

Atilk swayed and creaked the eerie song of the dead and decaying as they boarded through the stiff

doors of the heavy air lock. Dust and other micro debris floated in the air, lit up and glittering softly by the small lights mounted on their space helmets as they stood uncertainly, looking around at their long dead surroundings, the ice cold feeling of unease creeping slowly up the spines of the six strong team. The partition door down the corridor to their right was sealed tight, keeping the suffocating environment of space at bay, but for how much longer, nobody knew.

"I want three pairs to explore the remaining decks." Mekhi said calmly, ignoring the slowly settling sickness in his gut. "I'll head to the bridge and see if I can find out more of what happened. Karrogh, you're with me. The rest of you; you know the drill."

The others saluted as best they could in the dead environment and sorted themselves out. The Lizard followed Mekhi obediently through the broken corridors of Atilk, ignoring the ghosts of the past that lay in decay, the partially rotten corpses now held in a state of stasis by the lack of false environment that was so crucial to with-holding the lives of so many onboard any space faring ship.

"What do you think happened to them...?" Karrogh quired as they stepped over the smashed and slumped form of what was once a large built security officer.

"I don't know." The Elven replied simply.

### **---Frontal Docking Bay---**

Two small fighters hung from their liftlocks like old fruit that had been forgotten. Lieutenant Mo'Lomb and Crewman Shalle inspected the buckled hulks, not quite knowing what they were looking for. The lighting system wasn't working, leaving them fending off the smothering darkness with the small lights of their helmets. Zero gravity tugged lightly at their armoured bodies, slowing their movements, as if the air around them was thick and sticky.

"Found anything yet, Shalle?" Mo'Lomb's voice crackled over the suit's com.

"Nothin' yet." Shalle replied. ".. Wait a minute... I'm gettin' something we-"

Shalle landed on his front, something curled around his boot like a thin black snake, ready to strike. A circle of white light flashed downwards, revealing it to be a coil of discarded wire, hanging from the liftlock arm. Mo'Lomb chuckled and pulled his partner upright.

"You were saying?" He chuckled softly.

"I was saying, that I'm getting some weird readings from this area. The data stream on my visor's going nuts." Shalle replied, kicking the wire snake from his foot accusingly.

"Weird how?"

"Weird as in bad. But I'm not sure what it is. Switch to environmental scan, see if your suit's picking it up too."

Mo'Lomb watched as data scrolled down the left side of his visor like a water fall; the read out for their current environment.

"It looks normal to me."

"Hmm... Maybe I got a small malfunction in my ESC." Shalle replied and they moved on, furthering themselves into the buckled remains of the small frontal docking bay.

The Rabbit didn't mention the horrible feeling of being watched to the Lieutenant. It was a feeling he got all too often, one that stirred the primal fear in the back of his trained mind. Instead, he focused on the forest of ruined wiring and steel that had been bent out of shape by a blast, giving it the effect of a disgusting face lurking in the dark shadows. Shalle stared at it; couldn't pull his eyes away from it's

staring, hollow eye sockets of buckled metal and hanging wiring. The ship was watching. Atilk was watching all of them with quiet malice.

"Uh, Lieutenant..." He quivered, a shard of icy fear sliding quickly up and down his spine. "We need to re-group and get the hell out of here..."

"Sorry, what?" Mo'Lomb asked, peeling his attention away from the three rotten corpses that lay sprawled about their work stations.

"Y'know that bad feelin' I get...? Well, I'm gettin' that feelin' right now..." Shalle said and backed away from the face.

Mo'Lomb sidled up beside him, looking at the twisted metal patch of hull.

"You're seeing things again, Crewman. Now snap out of it." He said coolly.

The ship grinned. It was the grin of a maniac; Homicidal. Shalle stepped back, tripping over a length of twisted vent pipe and he landed heavily on his back, watching as Mo'Lomb gripped at his throat. Shalle's environmental readings spiked violently. He watched his Lieutenant helplessly, the visor of his helmet adjusting to pick up the fine grey mist coiling around Mo'Lomb's throat, squeezing tighter and tighter, like a Constrictor on it's prey. Mo'Lomb faught the mist, but he couldn't see it, Shalle's suit being the only one so far to have been adjusted to the new protocol. Shalle watched, horrified by his fascination at his friend's early demise, a demise caused by the mist only he could see, the mist that cracked Mo'Lomb's helmet, leaving the Fox open to the brutality of an oxygenless space, suffocating him without remorse. Mo'Lomb sank to the uneven floor, the last of his breath being sucked from his lungs as the air from his life support tank hissed out, being consumed by space.

Shalle scrambled to his feet and ran as fast as he could, wanting to leave the ghosts behind him, to bathe in the twisted grin of Atilk.

### **---Deck 5; Rec Room---**

Chief Kyltren and Crewman Rygoroh looked around in horror. The corpses around the room were twitching, bones snapping into place once more, claiming back their sockets and joints. The old uniforms hung from their partially decayed bodies and black holed eyes stared at the two hungrily, malice for the still living heating their hollow eyes.

"What the frack?" Rygoroh whimpered, backing up with her senior officer.

Bones cracked, teeth clicked together and the two living backed up against the wall, the door just to their left. They wouldn't make it. Knew they couldn't make it. The dead crewmen were closing in from all directions, like a pack of hungry Wolves stalking their prey, starving for their flesh.

"Captain Mekhi? Captain Mekhi, do you read me?!" Kyltren hissed into his com.

The small device crackled, blantly refusing to transmit his message, leaving the female Frog and the male Mule in the lurch, cornered by the forgotten soldiers of forty years past.

"This isn't right. They were dead when we came in here!" Rygoroh snapped.

The Mule looked helplessly at the Frog and she winced.

"Not your fault, I know. Ooohh Gaaawd....." She said, the blunt click of her seized gun echoing across the steady rythm of bones. "This is bad.... This is very bad..." She whimpered, pressing harder against the cold wall, as if it would provide her some form of protection away from the coming slaughter that was edging it's way towards them.

Something banged hard against the door, the thick sheet of metal vibrating from the blow. Someone was

trying to get in, trying to force the seized door open. Rygoroh and Kyltren's gazes danced nervously from the approaching corpses to the door.

"Chief!? Chief, are you in there?" Shalle's voice called out, muffled by the heavy door.

He was answered by a gut churning scream, the result of many teeth sinking into the neck of the Mule. He kicked and fought the old crewmen, but they only piled atop him, like wild Hyenas, all eager to get their own pound of flesh. Rygoroh hopped over the mess of upturned and broken tables, the desperation to find an exit becoming too strong. She knew Kyltren's fate was sealed, could hear his flesh being torn from his body, his space armour discarded like pieces of flimsy, useless tin. She scurried behind a pile of chairs to hide, the curved furniture having been thrown to one side of the room when the ship was rocked violently, possibly by the merciless spacial storm. No time to think of that now, though. Let the zombies have their prize and try and find a new way out.

She ignored the term she'd just used in her own head. There were no such thing as zombies. But there was. Right in front of her, devouring her fellow crewman, the sound of wet bone breaking, muscle and flesh being torn and shredded.

"Shalle?" She whispered into her suit's com.

A moment of static. Then a faint click and a hurried reply.

"Rygoroh?! What's happening?" Shalle asked worriedly.

"They're eating him." She said hoarsely, not quite believing what she was saying. "The bastards are eating Kyltren!" She squeaked in dismay. "I need to find another way out!"

For a moment there was no reply. Then there was another quiet click and Shalle's voiced panted down the line and into her ear.

"At the back of the room, in the corner, there's a maintenance panel. Get through there and follow the tunnel. I'm waiting on the other side." He said urgently.

Rygoroh hesitated no more, the old crewmen getting bored with their fast dwindling feast of raw flesh, and she scurried to the other side, spotting the hatch Shalle had mentioned, carefully prying the cover open and sliding inside the tight shaft.

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---Corridor 1 - A---

Captain Mekhi and Ensign Karrogh trod carefully through the dead bulk of the crumbling warship, Atilk, unaware that it was grinning at them from the shadows, watching every move they made. The shadows around them stirred like dark serpents, coiling around the twisted and broken remains of the ship.

Karrogh spun on his heel, gun raised. He knew something was there. Something unnatural and alive.

"Ensign?" Mekhi asked the paranoid Hare.

"I could've sworn we were being followed..." He replied slowly, his gun still raised at the darkness.

"Continue on, Ensign." Mekhi ordered, his determination to get to the bridge fighting off the sense of impending doom.

Karrogh hesitated a moment, still staring into the haunted shadows, before moving onwards, as ordered. They stepped through a partition door, but Karrogh grunted, something holding him still, frozen in place and unable to move.

"Quit messing about Ensign Karrogh!" Mekhi snapped angrily, biting off the following sentence,

surprised at his sudden flash of anger.
"Sir... I c-can't move..." He mumbled.

The door twitched, fighting it's way out from it's seized place in the bulky door frame. It shook angrily, straining against the metal of it's prison, the loose wiring and steel panels vibrating from the force. Karrogh whimpered and tried to force his body to move, but he couldn't. He was stuck, the feel of many icy dead hands holding him fast and tight, restraining him, holding him to the spot so he would be ready to meet his doom. Mekhi grabbed ahold of one of his arms and tugged, the rattling of the heavy steel partition door growing stronger, it's wheels squeaking in their ruts, eager to move, to do their job and seal off the section of corridor. Mekhi fought frantically to save his Ensign, but the terrified Lizard couldn't move; wanted to move oh so badly, but couldn't. Atilk and her ghosts wouldn't let him move.

The Captain's grip slipped and he rolled backwards, the door slamming shut, the sudden, swift movement seeming like a trick of the eye. Karrogh stood there, eyes wide, blood spraying the inside of his helmet with each breath he exhaled. A large smear of red glistened on the door, glittering jovially in the small light of Mekhi's space helmet. Karrogh twitched and his knees buckled, the front half of his body sliding a little way down the door before falling forward with a wet thump; his body having been sliced cleanly in half by the heavily armoured door. Mekhi gagged at the sight. Everything inside his ex-Ensign had been cut apart by the door. And the Captain fancied he could hear a soft, cruel laugh echoing up through the old ship. Now he was stranded in the fore of the vessel, all other partition doors seized up and unable to move of their own accord or his. He backed up, and ran in the direction of the bridge, ignoring the crackling static in his ear; his com link refusing to work.

---Corridor 3 - C---

Shalle pulled Rygoroh from the maintenance vent, her look of terror and sickness hidden by her helmet. "We need to get out of here." Rygoroh panted, biting back an unwanted whimper of fear and loss. Shalle nodded.

"I know. I've seen them." He said, now dragging her along behind him.

"There's more?!"

Another nod from the Pidgeon as he continued to lead the Frog, like a small child in trouble with her parent.

"It's the ship. Can't you hear it?" He said, casting a glance over his shoulder. "It's laughin' at us!"

"Laughing? It's a ship! Even its computer's AI can't do that! Anyway, I'm more worried about what's in the ship with us!" Rygoroh protested, putting an emphasis on the 'In' word.

"Nah, nah, I've seen it's face! Atilk is watching us! The dog has already had Lieutenant Mo'Lomb, and she won't stop until she's claimed us all!" Shalle said angrily and dragged Rygoroh around a corner, stopping dead in his tracks, the Frog slamming into his back and staggering backwards.

He could see the grey mist, curling and writhing slowly, like a box of snakes.

"What...?" Rygoroh's voice crackled uneasily down the com and into his ear.

"They've found us..." Shalle replied softly, quietly admitting defeat to himself as the partition door behind them had slammed shut upon their entry to this particular section of corridor.

"They...?"

Rygoroh was going to say more, but the floor beneath her feet groaned painfully, the eerie sound of metal slowly buckling and tearing. The floor sank and then cracked open like an egg shell, letting Rygoroh plunge into the mess of wiring and twisted steel below, her slim Frog form hitting the debris, the metal forcing it's way up and through her body. Shalle couldn't have reacted quick enough and cursed himself for not being able to help, the moment being made worse by the soft gurgling moan echoing into his ear. Then all went quiet. The mist swirled and Shalle stood frozen to the spot, inches away from joining Rygoroh on the wounded remains of the deck below. He squeezed his eyes shut, mainly through a defiance of some kind, refusing to watch the world around him fade to black as the wires that snared around him squeezed harder and harder, his space armour sinking and digging into his flesh, his bones crunching, grinding and breaking. But still Shalle refused to give Atilk the pleasure of his screams.

The old warship would have to find that reaction elsewhere, he thought bitterly, biting back another scream of blinding agony as his shoulder bones pushed hard against his skin, slowly tearing the flesh open inside the suit. An icy cold bolt of grey mist shot towards him, freezing the hotness of his pain, even just for a moment; And blood started to bubble from his mouth and nose. His eyes bulged, slowly being squeezed out from their sockets as the pressure became too much. Then it did become too much. Blood seeped from the torn material joints, leaking out around the tight black wires. In the depths of the frontal docking bay, Atilk grinned wider. Another victim caught, another soul ripe and ready to be used for her fuel.

---The Bridge---

Captain Mekhi, now the only survivor of the away team that had departed from Mendaris Fire a little over two hours ago, he couldn't quite remember, having lost track of time once things onboard the old stricken warship had started to get weird and he'd lost communication's to his own warship, which he could now see out of the main viewer, waiting patiently for him; a safe abode, a welcoming place to hide away from this space faring monstrosity. He leaned against a console unit, it's crewman slumped across the damaged panel face and rotten. Just like the rest of the bridge crew. Still in their seats at their stations, their fraying, torn and beaten uniforms hanging from their near skeletoned bodies. In the base of the bridge, the Captain sat back in his command chair, thin arms hanging over the edge of the arm rests, head tilting forward, chin in his chest. Mekhi stepped forward, ignoring the bridge crew, focused on the Elven sat dead in his seat of command, a man he knew all too well, one that he had once loved; still loved infact. He was the man that had gotten him into the business in the first place, by showing him around this ship when he was younger, when Atilk was still in one piece, armed and ready for battle, just like her crewmen. He rounded to the side, stopping in his tracks with a faint cracking of bone and a wheeze. The chest of the dead Captain was rising and falling. The balding head swung limply to look at him, and two hollow eyes focused him. Mekhi's heart raced, pounding hard as he paced around, to the front of the command chair, sinking down to a crouch, the non-existent eyes staring at him, not maliciously, but strangley lovingly.

"Father?" Mekhi mumbled, as if to himself.

The dead man grinned, the move made all the more easier by the lack of lip tissue and muscle.

"Son. I've been waiting for you. We all have..." The old Captain wheezed.

Mekhi's heart felt as if it were to explode in his chest, his breath comming short, leaving his body all too quickly. He felt light headed. His hands shook, the strength falling from his body and he sat on his knees, looking up at his long dead father.

"I look forward to you serving with me, son."

Mekhi couldn't speak, didn't have the energy to, otherwise he'd have questions. Questions like what happened and why he left his mother to raise four small children on her own. But he couldn't, the questions becoming lost in a wheeze. His air was running out quicker than it should, and his father just stared at him with his hollow eyes and that skeletal grin. He could see the face. The face of Atilk, the warship, lurking in the shadows of twisted metal, loose wire and broken console faces behind his long dead father. The ship was grinning. Possibly even laughing. Then Mekhi collapsed, slumping forward, lying at the feet of his father, the Captain of Atilk, the one who was now being controlled by the ship, instead of being in control of the ship.

The ship lit up, all systems coming online, being forced from their beaten comatose state. A rough clanking sound and a low grinding and Atilk moved forward, making the space between Mendaris Fire and herself grow. Atilk's shields flickered as they came online and a heavy clank sounded as the main turret swung around slowly, powering up a shot. Then the entire ship shook, as if caught in an earthquake, Mendaris Fire's shields failing and the newer, stronger warship being torn apart by Atilk's shot.

Mekhi looked up. Saw the bodies of the crew slumped in the positions they'd died in and then looked down at his own. When he looked back up, there was a little more to see. The crew were there, unwounded and looking alive, standing over their bodies, hands and paws passing through their corporeal corpses as they worked the consoles. His away team were stood in the bridge door way, not a scratch on them, helmets removed and staring around them.

"Now we move onto the next wandering ship." His father said from his seat.

2 - Bloody Memories

Like most of these shorts, this was a little something written to try and shift a mental block. Thankfully, it worked. ^^

Anywho, this is another Shadow Stalkers side story, this time with a character that I have used; Wingman Murfitt. Enjoy.

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### **Bloody Memories**

Blood sprayed up the walls of the rickety cabin, dripping and sliding down the rough, barbaric surface onto what lay below. Screams loud enough to shatter glass pierced the night, then the same, dull wet thumping choked them, drowning them out in their owner's blood. A female Mule fell victim to the axe of the Bear, lying, twitching on the cabin floor in the gore of her friends; A scene fit for an illegal horror movie. The Bear turned, as if looking into the camera, bloodied axe raised, and brought it down heavily, more blood spurting, more blows, more gore and more bone being split. There was no scream. The victim had no time to scream, even the ghost refused to scream, couldn't, seeing first person what the Bear was doing.

The skull crushing agony that insisted on accompanying every vision that Andrew Murffit, a Woodpecker of nine, had subsided. The grim scene of the butchered bodies faded to black. A blackness that numbed everything. Whispers in the distance. Whispers of worry, fear and panic. And his name was being called out, wanting him to be okay, pleading with him to be okay between words of what sounded vaguely like "Mama's here, sweetie."

He knew he had his eyes open. But he still didn't know why he couldn't see. The first time it scared him silly, to the point where he refused to go to sleep or to even be left on his own. But now, lying in the darkness, he was devoid of all emotion. Sirens in the near distance, closing the gap between him and them drew his attention away from the voices over head. Then bright light, a gasp of air that hit his lungs like hot liquid and his back arched violently, all muscles now free of the paralyzing affect the visions and darkness had on him, the bright summer sun burning his eyes, forcing him to blink hard and long. A cry of relief and the nine year old Woodpecker was pulled into his mother's bosom, her crimson plumage tickling his nose.

"You had me so worried." She whimpered before a pair of St Bernards in light green overalls took charge, shining more light into his eyes, checking his pulse and breathing and asking questions which his mother answered for him. He wondered what he had touched. It couldn't have been anything in his pockets. He kept nothing there; free of clutter for when his mother or father made him take his gloves off, so he could stuff his hands into his pockets, hiding them away from whatever memories lay embedded into whatever he had to touch.

But he had lost his balance on the wooden stairs in the open air shopping center, his hands flying out of his pockets to try and steady himself and receiving more than a backwards fall down the stairs when he touched the banister. A warm stickyness trickled down the back of his neck and he looked past the

fussing paramedics and to the old stair case. It was made of recycled wood, said a placard. "The cabin." He said hoarsely and then all emotion came flooding back, drowning out everything else, and Andrew found himself crying uncontrollably and not quite knowing why.

A paramedic reached for his hand and Andrew's small body went rigid again as fur brushed against feathers when the Canine's sleeve rode up slightly, his eyes wide, watery eyes not seeing the present, but the near past. Bone stabbed through flesh and fur, staining red as a small Cocker Spaniel sat in the grass of a park, crying in agony as other children, some with parents and guardians, stood around her, watching the paramedics tend her broken leg as if it were some kind of show. Then darkness came again, this time pulling him under into unconsciousness, the vision being the final straw, proving too much for him to handle.

Then he woke up, sweat slicking his crimson and gun metal black feathers to his body, hands tightly gripping his pillow, breath coming short, fast and ragged. Wingman Murfitt; Twenty eight years old, clairvoyant and pilot in the Shadow Knight's fifth squadron of space fighters. A Shadow Stalker since the age of eighteen, the name pulled from a vision he received from an old Pterodactyl as he helped the old man right himself after a fall on the street. That same year he'd made it to the planet Nuam and was enrolled almost immediately at the academy to train as a pilot, his life long dream.

Andrew rolled over onto his side, his girlfriend, a Corgi, lay next to him, distracting his chaotic mind with her generous curves, making him forget his childhood horrors and remember what had happened between them when she had finally come back planetside, relieved for three days of rest after weeks spent in the engineering department up on the Station. In a few hours he would have to get up for work himself, patrolling the edges of Shadow Space territory.

But for now, he would enjoy her beauty, remembering the passion of the night just gone at his own will and pace instead of it being forced into his mind like hot nails.

### 3 - Howl of the Wolf

A short story to accompany a friend's new series of short stories.

This is based in my Weredragon universe, but, with completely new characters, so sorry, no Shadow, no Xan or Bently, Ode or Vampire sisters.

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Deena gets taunted and bullied at school because she's different. But not the kind of 'different' you're thinking about. She's Human and also growing scales and feathers and has no idea why, so after an incident with the school's bully, she flees into the night.

Everything (c) me (Amy)

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Howl Of The Wolf: Welcome To The Underground

Deena sat at her desk, school book open and at least a paragraph and a half written down on the history of the too - much talked about Great War. She'd just started writing it when the teacher, Mr. Swofferson started babbling again, in his dreary mono-tone, the single pitch sound enough to put even the hardest of student to sleep. She was the only one to the two seater desk, the other students refusing to go near her, the politest thing they ever do really, since the rest of the time between being ignored they rip the shoot out of her by mocking her and staring with disgusted looks etched upon their features, unable to peel their line of sight away from the light green and pale yellow scales that dappled her brow like small beads of sweat or the small leaf green downy feathers that clung to the area of bare flesh just beneath her ear lobes. It was something she couldn't help. The scales and feathers had come along during puberty, making this stage of her life all the more miserable and intolerable. Plucking the feathers didn't work. They were back the following evening and it hurt too much to do it in one go. And make up just seemed to slide off the marble - smooth scales, something that depleted her meager paper round wages quicker than she could breath, so she just gave up all together. She didn't know why they were there. They were even spreading to different parts of her body. Her deep brown hair was slowly being shed, more of these downy feathers sprouting out of the hair follicles to replace what she'd lost to her hair brush or the shower. Even her doctors didn't know what to do or why it was happening. Her family was slowly shunning her. She's lost contact with her aunt Leena, grandad Ken and a handfull of cousins. She was slowly departing from her immediate family now, too.

A paper ball to the back of her head tugged her out of her thoughts. Swofferson was scribbling some incoherent scrawl on the white board, the dry marker squeeking across the cold surface with each curve and line to each letter, completely ignoring the goings on in his class, submerged fully into his own little world of battles, petty and major, leaving the class of thirty to have a brief mess around. Deena looked over her shoulder, her greying eyes focusing sharply on her paper ball assailant. Another girl, twice her own age, sat back in her hard plastic chair, tilting it onto it's back legs, a foot resting on the corner of the desk. Her bleached hair was pulled back tight enough to pass off as a face lift, gold necklaces and bracelets adorned her neck and wrists and her make up was thick and bright. Her name was Braken, or

at least that's what the other kids called her. She smiled cruelly, showing cigarette yellow stained teeth. "Allo, Freaky m'dear. Walking home again today, hm?" She said.

Deena turned her back. Braken was one of the toughest bullies in the school, and she knew exactly what was coming.

"How's about we have another little get together, yeah? You, me and the girls. How's that sound?"

Deena took a deep breath. It was nearly three twenty already. Five more long and tedious minutes until the terror of the weekly beating began. She heard Braken chuckle under her breath and her foot slid from the table when Swofferson turned around, a frown creasing and pulling his wrinkles together.

"Homework for tomorrow: I want you to write down paragraph A-1 of page three - four - eight in your history text books and explain it's meaning in three full pages." He snapped in his famous monotonous voice.

Deena replaced her pen and ruler back into her tin pencil case and slid it back into her pack alongside her books, all the while trying to stop her increasingly scaling hands from shaking. Then the bell went. That lame sounding horn - like siren blating off one three second wail, signalling the end of school and the start of fresh cuts and bruises. Behind her, Braken grinned, her catalogue bought jewelry clattering as she shifted.

Deena stayed seated for as long as possible, choosing to exit with the bulk of the class, a feat easier said than done.

She walked uneasily down the wide pathway that was wedged helplessly between the conjoined back yards of the housing estate, the odd black wheeley bin sat dormant at a tall wooden gate, seemingly watching idly as she walked by them, knuckles turning white as she gripped the shoulder strap of her pack all the more tighter as more foot falls sounded out behind her, creating a chorus of scrunching debris beneath leather school shoes. Whispers and giggles and a few shushes "It might hear you." and she sped up her pace. Deena marched toward the final corner, trying hard not to break into a run. Running always brought her down quickest. That final corner signalled safety, a place where she could see her home from, a small, but tidy semi detached house sat on a long row of semi detacheds. No such luck. Not this time. The foot falls behind her had sped up rapidly and were gaining quicker than she'd have liked, her brain clicking into gear just at the last moment, sending her seven footsteps forward before being pushed heavily to the floor, skinning the balls of her hands as she landed face first on the partially gravelled ground, just barely avoiding cracking her skull open.

"Thought y'might try and outrun us again, eh?" Braken tutted in a huffing breath. "Naughty little dog. How many times do we have to tell ya, eh? Don't run away. It'll only end in tears."

"Looks like we're gonna have to up the lessons a notch." Sneered another girl, one of Braken's tag-alongs.

"That sounds like an idea." Braken said, mocking edging her greasy tone.

Deena squirmed and screamed for help, knowing full well that none would come. A heavy foot landed in her side, a searing pain bolting up her side, making her try and curl up, but the hands pinning her didn't allow for such meager forms of defence. Another kick, this one to the face. A trickle of blood, followed by a tooth being spat out onto the ground. A cruel laugh then another kick, the jeering of the girls blocking out all other sounds. Deena continued to wriggle and thrash, managing to free a leg, kicking one girl in the stomach, making her reel, severely winded. A moment of shocked panic and Deena grabbed her chance and twisted to her feet, pulling herself out of the grip of two more girls, her right arm still trapped firmly in the grip of Braken's right hand. Braken snarled something and came back at Deena, Deena putting her free arm up to shield her face from the in-coming punch, instead a horrifically sharp pain

shooting up her arm as the skin on the underside of her wrist split open, a deep yellow pointed length of what could only be described as bone, sliding out of her arm fast, slicing Braken's face open, scarring the bone beneath, narrowly avoiding her left eye. Braken cried out and fell back, clutching at her face and screaming. Deena took a step back, her eyes slowly going from girl to girl then to her wrist where the sharp, horn like bone protruded from, heavily bloodied and aching. Bile rose up in her mouth, mixing with the taste of blood and stinging the crater in her gum where her tooth had once been. She curled over as the remains of her school dinner hit the floor with a coughing heave and a wet slap. Once she told herself she was empty of anything chuckable, she violently shook her arm with as much force as possible, panicked whimpers, rapidly turning into sobs as she mumbled under her laboured breath. She took one last look at the girls, Braken crying hard and swearing angrily, her hands bloodied and clinging to her face as her so called friends huddled around her, one with a mobile phone to her ear. Deena mumbled an apology, the best she could muster, but her own tears won out and she ran as hard as she could, trying to outrun the memories of what had just happened. It was an accident. She told herself as she ran, no destination in sight. Just a freak accident.

She sat huddled on the edge of her bed, her left arm firmly wrapped in bandages beneath a long sleeved shirt, her favourite teddy pressed hard against her chest, nose buried in it's plush, balding head, a familiar scent to ease the day's pain. She tried to shoo everything out of her mind. Braken, her parents asking her questions about the blood stains, the questions becoming all the more intense when the police turned up. She stared out of her window, the stars glittering in the sky and the near full moons hanging low in the sky like two giant baubles. She edged closer to the window and heaved it upwards, propping it up with a lump of wood she'd found in her father's shed. She made herself as comfortable as possible on the window sill and looked out across the street and towards the forest. She inhaled the muggy summer night's air deeply and glanced at the clock. Four thirty five am, and still she couldn't sleep. A distant sound pulled her attention back out towards the forest. A strange sound, one that only seems to happen every so often. She'd tried figuring out what the sound was, but to no avail, her imagination always settling down on one of the creatures from tales her grandma used to regail her with about creatures that lived underground, hiding from the light. When she'd pried more about these creatures, she'd only been answered with a typical "They're monsters, and if you ever see one, run." That's all her grandma would say, frustrating the young and curious Deena to no end. But then, she'd also heard other stories about what lay hidden beneath her feet. Some said similiar things to her grandma, saying that they were monsters, only emerging at night to hunt unsuspecting people. But only a handful would say the opposite; that the underground was a refuge of sorts for misfits and otherworldly creatures, saying that they'd caught a glimpse of them coming and going, climbing in and out of manholes that have been long forgotten by the council and the mass populace in general. She'd seen a few of these manholes dotted about, in the city and in the suburbs, their long since changed city emblem rusting and fading with time. She knew she wouldn't stop changing. And after what happened with Braken, now the previous day, still haunted her and propelled her to pack a back pack that she'd pulled from the top shelf of her closet, stuffing it with her tooth brush, deodorant, hair brush and whatever else she may need. She zipped up her bag, slung it on her shoulder and hesitated. A quick look into the mirror to her right and she herself for what she was; a monster. But it was only looks. She didn't feel like one. She only held an ounce of guilt for what she'd recently done. She took a deep breath, hooked a leg out of her window and steadily shimmied her way down the drain pipe, landing neatly on the grass below. She took one last look at her house, her garden and headed for the gate, a possible manhole location in mind. She knew she'd seen one close by. But would it be the correct one? It was a chance she wanted to take.

Deena wandered cautiously down an old alleyway between an old car workshop and a block of public toilets, looking about herself carefully, on a constant alert for any late night or early morning moochers. She stopped at the very end and looked around, finally spying a raised manhole to her left, set, secreted away in a shallow cubby hole, litter splayed around it's base. She kicked off an old beer can and winced inwardly when it sloshed metallicly against the ground. Another look around. No one. She crouched, inspecting the steel plate's insignia. A Phoenix style bird clutching what seemed to be a spear lay embossed and worn on the rusting surface. It was the city's old insignia, a good omen for Deena. She took a deep breath and wiped at the cool surface with a hand and crouched further until her ear just barely grazed the rough texture of the steel. She fancied she could hear the sounds of life from beneath the heavy cover and tried to suppress a grin. Now her only problem was, how to remove the heavy cover. She steeled herself and rummaged through the masses of rubbish, finally coming across a discarded crowbar. Though it could've been placed there for a reason... She pondered, gripping the metal bar with steadily shaking hands. She approached the manhole, forced the long end of the crowbar into a hole in it's cover and heaved as hard as she could until it finally shifted, being pried and forced from it's resting place. A waft of heat bellowed up into the early morning air, carrying an array of scents with it, each one assaulting her sense of smell with the force of freshly laid tarmac, making her gag and cover her nose with her sleeve. She peered down, spying a bright light at the bottom. There was a ladder leading down to a platform, then another ladder. One last look at the outside world and she grabbed her pack and carefully descended a few steps so she could try and pull the cover back across. But she was too weak, that first bout with the cover having taken much more out of her than she realised, so the cover stayed put, partially covering the hole.

As she landed on what she assumed to be the ground her ears popped again and all sounds suddenly became loud, the scents stronger and lights brighter. A heavy hand landed on her shoulder and she shrieked and ducked out of the way. A strange looking man in a black, heavily padded uniform stood in front of her. She eyed him carefully and quickly, spying the large gun tucked away, camouflaged against his heavy black armour. His hair was a brilliant red fur, fiery slit pupilled eyes and when he spoke, she fancied she could spy fangs.

"Well? Where's your ID?" He ordered.

"I-ID...?" She said, trying to avoid the fear creeping further into her voice.

He bowed his head, dipping his shoulders forward and came to her eye level, seemingly inspecting her thoroughly, his gaze piercing through into her mind and soul.

"A Surface Dweller, huh?" He re-gained his posture and gave a small roll of his shoulders. "What's your business here?"

"Uhm..." She faltered. "Refuge...?"

A hazarded guess of an answer, but he raised an eyebrow.

"Wait here and don't move." He ordered again and turned around, ducking into a small doorway.

A murmured one sided conversation and he returned.

"A woman called Shelby is on her way. She's the one you need to talk to."

Deena nodded uneasily, her mind abuzz with one too many thoughts. Was this really the Underground? How big was it? Where would she stay and what would she do? Would her small amount of pocket money even be valid here? She had no idea and before she even knew what was going on, a blue, hovering vehicle pulled up at the low railing just off to her left and a short, stout woman with white skin and hair, deep blue eyes and a red skirt suit stepped onto the catwalk, briefcase in a leather clad hand, her other hand outstretched in greeting as she strode swiftly toward Deena. She took Deena's hand and

gave it a firm shake.

"My name is Shelby and I hear you're new in town and looking for shelter?"

Deena was taken aback. Neither Shelby nor the man had looked at her in disgust or distaste, she realised. Maybe they'd seen more like her and could answer her questions and shed some light onto what she was going through.

"Now, now. Don't be scared. I know you're still just a fledgling, but we welcome all ages, here. All I need to ask you is a few questions." Shelby said.

The word 'fledgling' hit Deena's mind like a rock. She'd never been called that before. Ever. Shelby guided her over to the car and rested some paperwork on the roof. Deena watched, fascinated by the vehicle. Never before had she seen a car float in mid air.

"What's your name?"

Deena snapped back to reality and looked at Shelby.

"Uh, Deena." She replied simply.

Her name was scribbled down and the questions flowed like water. Then she had to explain why she was requesting refuge, a task much harder than the first few times she'd had to tell the tale. But the woman just looked at her sympathetically and the guard didn't shift at all.

"If it's anything to go by, I landed a forty seven year old man in hospital when I was twelve." Shelby said. Deena stared at her.

"I threw a spoon at him. Broke five of his ribs." She grinned. "Now then, I'll just do a quick scan of this and send your picture in so my boss can have a quick look. Fingers crossed."

She picked up a small device and the light flashed. Then she produced a long, thin device and swiped it across the paper work before typing a code into the back of the small camera.

"Shan't be long." Shelby said and Deena managed a weak.

Shelby upheld a small conversation, telling Deena what it was like in the Underground and telling her about what she was going through. Apparently there was a certain gene that skipped several generations, but became active at random, usually spurred on into evolving during the ages of thirteen to eighteen. Now she knew what to expect, she wasn't to worried about it anymore. Everyone had been panicking for no reason.

A bleep then a short ring and Shelby looked down at the back of the camera, gave it a quick once over and pulled more papers out of her briefcase. A few signatures were signed, a green piece of paper was stamped and handed to Deena.

"Welcome to the Underground." Shelby announced with a smile. "Take this over to the Civillian Station and they'll do the rest. Here's a map of where you need to go and a number to call incase you get stuck, okay? Now go on, get yourself sorted out and ready to explore. I hope to see you again."

Another smile and she climbed back into her car, all paper work gathered and she drove off, leaving Deena behind on the catwalk car dock, clutching her pack in one hand and a piece of paper in the other. She looked at the guard, dumbfounded and he gave a small, knowing grin.

"Through that archway, go left then down two levels. Follow the blue and green stripes, you can't miss it." He said.

Deena took a deep, shuddering breath. The thought of what she'd just done was slowly creeping up on her as she walked towards the archway. She stepped out on the main catwalk, a flow of weird and wonderful people, all dressed in studs, colourful leathers, fishnets and heavy jewelry flowed around her like water does a rock. She looked all about her. All kinds of species and races were going about their daily business, neon signs lit up the cavernous, metallic and rock carved city. There were at least ten levels above her head. And then she looked down. She forced her way toward the safety railing and

peered down into the masses of floating vehicles, puffs and streams of steam and smoke spraying from small ruptures, accidental or otherwise, in the network of pipes. Nets stretched between the catwalks at seemingly random intervals. She looked down again, feeling her stomach lurch once more as she looked down upon the colourful heads of those on the catwalk below her feet. This would take some getting used to. She thought and edged along in the direction the guard had told her to go in. She battled her way through the crowds and descended two levels as told to and found the blue and green stripes along with the sign posts. Another ten minutes and she was stood in the doorway, somewhat relieved that she wouldn't be alone in the waiting room. She approached the main desk, handed over the piece of paper and waited.

"Please take a seat. We will be with you shortly." The man smiled and gestured at the row of plush looking seats.

Deena sank down into the cushions of a seat and sighed heavily, her mind wandering back to the surface, to what her parents would say when they found her gone. She'd definitely have to enquire about surface visits. She thought, tears trying to force their way past her eyes. She wiped at her face with a sleeve and waited patiently for her new life to begin.

4 - Nightmare

Shadow has brief out of body experience and is soon pursued by something that even she's terrified of.

Everything (c) me (Amy)

Nightmare

The underground city is vast, but not as I remember it. Something doesn't feel right, something's out of place. I walked across the catwalks, trying desperately to remember how I got here. It wasn't a warp fault, I knew that much, but I couldn't remember what had happened before hand. I'd just woken up here. The various races surged around me, parting like water does as it flows around a rock. I'm not in my anthro form, but my Human shape, my blue scales dappling my skin. For some reason, I'm walking towards a place I used to work, a place that held a steady job and a fist full of friends for so many years. It was a place called Neon Junction, a members only nightclub. I looked over my shoulder and peered into the crowd of brightly coloured, leather clad bodies behind me. The feeling of being followed was getting stronger. Something big was following me. The hairs on the back of my neck prickled and I sped up my pace more, striding towards the front doors of Neon Junction, it's brightly lit sign flickering above everyone's heads in the near distance like a beacon of salvation, promising safety. Something in the back of my mind spurred me onward, my legs moving faster, sending me into a near sprint, pushing past and dodging the various huddle of bodies that were moving in all directions. Xan wasn't at the door, yet the doors were wide open, the long, dimly lit tunnel leading down into the club itself quiet. Of course it had sound proofing, but the bass could still be felt and heard as you moved further in. But I felt nothing. The doors banged shut behind me, the lights flickering and my surroundings going black. Though it was familiar, it brought me to the point of near-terror. My dark sight wasn't kicking in. I had to fumble around, feeling my way towards the inner doors. The felted walls of the club's tunnel gave way to a smooth coldness that I could only label as concrete. The musty, sweaty smell of Neon Junction gave way, evaporated into a metallic scent, the familiar sting of antiseptics infiltrating my senses. The prescence behind me grew stronger still, nearing me. I didn't want to go through those doors. But I also didn't want to find out what was following me. I took a breath, as if ready to take a dive off the top of a dam and shoved the doors open in a manner that stated that I was here, and pissed off. But my usual mask of intimidation melted away quicker than my heart beated.

Bright white lights blinded me and I fell back against the smooth white concrete wall which had been Neon Junction's inner doors. I instinctively raised a hand to shield my eyes, but it had little effect to dampen the sterile false brightness. Four figures lurched out of the brightness, three wearing similar clothing, the other, larger and wearing dark clothes. It was then that my memories clicked down into place, like the beginnings of a puzzle. I now knew where I was. I was back in the Prytchard Facility. I felt a panicked whimper rise from my throat, something I hated hearing comming from myself, but I couldn't help it. The pain these people had inflicted upon me when I was fifteen was still raw to this very day.

Their nano-technology still burned beneath my skin, everyday threatening to send me mad with pain and anger, an anger at the scientists for doing what they did, Humans playing God; And an anger for myself, for letting them capture me in such a simple fashion. One of them stepped forward, hand outstretched, a male voice cooing from the bright lights, unrecognisable words, a foreign language to me. Terror shook my body. I couldn't do this again. Too many times something like this had happened. Yes, I'd killed for fun in the past, but no matter what the crime, nobody should be subjected to being a lab rat. The hand caressed my cheek and it burned white hot, like an Angel's touch, the pain making my knees shake. A dark figure, tall and lanky rose up behind the others. It was more of a shadow, a heart of piercing, burning white at the center of its chest. It loomed over us all. My knees buckled beneath me, finally sending me to the floor. It wasn't the burning touch of the outstretched hand.

It was something else. A wave of power flowed angrily over my skin, searing my nerves. The blurred figures seemed not to be aware of the monster's presence. They simply took notes, exchanging interested garbled words about what they were witnessing. I clawed at the cold grey lino floor, trying desperately to get away, my fear nearly overriding my senses. I could feel my skin burning, not with the power of the monster that was slowly following me, but with the temptation, the need to change. The top of my head hurt, my horns threatening to push through whether I was ready or not. My shoulders ached, wings trying to force their way into the world as my lower back twinged, the sign of my tail forming.

The garbled voices became excited as they spectated my change, an angry cry of pain ripping up my throat and out into the white expanse of the warped version of the Prytchard Facility as I arched forward, hands splayed across the icy floor, my clothing tearing as my body changed. As the glorious pain rippled throughout my rapidly changing body, a dark shadow loomed over me, the feeling of utter dread and cold fear settling in the pit of my stomach. I felt my body go still and I panicked. I wasn't done changing yet. I couldn't breathe, my half formed wing muscles were tight, locked around my chest, making it hard to inhale. I tried moving, a sliver of silver white blurring through the air, down towards me. My movements were painfully restricted due to my partially changed body and I skittered sideways on clawed hands and feet, my wings awkward and getting in the way as the sudden movement made my body contract violently, a strangled squeel of sheer pain passed my scaled lips and my small, nubby horns pushed down a little way into my head as I hit the wall behind me. My skull hadn't become thick enough and my horns weren't prepared for the impact. Blue and yellow dots danced about in front of me. I lay there in my awkward state, concentrating on not dying, willing my body to either continue changing or to reverse, to return to my Human form. No such luck. My mind was a blur, I was unable to think straight, let alone give out commands to the rest of my body. I squeezed my eyes shut and swore I heard my name being called in a strange way. It was as if someone was singing it to me. My first, middle and last name being sang to me. There were only three people in existence who knew my full name. General Newark, Chester and my dad. I opened my eyes again, feeling, allowing my body to relax. The vast whiteness of the Facility had gone, replaced by a more welcome sight of a rusty red metal corridor, clusters of pipes and wires leading along the walls either side of me and disappearing around the corner.

I was onboard the Star Stalker. Though it was familiar territory, I was still being stalked. I looked down at myself. Still painfully stranded between Human and Dragon. Why wasn't I dead? That was my current main question alongside who or what was stalking me. The sudden changes in environments could take a running jump. I've been in weirder situations. I clawed my way down the ageing corridor of the old ship, the sing song voice still echoing in my mind, the monster still following me, it's presence sending my mind skittering. It hurt like hell to move. I couldn't walk properly and my partialy formed wings and tail were dragging across the rough metal floor gouging cuts in my soft scales, blood trailing behind me as I slowly clawed my way onward, determined not to stop, to not let the monster get me. A childish thing to

be saying, but I know what monsters can do, and it's far worse than what any terrified child can imagine. A dull red light flashed up ahead, reflecting off the dull surfaces. The ship was on red alert. Yet there were no explosions to be heard. I stopped my agonising movements to feel the momentum in the ship's frame. But it wasn't moving. Everything was still and quiet. I tested the air, my forked tongue flicking out, the only part of me that had fully formed. Nothing. Not even the old metal of the ship could be scented. A low growl from behind and my nerves stood on end again. The monster was in the corridor with me. I was close to the bridge. I knew that without even having to look at the metal sign plates that were welded on the walls. I could navigate this ship blind and unfeeling. My taught muscles protested angrily, white hot pain ripping through my body once more, a tear escaping my good eye as I dragged myself onwards towards the bridge, and hopefully towards safety. The door was wedged open, buckled and bent, stuck in it's frame, the blissful sight of the small bridge visible through the mangled gap. Flickers of a violent space battle erupted in my mind and quickly faded. I shook it off and willed my body onward, but as soon as my hips crossed the threshold, I heard the air being sliced and a pain like nothing I'd ever felt speared through my back.

I convulsed and screamed in agony, a cry lost between Human and Dragon. My vision blurred and I forced it to clear again. Three bodies lay on the bridge ahead of me, lay in the dip in front of the main viewer screen. The one to the right, I recognised instantly. It was Chester. I'd never seen him looking so scared in all the years I'd known him. The second figure was female. She crouched on the other side of the unconscious body. Flame coloured hair and dark skin. She wore nothing but an old pair of torn shorts and a white cotton shirt to match, tied in a knot at the front to hide her breasts. It took me a moment to realise who she was. The pain had subsided, numbed by lack of movement. She was my mother, the woman who had died trying to save me from the scientists at the Prytchard Facility. She was the one singing my name. The long silver white blade in my back twitched and jerked away from me, sending my body into another convulsion. I bit down on my lip to stop from screaming again, instead drawing blood. I crawled forward to get a better look at the unconscious figure. My gut churned and I went cold, ignoring the agony that vibrated through my body as I realised who it was that lay on the bridge, dying in a pool of dark blood, her husband by her side and her dead mother cooing her name, trying to call her back into existence, to try and save a dead ship from whatever was outside in the cold darkness. The body was me. I wanted to throw up. I swallowed hard, forcing back the bile that rose and clawed onwards, now hearing only my blood pumping around my body, the sound dominating my hearing. I whimpered more, my will to live fading as the pain that ran through my mishapen body became more intense. I fell down the steps and landed heavily at the foot of the ladder that led up and into the cockpit. The monster had stopped at the doorway, unable or unwilling to cross the threshold, which one, I didn't know. But it had stopped and my energy was fading. I hauled myself over to my body, my clawed hand passing through my crooked leg. I was in a mess. More so than I'd ever been since joining the Shadow Stalkers' ranks. Then the bridge whirled and tilted violently before sinking into darkness.

"Whut 'appened?" I asked raggedly, the metal floor cold against my back.

"We were on a retrieval mission and we got ambushed by pirates." Chester said haggardly, relief flooding his dark eyes.

"How many?"

"I don't know. But we were heavily outnumbered. Me, you, Ev and Tamas are the only survivors. They're down in the engine room trying to get the main engine back online."

His grip tightened on my paw, sending a sliver of hot pain up my arm. But I didn't care. I was alive, and if those pirates were, I can guarantee it won't stay that way for long.

"I honestly didn't think you weren't gonna make it."

"You of all people should know that I ain't that easy to get rid of." I grinned weakly.

The ship rippled beneath us and a young male voice crackled over the ship's com.

"We've managed to restore partial main power, which is just enough to get us to the station. We're now working on the long-distance com-link."

I recognised that voice. It took me a moment to figure out who it was, but I finally recognised it as Tamanas Solis, the newest recruit to the Stalker team, and the last remaining new crewman. We took on five more, but apparently, that battle had cost us four of their lives. I blinked hard, pain surging through my body.

"Help me up." I said raggedly.

Chester pulled me up and I bit back a scream of pain as I realised my leg was fractured, something that should be impossible due to the bio-armour that had been implanted in me, courtesy of the Prytchard Facility. He sat me down in the command chair. I was acting captain until Spirit returned from Kanamiea, the planet we were originally headed to.

"Take us back to Nuam orbit and let the general know what happened as soon as we get a strong enough signal." I said, fighting the strong urge to pass out again.

Chester nodded and climbed up into the cockpit, regaining control of the ship and taking us back. I had to ask him about the monster that was stalking me in my mind later. He may know something about it. But then, he might not...

5 - Deadmetal - (Transformers)

Second fan fic I've ever written, and my imagination has to make it incredibly hard for me. o_O
cowers in fear of all the Transformers fanboys that is about to lynch her in a merciless fashion '>.>
So, my apologies, but I have recently (re) watched the Transformers film, and Blackout jogged a small, well hidden memory; The fact that I have a little TF fan character stashed away, collecting dust in the back of my mind.

So, before you all start reading; I apologise. Profusely. TF is such a massive universe, with god-knows how many characters, and I've only recently gotten back into the fanism of it. Alas, my mind is still a tad fuzzy on it, so I've tried to keep this one as seperate as possible, so as not to ruin Megatron or Optimus' reputation in any way, shape or form. XD;

So, that said: please don't hurt me! D8

Bits of random TF info and knowledge are always welcome, very much so, since my brain is still refusing to work properly. >__<

Deadmetal, Krusher, Carjack (c) me (Amy)

Transformers (c) Hasbro

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The steady booming *whumps* echoed down the near empty, battered and beaten street, reverberating off any and all surfaces that was available to the sound, rebounding into the chill, crisp night air, mixing intently with the swirls of snowflakes that were once again lazily floating down to earth to coat everything in their soothing coolness. A little further down the street, beyond the parked cars that lined the curbs, awaiting their owners like loyal pets born of metals and plastics, some hidden beneath a thinning layer of old snow, the Apache AH-64A helicopter hovered down to a neat and clean touchdown on the cracked surface of an outdoor basketball court, sending whirlwinds of snow up around it. The few who still cared about what was going on in the outside world beyond their own little world, took a small chance to peek out of their windows and at the ugly chunk of machinery that had just landed where their children had played just hours before. Their curiosity sated about the singular commotion outside, in the darkness across the street, they ambled their way further into the depths of their houses, reluctant to become involved in whatever was about to happen beyond the old wood and brick walls of their abodes. A wise choice, subconsciously made, since behind the blacked out windows of the Apache, sat no pilot or co-pilot. Just an empty cockpit. Not that that sort of thing was unusual now, the army now setting up their craft to be piloted by remote control under the notion it's better to lose weaponry rather than a good soldier. Too many men and women along with innocent civillians had lost their lives to a war that had long since lost meaning and plot and course.

This Apache was far more different than any other, not only because it bore no pilots, but because it also wasn't a chopper controlled remotely by someone sat at a desk console in some distant military base. This one had a mind of it's own, a task of it's own and a war of it's own. Either oblivious to it's current surroundings or just plain not caring about the fact that it had landed in the middle of a rundown neighborhood, it seemingly stared into the sheltered depths beneath the fly-over, it's vision sensors switching from shades of electric red, green and blue, scanning each parked and abandoned vehicle

that sat like metallic corpses beneath the dual carriage way that lay silent above their heads. No one on the outside could see these sensor beams sweeping over each vehicle, diagnosing and searching as quick as a blink of an eye. Only the Apache could see them as they investigated every square inch of rusting, dented and scuffed metal, plastic and glass. The diagnosis varied from vehicle to vehicle; shot transmission, blown gear box, a heavily abused engine. None of these vehicles were going anywhere fast anytime soon. Then the scanner beam flickered over the old 4x4 sat in the corner, beside a large, chunky concrete support pillar.

It looked battered and beaten from the outside. Even the up-holstery was fraying helplessly. Anyone would dismiss it as an old car that had been abandoned, cast aside to rot away, not worth the money to have it towed to the scrap yard. But the Apache knew better. This wasn't a regular 4x4, just as the Apache wasn't a regular gunship. The large four propellers came to an abrupt halt, a dull metallic *click* signifying the sudden end to the gradual slowing *whump* of metal slicing through air, the smaller, tail blades swiftly following suit as they folded back, shifting position as two legs emerged, followed by long, metallic arms, the wing-bound weaponry shifting to somewhere within the eighteen foot mechanical monster's fore arms as the rest of the Apache's armour manouvered about it's new shape, taking on the form of a bipedal robotic organism, a crest of three spikes lining the top of it's head.

The newly formed robotic organism, designated Deadmetal, watched as the 4x4 swiftly switched from the decaying heap of mechanics into a robot of similar shape. Shorter in stature, the freshly transformed 4x4 only stood at sixteen foot, but bore a far worse goal than that of the freshly changed chopper that stood defiant before it. The one their kind called Carjack was here to destroy, to make life a living hell for those that dared to cross it's path, be it of organic nature like the Humans, or mechanical of nature, like the Autobot it had locked gazes with. A brief moment passed, a flurry of snow, the first to fall since the morning of that day and enourmous limbs almost laborously swung into action with more grace than one would expect from such a large, technological creature. An alien alloyed fist connected hard with an alien alloyed jaw, an electronic wail of what could pass off as glee emanating from the Decepticon Carjack as he landed the first blow. Deadmetal may not have been the strongest of the Autobot aligned hunters, but he made damn sure he was persistant enough to get on the wick of any Decepticon who opposed him or that he was sent after. Either way, he didn't give up easily, and Carjack knew it, having spent two weeks trying to fend off the Apache being after having received orders to fall back and return to base once he had claimed what he'd been sent out for; something that couldn't be achieved easily with an Autobot hot on your trail. Carjack had tried throwing him off his trail several times at the cost of his preciose and fast depleting energy levels, each one failing, even when he thought he'd succeeded in doing so. But now, there beneath the fly-over, it would end, one way or another, and both sentient machines were determined to end their opponent, which consisted of each other.

As the two collided heavily, a blade flicked from Carjack's forearm, shearing down on Deadmetal's shoulder, instead gaining only sparks and a powerful shot in the armoured abdomen from the chain gun that was tucked snugly away in the Autobot's lower chest, wedged between his chest plating, leaving enough room for a perfect rotation in any forward facing direction. Carjack stumbled a few steps backward, the concrete beneath his feet shattering, cracks creeping outward like a spider's web beneath his weight. An electronic sounding growl and a swift string of curses and a large, shoulder mounted gun rotated quickly into position, firing three rounds of heated plasma charges, two hitting home, sending the Autobot into a near somersault, the blades on his back spreading outwards as he landed heavily, the impact sending out shockwaves that rattled the old chainlink fences that partially encircled the outdoor basketball court, and a small amount of concrete dust being shaken from the underside of the fly-over.

Carjack approached the felled Deadmetal, sure that his shots had done enough damage to keep the hunter down.

It was a mistake, one rarely made. Deadmetal's leg swung up as soon as the transformed 4x4 was within range, knocking him off balance, sending him crashing to the already irreparable concrete ground, the sudden motion allowing him to neatly return to his feet, to look over Carjack as he became the one sprawled on his back, the impact having momentarily knocked his vision sensors out of whack, giving him the effect of seeing double with the occasional blur of static. The interference may have only lasted a split second, but it was enough for Deadmetal to return to his feet and produce a gun, one that was now aimed at his head. Carjack rolled from the path of the hot plasma shots that rained down where his head was once at to hiss angrily in the thin snow, and he rolled in a semi-circle and back onto his feet, a metal arm arcing downward, slamming into Deadmetal's back making the four blades rattle in metallic protest at such an action.

Deadmetal staggered forward, one step, two, three and on four, regained balance and swung around, a heavy metal bird-like foot swinging upward on the end of a long metallic leg, slamming into Carjack's chest, sending him a little way off the ground and backward, the force of the kick being enough to send him rolling roughly upon landing, sparks flying, concrete shattering as he bounced across the ground, only to come to an abrupt halt against one of the support pillars for the road that stretched out over their heads, buckling and splintering the reinforced cylindrical stack of concrete. The Decepticon managed to climb part-way back to his feet with a growl before Deadmetal charged toward him, his giant fist coming down and around, smashing into the side of his head, swiftly followed by a round of shots from his arm mounted gun. Sparks jittered from Carjack's shoulder, but it wasn't enough to stop the determined robot from attempting another attack. Blocking Deadmetal's next blow, Carjack rolled awkwardly back to his feet, using his damaged arm as a sort of flail, the blade sliding out once more into sight, slicing a deep scar across his opponent's face, gaining an electronic-esque scream in return.

If any of the residents were to dare to pay any heed to what was going on outside, they'd have seen a flash of blue-white light, the result of a controlled EMP shot being aimed towards the damaged 4x4 as it continued its battle to fell the transformed Apache, but the days of trying to outrun and lose the Autobot had taken its toll on his energy reserves, making him slow to react. Now he knew why Deadmetal had only been chasing him and not constantly attacking, only being evasive. The numerous sudden attacks Carjack had performed on the chasing Deadmetal had cost him a few extra, precious hours of energy. Deadmetal was tiring too, though. He could see that much, in the way he attacked, the slight lag in attack reaction; the slightly awkward movements slowly growing in regularity. But it wasn't as bad as what Carjack was suffering now. He'd either have to escape or be destroyed. He didn't like the thought of the latter, so he used another burst of precious energy to shift back into the 4x4, narrowly avoiding contact with a large, metallic fist as he tore off, swerving around Deadmetal's feet and vanishing down the road with an angry roar of cloned engine. A swift curse and Deadmetal was back into his Apache AH-64A, cutting across the rooftops, in pursuit of an all-too-fast battered 4x4 that looked as if it should have been scrapped years ago.

The image of a micro-chip spun through Deadmetal's mind. Carjack's main objective was to steal it from a high security military research facility out in the middle of the wastelands that bordered the small city. He didn't know how he'd gotten away with it. Stealing the identity of one of the vehicles; yes. Easy enough. But to get past security without a Human driver or ID... Carjack should've been destroyed upon entrance, or at least deterred by the massive amounts of artillery used to defend the small base. That

riddle aside, one that could possibly be solved later, Deadmetal returned to his current objective; Retrieve the chip and destroy the Decepticon before he returns to base. Easier said than done... Deadmetal grumbled to himself as he flew low over the rooftops, Carjack still in view on the road below, but not close enough to shoot at yet. Expending a little more energy, the Apache sped up to keep an even pace with the swerving and swearing, frantically agitated 4x4 below. Then the roof of the 4x4 tore open as the chain gun above raged into action. Carjack slid in a U-turn, acidic words spitting forth as he tore off down a side - road, the fire exits and over-hanging roofs of the buildings he raced between halting Deadmetal's gunfire with a frustrated, metallic grinding noise emanating into the cold night, seemingly being absorbed by the growing snow.

On the other side of the buildings, Deadmetal had lost track of Carjack. Nowhere to be seen. Just a short lived set of tire tracks in the thin snow that melted back into black tarmac below. Lowering carefully, his descent sending up billows and swirls of snow, he inspected the tracks all the more carefully. Sure enough, Carjack had finally succeeded in losing the hunter as his vision flashed a warning red; a sign he was starting to become dangerously close to temporarily shutting down. It'd happened before, but it was in a more open area, more secluded from mankind. Deadmetal was just inches away from a low roof that jutted out over a narrow road behind a cluster of tightly packed houses. To shut down here, would mean to destroy homes and possibly even kill their denizens. A choice was made. Deadmetal ascended, turned effortlessly and headed back the way he had come, in search of a place to re-charge emergency energy reserves, or energy permitting; fly back to base.

Winding down narrow back-roads, Carjack smirked to himself. There was no sign of the Autobot. *His energy reserves must have gotten the better of him...* He thought idly, a slight hint of victory and smugness entering his voice.

He turned onto a disused road and headed south-west, back towards his own base. Halfway down the road, he was pulled out of his musings on whether he wanted to hand the micro-chip over or not. He was about to come to a conclusion on that subject when a voice tore through his thoughts, violently derailing them.

"Carjack?! Where the hell are you?" A voice growled angrily. "You're two days late on your delivery!" He knew the voice well. It was Krusher, the leader of the small group of Decepticons he'd been assigned to be working with, and neither got along all that great.

"I came across a little problem. It's all sorted now, so don't get your circuits in a knot!" Carjack snapped, all the more annoyed at having to expend more precious energy with a possible petty bickering match that was threatening to rear its ugly head.

"What kind of problem?" Came the next growl.

"The Autobot kind." He retaliated. "Now, if you don't mind, I'm red-lining on the energy reserve front." He snapped again and only caught the beginnings of a growling stab-back when he cut off the communications link between himself and Krusher.

Everything had gone silent once more, bar the low, growling hum of his copied engine. The idea of swerving off in the opposite direction to re-charge in a secluded spot was tempting. Very tempting, especially since there were plenty of military aircraft about and he was in possession of an much sought after micro-chip, the kind of micro-chip that could give any being of any nature a serious upgrade towards the high on un-stoppable level. A very tempting thought indeed. There were plenty of worlds out there, all with wars of their own, each side secretly begging for mercy or a large, powerful weapon to wipe out their opponents with. With that kind of power, Carjack could become among the strongest



Decepticons in existence, a world indebted to him, willing to do anything he wants them to do... An army of his own... No more Krusher... No more Autobots...

Another swift, sharp turn on the snow-slick road, and Carjack sped off in the opposite direction. He'd made up his mind. He'd become stronger and come back and destroy everything that lay in his path and more. It would be a beautiful sight to behold. Magnificent and awe inspiring even. Not even Deadmetal would be capable of doing anything about it. All would tremble before the mass of the little-known Decepticon that was designated as Carjack.

Once he'd had a chance to re-charge, of course...

## 6 - One Way

*Found this lurking about incomplete on my computer. Decided to complete it and upload it. Admittedly, it's not my finest, but it was spurred by an incident a few weeks ago where myself and my Peugeot 106 nearly ended up kissing a van at about 60/70 mph. On one of the worst roads around here. >.o*

*So, out of boredom and lack of stuff to do, I decided to have a go at finishing it. And I think I failed. Especially with the ending. >\_<*

*Anyway, it's a short story to accompany a friend's short story series call Howl Of The Wolf.*

*Everything (c) me (Amy)*

*(except for the car models. They don't belong to me, but anyone with half a brain cell would know that. lol )*

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### **Howl of the Wolf: One Way**

Sirens split the evening silence with their obnoxiousness, crying warnings to those in the area. The building was on fire, scorching, hungry flames eating away at the faceless brick and concrete structure like a fat man at a buffet. The Magpie stood on the opposite side of the street, the spray from the firemen's hoses dampening his feathers and further drowning his spirits. No one knew how the fire had started. The huddled employees who shared the same side of the street as he, were whispering and chattering excitedly above the din. Some were saying it was the ageing fuse box in the cellar, others saying arson. Right now, the cause wasn't what was plaguing Nathan's mind. It was what he was going to do next, and if he and his fellow employees were going to get some kind of compensation for this. Work was scarce at the present moment in time. No one was employing. More so, they were laying people off, trying to save money to keep their businesses afloat. Nathan heaved a sigh. This had been his fourth job in a year. Laid off after fifteen years of loyal service to a car sale's room - cum - repair garage then laid off twice more, both times after a mere three months of service to the other companies. And now this. His latest job, one that seemed so promising, albeit intensely boring, gone up in flames. The Polar Bear next to him was ranting about out loud about something. But only being able to understand his mother tongue, Nathan hadn't the foggiest what the large man was on about. Though one thing was for sure, judging by the harsh tone of his ranting voice; It wasn't good, in a way making him glad he couldn't understand what the man was saying. Right now, there was only one thing anyone but the emergency services could do; Go home and wait for further news about the incident. Turning, Nathan pulled his suit jacket around him and wandered off in the direction of where he'd last seen his car. That was at least three blocks away, the business's own, private yet small car park being stuffed full of mechanical monstrosities and mechanical works of art.

Now sat in his chair that was situated next to the bay window in his badly and hastily decorated living room, Nathan sat with his feet up, TV remote in one hand, newspaper in the other which was turned to the advertising pages. It was wise to start looking for a job now, instead of leaving it until the last minute.

He had a horrible feeling that the next few days wouldn't be pleasant. The past three years hadn't been pleasant. Personal problems had mounted into family problems and now he was out of a job. Again. The only things he was grateful for was for his wife and her abundance of seemingly never ending patience and understanding; their son, Trent and the fact that he wasn't the one to have caused the rift in the family. That part was down to his youngest brother in - law and his perpetual drug habit. Putting down the newspaper, seeing nothing that required his expertise in the fields of pencil pushing for the local council or driving, he stared blankly at the TV.

*This is ridiculous.* He thought sourly. *There's always need for a driver somewhere!*

His wife walked into the living room from the kitchen, Trent trailing her like a puppy.

"I'm going to the shops to get something for tea. Need anything while I'm there?" She asked, collecting her handbag and its various, mysterious contents together.

It took a moment for her husband to reply, but when he did, the words that left his beak sounded distant and lost.

"Nah. I'm good." He replied slowly.

His wife, Lidia, wrinkled her brow slightly, grabbed the car keys and approached him. Leaning down, she placed a gentle kiss on his forehead. Trent bounced up onto his lap, wrapped his little feathered arms around his father's neck and gave a squeezing hug, which Nathan readily returned. It was brief moment of bliss that he relished, taking him away from the gloominess of the real world.

"If you remember anything you need, just give us call. Got me mobile on me." She said, having one last rummage through her well stuffed leather bag.

"Safe journey." Nathan said warmly through the downy feathers of his son's head that were tickling his nostrils.

"Only a few blocks away." She smiled. "C'mon Trent. Let's go get you some tea." She reached a feathered hand out and the little boy took it, hopping from his father's lap and bouncing to the front door that was situated behind Nathan's chair.

Turning slightly in his chair, Nathan watched through the rain wet bay windows as the doors on the dark green estate closed, his eyes fixed on the vehicle as it rolled carefully backwards out of the red brick driveway. He also took note of the rain. It was heavy and didn't seem to be letting up anytime soon.

Three hours had passed. Lidia and Trent were nowhere to be seen. And after trying to get ahold of his wife several times after remembering they needed washing powder, he started to worry. She shouldn't be taking this long to get the shopping done. The supermarket was only around the corner. It was also on a main road, the car park's junction notorious for accidents. He'd had several dented wings and whiplash due to that particular junction before. And there'd been more HGVs coming through the town lately, too....

He shook the thought from his head and put the grim thoughts down to his run of bad luck. He settled back down into his chair after pacing around the house in a restless state and picked up another newspaper, this one the national paper. Desperate times call for desperate measures. His boss hadn't phoned him since the day of the incident at the offices, and neither had any of the man's secretaries to let him know what was going on. The fire had been on the news several times, but nothing was said on what was going to happen to the employees who worked there. As soon as his long tail feathers fanned in a state of partial relaxation, the phone rang, making him jump, the feathers around his neck fluffing up. Plucking the cordless receiver from its cradle on the table beside him, he pressed the green button and held it to a hidden ear with his free hand. The voice on the other end of the line was unfamiliar and had a stern undertone to it. In the background, there was the sound of sirens and people shouting. His gut went cold. Quickly checking the number on the face of the phone he sank into his seat, newspaper

dropping from his hand. Indeed, the voice on the other end of the line delivered bad news. News that he never wanted to hear. News that *no one* should hear, especially from a stranger using a spouse's mobile phone. Nathan's eyes became wet and tears streaked down his cheeks. He needed to get to the accident site, and he needed to get there immediately. Hanging up and tossing the phone to one side, he slipped his trainers on and swung the front door open, house keys in hand. The rain was still pouring. But he was in too much of a hurry to grab a coat. He ran outside, into the downpour, his black and white feathers soaked in seconds. He splashed through puddles, wiped the damp from his face so he could see through the wet haze and rounded the final corner, lungs burning, heart pounding and eyes stinging. It was amazing how fast one could cover three blocks on foot when in a state of near blind panic. Nathan slid to a halt as the scene presented itself to him. The battered old tow truck, sturdy and steadily rusting away, had the mini bus's rear wheels hefted off the ground. He circled around the hastily erected yellow tape and police officers as much as he could, trying to get a better view of what was going on. Wedged between the mini bus and a large, fully loaded articulated lorry, was the family car. The once well built vehicle had crumpled under the pressure of both HGVs, reducing it to the width of a cracker. Both bus and lorry were facing each other. Two large vehicles travelling the opposite directions on a busy one way system never boded well.

Nathan's blood ran cold when he caught a glimpse of a thick, oblong black bag laying on the floor beside the crumpled mini bus. He started toward it, ignoring the swarming police officers, paramedics and firemen, hearing nothing now, but the pounding of his own heart in his ears. Just about to cross the line, a Rottweiler in a black and white officer's uniform caught his arm firmly, swinging the Magpie back around.

"Sorry, sir, but I'm gonna have to ask you to stay here." He said sternly.

"But, that's my *car!*" He protested. "My wife and son were in there!"

The copper seemed to stay impassive. After a moment, he reached for the radio that was secured to the top left of his stab proof vest and murmured something into it. There was a static filled reply, that sounded more like a garbled mumble than anything else, and the heavily built copper gave a solemn nod and pointed to the nearest ambulance. Nathan quickly hurried over to said vehicle and pried for information. Upon flashing a small picture of his wife and son that had been secluded away in his wallet for some years, the paramedic's shoulders slumped slightly and his lips worked around words that refused to be said. Eventually, the Feline just settled for placing a paw on Nathan's shoulder and giving a solemn shake of his head when the feathered index finger jabbed at his wife's image.

"What about my son?" He near shouted over the din.

"Fire fighters're still trynna cut him from the car!" The paramedic replied, equally as loudly, just to be heard over the din of sirens and metal being forced open by high powered metal cutters.

The Rottweiler approached him, and Nathan spun around, eyes wide and tear filled.

"What happened?!" He demanded feebly.

"Driver of the bus weren't paying attention to his surroundings and turned up the one way. The artic' was doing thirty. I was in the area." He said softly, with a hint of regret. "It weren't pretty."

Anger suddenly erupted inside Nathan and he found himself searching his immediate surroundings for the bus driver.

"Too late," The copper said reading the Magpie's reaction perfectly, "he's been taken to the hospital under police escort."

Nathan gaped, held his tongue and turned around at the sound of metal parting from metal. The roof of the severely battered estate was peeled off and soon as it was on the floor, paramedics swarmed in to help the firemen try to free the child. *His* child; an eight year old boy who would be turning nine in two days time. For long, arduous moments, where time seemed to slow to a stop, Nathan looked on

helplessly as the various bodies flocked the car from all angles.

Eventually the boy was pulled free, limp and lifeless. The din of shouting quietened, all eyes downcast. Nathan fell to the floor, sobbing, pleading to every god he could think of. There was a hush in the crowd of onlookers and spectators. Even the last of the sirens had been silenced. Nathan slammed his fists into the wet tarmac, water splashing up and into his face. So much had been taken away from him. What next? His home, too? He had no idea what to do next. He didn't want to go home. Didn't want to return to an empty house of old and recent memories. His thoughts died down, mind emptying of everything. Blankness reigned supreme in his over stressed mind. Unsteadily forcing himself to his feet, he turned and walked away numbly, not questioning where his feet were taking him. Streets were navigated, roads crossed and street signs read. Eventually he found himself sat on a bench in the park, under a tree, hands in his lap, eyes fixed on some point across the wide expanse of green and the smattering of ancient oaks. In his pocket, his phone vibrated, then screamed at him for attention, that most annoying of sounds boaring right through his skull. He absently pulled the small device from his pocket and checked the screen.

### **Mabel**

It was his mother in-law. He looked up at the now rainless sky. The sun had almost set. He still didn't want to go home. Still didn't want to talk to anyone. He wasn't sure what to do about the rest of his family. He had two sides to tackle. How does one go about telling a woman that her only daughter and grandson has died? It was an impossible feat. One that he couldn't avoid for long, but it wasn't something he was prepared to do at this present moment in time. He placed the irritable little piece of technology back in his pocket and curled up on the bench, making himself as comfortable as possible. Home could wait until later. It wasn't as if he was going to get into trouble for being late. His eyes slowly closed, blotting out the sight of the park and the raucous sounds of bored and boisterous teenagers as they meandered aimlessly through the park. Sleep claimed him quick and mercilessly, wrapping him in blissful, all consuming darkness.

Awaking to the sound of cheerful birds chattering away to each in the branches above his head, Nathan sat up, feeling worse than he'd ever felt before. He felt ill, sick to his stomach, cold and empty. He pulled his phone from his pocket, pressing the OK button beneath the large, scarred screen to review his missed calls. He had seventy of them, all from various people, some numbers he knew very well, others he didn't recognise at all. *I should go home...* He thought miserably. *My answering machine's probably stuffed full to the point of exploding...*

Hauling himself to his feet, he shambled off in the direction of his house at his own pace, dreading walking through the door to be greeted by no one but emptiness. He looked up to the sky, shielding his eyes from the all too bright sun. The world over his head was a clear, bright blue. The clouds had finally bugged off and left him to dampen his spirits further of his own accord. He stepped off the curb and into an unusually clean street. *Council workers've been busy...* He thought numbly. He wanted to think of anything but what had gone on yesterday. Though he knew he couldn't avoid it for much longer, he still tasked his fuzzy feeling mind with the most mundane of tasks. He started off with counting to one hundred. Then he went through every name he could think of before settling upon listing all the films he'd ever seen and trying to name all the characters within them. His eyes still downcast, staring at the floor as his feet moved him along the familiar streets, he came to his road. He stopped at the junction and looked around. All the driveways to every house he could see were occupied. Some had vehicles parked in them that he'd never seen on this street before. *Surely there wasn't a half price car sale in town...* He muttered to himself. Where there was a yellow Fiat before, now stood a sleek and expensive

Jaguar in a traditional green. Nathan wrinkled his brow. Something was definitely wrong. He proceeded slowly to his house, eyeing up the changes in the residence's gardens and choices of transport. When he came to his own house, he stopped dead, mouth hanging open. There, sat in the red bricked drive were two cars, both very familiar. An old Morris Miner and an old deep green Mondeo estate. He rubbed at his sleep ridden eyes and slowly walked up the drive. The last he recalled, both cars were write-offs. The Morris had been the first to go in the late eighties when his aunt had lost control on a patch of black ice, putting the vehicle into a ditch. And the estate. *His* estate... He tried shaking the thought from his mind, but it wouldn't leave, refusing to go away like a never ending itch.

He slowly approached the porch and inserted his key into the lock, turning and gently pushing the door open. He peered inside and was instantly greeted by the rich scent of freshly baked banana bread. His salival glands instantly reacted and he pushed the door open a little further. He recognised that smell. Knew it from when he was younger. His aunt's banana bread, as he once put it, rocked his world. And it still did. As nostalgia quickly filled his mind and senses he stepped into the living room. Everything was as he'd left it yesterday. Except the newspaper was back on the arm of the chair, the phone was in its cradle and the TV was off. Closing the door behind him with a gentle *click*, he replaced his keys on the small hooks that he'd screwed into the wall next to the coat hooks.

"Hello...?" He ventured.

There was the distinct sound of small feet running about excitedly upstairs. He cast his eyes towards the badly artexed ceiling and followed the footsteps across the landing and down the stairs.

"Dad!" Came the small and excitable voice.

"Oh my god..." Nathan muttered as Trent lept at him, throwing his arms around his father's waist.

Nathan sank to his knees and instantly returned the hug, burying his face into his son's downy feathers.

"Hurry up! I need a taste tester!" Came the familiar demanding voice of his aunt.

Trent quickly peeled away from his father and scurried into the kitchen. Nathan followed, but at a slower pace. He had no idea what was going on. Stepping through the kitchen door, he looked around. Again, the kitchen was as he'd left it. With the exception that his wife was sat at the end of the table in her usual place, nose buried so deep into a newspaper, that she didn't notice him. Pulling a tray out of the oven, was a plump female Magpie with curlers in her hair. Nathan's aunt, supposedly long since dead, plucked a cooling lump of sweet smelling banana bread from the rest of the loaf and carefully handed it to Trent. She looked over at Nathan and beamed.

"And it's about time you joined us." She smiled and dumped the loaf on a cooling tray.

"But you're..." Nathan began uncertainly.

"Dead." His wife finished abruptly.

"What?" Nathan said abruptly.

Oh how he wanted to sweep that woman out of her chair right now... But there were other eyes present. That thought could wait until that night. She dumped the paper on the table, folded open to the page she was reading and shoved it towards him. Nathan took the paper and read it. It was open to the obituaries and a cold shiver ran the length of his spine. Their names were there. Two listing a car accident and one, his, listing a stabbing. He read it repeatedly, letting it sink in.

"I didn't even see the bus..." She muttered almost to herself. "It just appeared out of nowhere. I *swear!*" Nathan's aunt sat down beside her and patted her hand reassuringly.

"I know, I know." She crooned softly. "It's all over now, so don't you worry you pretty little head, 'kay?" Nathan ignored the on-going conversation, his eyes locked on his family obituary, reading it again and again. Then a thought occurred to him.

"Those bloody teenagers!" He snarled acidly, scrunching the paper up in a hand. He looked down at

his son who was munching the warm banana bread. "Sorry son. Random outburst..."

He then sat down heavily on a kitchen chair, chucking the paper into the middle of the table. He looked over at his still mildly dazed wife and gave an unenthusiastic smile.

"Thought it weren't gonna past its next MOT after yesterday." He muttered half heartedly.

It was a very bad attempt at dark humour, but his wife still gave a small smile after a moment when she realised he was on about the car.

"Was it really that bad?" She asked.

Nathan nodded.

"Were there fire engines there?!" Trent asked, climbing into the chair beside Nathan, who looked stunned by his son's sudden question.

Surely boy should be shaken after the incident..? But then, young minds are always more malleable and forgiving than the older ones.

Nathan really couldn't see a way out it, so he sighed and nodded.

"At least three." He said, ruffling the boy's head feathers lightly.

"Your son is quite the morbid little beast." His aunt said lightly and with a smile.

They sat in silence for a few moments, taking in the new situation. Nathan finally came to a conclusion. If this was the afterlife, then he'd just have to go with the flow, like he'd done so many times before. He was good at adjusting to new things, and he was always willing to accept whatever challenge life threw at him. To him, this was just another challenge.

"So, uh. What's for dinner?" He asked.

"What?" His wife all but exclaimed.

His aunt gave a hearty laugh.

"Yeah, I'm hungry!" Trent said, following his father's almost absent minded query.

"Okay, I'll make us all some sandwiches, then while we're eating them, I can fill you in on your new lease of life." The big woman smiled and pushed away from the table.

"Sounds good to me." Nathan said.

His wife gave him a sharp look. Nathan shrugged helplessly. He was feeling as bad as she was, but he was doing his best not to show it. He'd deal with it later, away from prying eyes. But right now, it wouldn't do to have two upset parents hanging around a young boy. It'd bring his spirits down. So to speak...

## 7 - Water Tank

*Short story that fast lost track of itself. xD;*

*I really don't know. Mainly because I can't remember what I actually wanted to happen in this in the first place. It originally involved a dead body of a woman who'd been murdered and then dumped in one of the boiling tanks, but that idea kinda packed its bags and went on a permanent vacation. lol*

*Anyway, here you go. Happy Halloween, I guess...? (It was supposed to be a Halloween story, but again, I fail. lol)*

*Everything (c) me (Amy)*

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Water Tank

Morgan moved quietly down the central catwalk, his boots clacking and clinking against the tough meshwork as he walked, quietly hating his job. He hated water. And he was in the job of keeping watch on six, deep water filled tanks. Three either side of him, three on the floor directly above. The metal room was in a constant fog when the space faring liner was in use, grimey water droplets dripping constantly from the low ceiling that spared him a meager four inches of head room, forcing him to duck beneath the pipes and support beams that were bolted to the ceiling. He eyed up the three water tanks that held the recycled, clean water. The water in each of the three tanks positively sparkled beneath their safety glass. Then he turned his attention to the boiler tanks full of the dirty water from the tanks on the floor above. With each flush of a toilet, each use of a tap and everytime the wave machine in the main swimming pool splashed water over the sides, the main waste tanks over head filled a bit more. The tanks up there, in Water Room One, were constantly feeding Morgan's tanks, the filth being filtered from the water, which in turn was boiled then filtered again as it was pumped, cleanly into the Clean Tanks. All had been going smoothly up until a few minutes ago, when he'd recieved word from a commanding officer that people were complaining about the sudden lack of water pressure. Morgan had heaved a sigh knowing full well what this meant. If one tank got clogged, then the pressure in the others would drop considerably. And the only way to combat it, if the pressure build up didn't force the blockage to clear, was to shut the offending tank down and go for a swim. And the offending tank was bleeping and flashing its red tell tales at the sweaty, disgruntled Elf. He swore the water tanks had been mocking him for the past three weeks. Ever since this cruise had started, there'd been numerous blockages in all the tanks, including the ones upstairs, which, he thought with extreme relief, were not in his charge. They were the charges of his co-worker, Jarret. In truth, the ship was in dire need of a retro-fit. Everything on board needing updating or replacing. Even the water tanks and their components. It was a wonder that health and safety weren't clambering all over the liner's owners, screaming for the ship to be dry docked permanently. Morgan inspected the flashing tell tales with disdain. The needle on the pressure gauge had left the comfort of the green and had dipped into the orange, scant millimetres away from touching upon the angry red. He looked down into the tank of brown boiling water, heat condensing on the safety glass that covered the tank top. He couldn't see a damn thing. He made his way across to the far end of the room, wiping away sweat slicked tendrils of black hair and plucked the radio from its cradle. He

depressed the button on its side and put it to his mouth.

"Water Room Two to Water Room One." He spoke into the radio with an air of undeniable boredom. There was moment of silence then the radio crackled with static and a new, familiar voice replied to his request. A droplet of the grimey water dripped onto Morgan's head.

"Jarret, have any of your Sludge Tanks registered a blockage?" Morgan asked.

The line went dead for another moment, then Jarret came back.

"Damn." He sighed. "My third tank's registering a blockage in the Alpha Pipe."

"So's mine. Care to check it out before I shut down mine for closer inspection?" Morgan asked, a slight tone of hopefulness underscoring his initial boredom.

"Donning my suit as we speak, my friend." Came Jarret's reply. His grin could be heard in his voice.

"Lemme know what you find asap." Morgan said and re-cradled the radio, the springy wire coiling around itself as the slack in it was regained.

Morgan made his way back to the offending tank. Peering through the near perpetual mist, he squinted into the tank once more, a cold chill running up his spine despite the sauna like conditions of the room. Beneath the safety glass, the dirty water was bubbling away quite happily as if nothing was amiss. But looking hard, squinting through the condensation that gathered on the underside of the glass, he could see that the tank was below full. The tank was never below full. None of them were. Except for on this journey. On this cruise, the guests were blissfully unaware of the problems that were cropping up throughout the ageing cruise ship almost constantly. The old liner really needed an overhaul. *No, it needs to be scrapped.* Morgan thought bitterly. That way, he might be able to get a better job. But would the pay be any better...? Or would it be worse...? Truth be told, he chose this job himself. Not many people wanted to work in the Water Rooms onboard a massive space faring liner, but it wasn't the working conditions that had allured him. It was the pay. The pay was above average wages, mainly due to the hazards pertained in the job, as well as the uncomfortable working environment the employee would have to put up with. But Morgan had got the job, and he'd put up with it for the past five years, and as much as he hated tending to the filthy water tanks, he didn't want to leave his job. The health plan was top-notch as was the pay and the onboard quarters he got to dwell in during each cruise. He wasn't about to give it up any time soon, no matter how badly the little voice in the back of his mind protested.

From the back of the room, the radio crackled for his attention. Morgan strode over to it and was greeted by the voice of Jarret, who sounded decidedly knackered and mildly disgusted.

"Morgan? You there? C'mon man, I need a fracking shower!" Jarret all but whined.

He gripped the slippery, water proof communications device and depressed the button, answering his co-worker.

"I'm here," He replied levelly, "Find anything?"

The response was not something he wanted to hear.

"It's hard to see through all the crap floating about in the tanks up here, but there's *definatly* something big blocking the Alpha Pipe. And it's at your end, pressed up against the filter." Jarret replied.

"shoot..." Morgan mumbled unhappily. This meant he had to go into the tank.

"Well, I'm going for a shower. I smell worse than fermented Hoash..."

The line crackled then went dead. Morgan replaced the radio in its cradle, eyeing the bubbling tank like a cat would a bath. The only thing he hated more than a tank full of water, was a tank full of murky water. Even green watered swimming pools gave him the creeps. He shrugged the horrible feeling off and put it down to what he always blamed his irrational fear on: Too many horrors when he was a kid. He walked across the catwalk to his left and pried open the greasy cover of a control panel that was embedded into the wall. The hinges on the cover gave a protesting squeek as he did so. He looked down the damp

array of switches, buttons and gauges and located the small control interface for tank three. Two switches were flicked and a button pressed. An alarm went off at the tank's main console and Morgan shut the control panel's cover and made his way across to where the red tell tales were now flickering angrily, bleating out a warning. The heat had been cut off to the tank and the openings to the clean water tanks had been closed off by strong shutters. Everything had been intentionally cut off from the boiling tank. All he had to do now was wait for the temperature of the water to come down enough for him to submerge himself into the murk without fear of being scolded to within an inch of his life. The cooling process would take at least twenty minutes. He flicked a switch on the interface and the safety glass slowly slid back, releasing the acrid aromas of boiling waste along with a plume of steam. Morgan gagged, the stench almost too much for his system to handle. He reflexively turned away from the now open tank, hand to his face, covering his nose and mouth.

Pulling the heavy wet suit on, he zipped it up at the front, his clothes folded as neatly as possible on the wet bench behind him. No matter. His clothes were wet within moments of entering the room anyway. He pulled the breathing equipment on, strapping it securely to himself before waddling awkwardly over to the blocked tank. The water temperature had gone down enough, and was now luke warm compared to its murderous state of boiling a little more than twenty minutes ago. Morgan swung the gate open on the railing that surrounded the tank. He gripped the top of the ladder and peered down into the mist and at the murky water. For long moments he stood there, frozen in place, his skin crawling from just looking at it. He really didn't like bodies of murky water. Especially when the body of murky water was contained in a deep, seemingly bottomless tank. Who knew what kind of monstrosity was lurking down there, blocking the main feed pipe. It certainly couldn't be a mass of tissue. If the water didn't dissolve it, then the heat of the water surely would break it up. He squeezed his eyes shut and took a deep, shuddering breath. Maybe it was time to look for a new job. Preferably one that didn't involve tanks of dirty water. Pulling the breather mask tightly over his face, he checked once more that no skin was on show, revealed to the potentially lethal grime that lurked within the tank. Assured that he was fully covered, he pressed on, landing with a splash. The murk swarmed around him, shrouding him with grit and small lumps of grime that had yet to be broken down by the boiling process. He paddled forward, feeling along the horribly greasy wall of the tank until he fingered one of the smaller pipe mouths. He could now just about make out the gaping maw of the Alpha Pipe. It wasn't a welcoming sight. It sent chills racing across his body as his imagination went into overdrive, conjuring up all kinds of beasts that could lunge out at him from the darkness of the gaping, black hole...

He shook his head, clearing his mind. He could see inside the large pipe, could see the network of meshes and grilles. Clumps of waste of various types clung to the wires of various thickness. He pulled at a piece of tissue, the debris all but disintegrating between his fingertips. He pulled at another piece of debris and cast it aside. Now the grime had settled, accommodated to his presence in the tank, he could see a little bit clearly. The clarity wasn't much, but it was marginally sufficient for him to do his job efficiently. And the quicker he got it done, the quicker he could be back out of the tank and in the shower, safe in the knowledge that it wasn't going to clog up again for at least another forty-eight hours. Gripping a large piece of wedged debris he tugged. It wouldn't budge. He had no idea what it was. And it was firmly wrapped around the wirework of the central filter, one tendril hanging free and in Morgan's reach. He grunted, a stream of bubbles escaping to the surface as he gave another tug, this time bracing himself with his flippered feet on either side of the pipe opening to give himself some leverage. He heaved again. The tendril of debris whipped from his gloved hand. Morgan pulled back in surprise. Something moved swiftly behind him, disturbing the water and the grime that was settled on the floor of the tank.

He searched the gloom and saw nothing but the half boiled left overs of the waste tanks on the floor above. Then, just as he was succeeding in calming his warped imagination, something thin wrapped around his ankle. Morgan looked down, eyes wide. There was a thin, deep red, mottled blue tentacle wrapped firmly around his ankle. He yelped, the sound muffled by mask and water and tugged away, flailing for the ladder and the safety of the catwalks. Whatever it was, was clinging on, but wasn't hindering his progress. As he gripped the ladder and heaved himself out of the water, something sharp pierced the back of his leg. Morgan cried out. The pain was excruciating, burning up the length of his leg and was slowly spreading out across the rest of his body. The tendril that had pierced him sank back into the water and the one wrapped around his ankle released him and vanished back into the gloom too. Morgan heaved himself onto the catwalk, pulling his breather mask away from his face and groaned in agony, rolling onto his back as best he could with the burden of the single oxygen tank that was strapped there. As his wandering hand brushed against the back of his calf, he looked down. There was a needle sharp, thin spear embedded in his flesh. The boney needle had easily pierced the thick layer of wetsuit and was now buried deep in his muscle. He gripped it and gave an experimental tug. He instantly regretted it. Pain seethed through him and multi-coloured stars and spots danced mockingly before his eyes. He groaned again. Whatever was down there was clogging the system up and it could survive the heat that the boilers doled out. He tried to stand and got as far as a crouch before he fell forward, skinning his right cheek on the catwalk grating as he landed awkwardly. He hissed something under his breath and then proceeded to haul himself across the catwalk, towards the bench and the radio. Finally reaching the bench, he pulled himself up onto it, un-hooking the radio from its cradle with numb fingers. He fiddled clumsily with the channels until he got the one he wanted.

"Water Room Two to Security." He said breathlessly. His head spun horribly and he was feeling incredibly ill.

"Go ahead Water Room Two." Came the gruff reply.

"I've got something potentially lethal in tank three." He gasped as his leg cramped painfully. "I need a medic and permission to vent the tank."

"We're on our way." Was the instant reply.

Then the weight of his equipment and the heat became too much. His eyes rolled back, his body spasmed and he slid awkwardly from the bench, landing in a sprawl on the catwalk.

The heavy, reinforced steel door of Water Room Two was heaved open with a protesting squeek and three guards and a medic piled in. It had been four minutes since the call had come through and now they found themselves with a passed out Tank Attendant, whom lay sprawled awkwardly at the end of the room. The medic hurried over to where Morgan lay, sweat beading her skin almost instantly, her nose wrinkling at the acrid smell of the tanks. Kneeling down beside him, opening her case, she looked down at him, eyes going wide. His skin had turned into masses of boils and tumours. Behind her, the guards got to work. Two of them were already wearing wetsuits, their equipment strapped on and ready to use. Pulling their flippers on and their masks over their faces, they plunged into the now cold tank.

"What's his status?" A gruff voice asked through the lingering mist.

There was a moment of silence. Then the medic replied, solemnly.

"Dead." She said and carefully inspected the tumours and boils. "I can't give a definite reason why in these conditions, but it looks like he was boiled from the inside out..."

She placed a hand gently on Morgan's chin and slowly tilted his head to one side. From below the surface, there was a muffled cry quickly followed by the bubbles it produced. One of the frogmen guards surfaced and scrambled out of the tank with a speed and agility that was belied by his current state of

dress. His boss grabbed him and helped him heave himself onto the catwalk. Upon removing his breather mask, the man looked visibly shaken.

"There's something in the tank, sir!" He said hurriedly. "They were *everywhere*! All around us! Craig... He was... He was..."

As if on cue, the surface of the water in the tank bubbled violently and red and blue grimey looking tentacles thrashed about the surface momentarily, a few chunks of fresh meat being thrown about among the frenzy. The guard in the wetsuit promptly threw up.

"What the frack?!" The older man exclaimed.

"What's going on?" The medic asked, approaching with a stride.

"We're venting the tank." He said.

"We need the captain's permission to do that-" She started to say, but she was cut off.

"We can worry about the captain later." He snapped and flicked a switch. The safety glass closed over the tank, a flailing tentacle slapping wetly against it.

"Oh my God!" The medic exclaimed.

The frogman guard pulled himself to his feet.

"Sarge, what about the other tanks?" He asked.

"We'll discuss those with the captain later. For now, this needs to be emptied. What ever is in this tank is going for a swim outside."

"I hope. Those things have a tough grip."

The Sergeant strode across to the main controls embedded into the wall and pulled the front cover open with a wet squeek. Buttons were rapidly pressed and there was a succession of low rumbling and dull clanking noises from below their feet. Then there was a horrible gurgle, like a giant bath rapidly draining its contents. The dirty water in the third tank promptly started to get lower and lower as the water was jettisoned into space, instantly crystalizing in the lack of atmosphere and warmth. In the bottom of the tank, small, spikey creatures with long, meandering tentacles thrashed about in the brown muck. There were only a few of them left, clinging onto the heating pipes that lined the floor of the tank whilst their brethren were sucked out into space.

"What the hell are they?" The younger guard asked, bewildered and still feeling somewhat ill as the remaining Octopus like creatures coiled around the dirtied Elven meat.

"Octopoda Spirriniah." The medic said slowly. "At least I think so..."

"What the Hell're they? The Sergeant asked, repeating his underling's query.

"A kind of Octopus that likes to dwell in hot water. They're highly venomous and much stronger than they look." She replied. "They're mainly found on planets such as Desseria and Sumalku."

"What the Hell are they doing on this ship?"

"Some people like to keep them as pets. They breed extremely fast, so they tend to get flushed alot." She replied almost nonchalantly.

"Get the captain down here." He growled bitterly. "I want all these tanks emptied before the next stop."

"And then what?" His comrade asked.

"We interview everyone on this ship and find out who brought these bastards on board. I'm gonna have 'em for murder." He snarled and went to inspect the other tanks while the captain was contacted.

The captain, a plump man with a neatly trimmed beard stood in the doorway to Water Room Two, Jarret just behind him, trying to get a look into his co-worker's area to see what was happening.

"What's going on?" Jarret asked again, becoming more and more agitated as his questions were sidestepped and dismissed.

"Non of your business." The captain snapped irritably.

"Yes it bloody is! I work in Water Room One! I wanna know what's going on and what's happened to Morgan!" He protested angrily.

The sergeant locked gazes with the captain.

"Your co-worker, Morgan Beckman has been killed." The sergeant said coolly.

The captain glared.

"... *What!?*" Jarret snapped and barged past the captain and the sergeant, heading for the back of the room where several medics and guards swarmed.

Two guards brought Jarret up short and ushered him back.

"It's best you don't see." One of the guards said. "It's not a pretty sight."

"He never was a pretty sight to begin with." Jarret retorted lightly, then realised that his friend was no longer there to playfully thwack him in the back of the head for such a comment.

His shoulders sagged.

"What happened to him?"

"Poisoned." Came a female voice from somewhere behind the guards. "Someone brought a couple of poisonous Octopi onboard and flushed them or their offspring. Your friend Morgan was the victim of them."

"But... But.... He only went to unblock the Alpha Pipe in this tank." He replied helplessly gesturing at the offending, now empty tank. "Nothing can survive the kinda heat these things generate."

"I'm afraid these creatures can. They thrive and reproduce quicker in hot water."

Jarret leaned against the safety rail of the neighbouring clean water tank, sapphire eyes down cast.

"We're emptying the tanks!" Came the sergeant's voice. "Every last one of them."

"Even the cleans?" Jarret asked, eyes wide.

The sergeant nodded.

"I ain't taking no chances. Go back upstairs and empty those tanks too."

Jarret hesitated only a moment. Was this really happening? He nodded once and hurried off back to Water Room One. Taking the steps two at a time, he bounded back onto the catwalks of his narrow Water Room, gagging instantly on the fermented aroma. No matter how long he worked in this room, the smell of boiling waste was a thing that was hard to become used to. He trudged alongside the covered tanks, the sludge beneath the safety glass bubbling away languorously. He approached his own set of main controls embedded into the far wall and opened the cover. He flicked switches and needles started to slowly dip into their red zones. He grabbed the gas mask to his right, plucking it from its hook and pulled it over his face. The last time he'd had to vent these tanks, he'd nearly died from the fumes. He grabbed the radio and called Water Room Two. The gruff voice of the sergeant answered almost immediately.

"Let me know when the boiler tanks down there are empty so I can empty these." Jarret said.

"The second waste tank is now being emptied as we speak. I'll let you know when the first tank is done and ready."

There was a moment of static and then all went silent. Jarret cast his eyes around the room, taking in his surroundings. This would be the last time he would ever see it. The next stop would be tomorrow noon at an orbital station, and he intended on leaving along with some of the passengers who lived on the planet the station orbited. He was sick of working the Water Rooms, both figuratively and physically. The pay was good, yes. But his health had been in decline ever since taking up the job seven years ago. It was time for a fresh, safer start in the world of business. The radio crackled and the gruff voice of the sergeant floated through the room. Jarret grabbed the radio and depressed the button, answering the sergeant.

"Prepare for sluice release. All three waste tanks down there are gonna fill up fast, so close the lids incase of spillage." Jarret said sternly.

"Acknowledged Water Room One, lids are being closed now. Release the contents." The sergeant then signed off with a buzz of static.

Jarret took a breath and proceeded to flick all the appropriate switches. There was a series of clunks as the regulating gates in the network of feed pipes were opened fully, filters sliding back into their respective slots as the system started sucking the tanks empty with unnerving speed. Down in Water Room Two, the three boiling tanks filled fast with thick brown sludge, the contents slapping thickly up against the safety glass. A couple of the guards gagged. It wasn't a nice sight and made them regret ever eating lunch. The radio crackled and Jarret's voice came through.

"There's something moving in the bottom of these tanks up here." He stated, sounding rather displeased.

He could hear the creatures writhing and squirming in the muck beneath the safety glass. They were also making odd sucking noises.

"We're releasing the contents of the boiling tanks now, stand-by and don't open the lids." The sergeant said brusquely.

"I wasn't even considering it." Jarret replied, making a slight adjustment to his mask.

The contents of the three boiling tanks froze into clumps as soon as they reached the blackness of space. As soon as the boiling tanks were empty, the clean water was backflushed through the pipes and into the grimey boiling tanks, swilling away the Octopi and most of the clinging waste. The sergeant watched the tanks empty for the third and final time. Everything had been flushed away, jettisoned into space out of the under carriage of the ship. He picked up the radio and depressed the button, addressing Jarret.

"All tanks clear. Get yourself cleaned up and retire. I want all members of staff in the main hall tomorrow when we arrive at the dock."

He re-placed the radio in its cradle and looked to where Morgan's deformed body lay, a sheet of white linen draped over his corpse. He then looked to the medics.

"Get him outta here." He said, gesturing at the body. Then turning to his own team, he said, "Seal off both Water Rooms. No one's to enter without my permission. Even the captain."

The captain bristled slightly at this then calmed down somewhat. A man had died in that room, and it wasn't up to him to dole out justice or investigations. That was the sergeant's job, what he was being paid to do.

Jarret stood alongside the three other Water Room workers in the main hall of the ship. All members of staff were clumped together, chattering away quietly to each other.

"Morgan were a good lad..." A much older man said solemnly, his brow heavy with age. "No one deserves to go in such a way."

"I 'ope they find whoever brought those things on board." Grumbled another man sourly.

"I hate Octopuses." Said the youngest worker.

All three were wearing their uniform of dark brown overalls. Every member was in uniform. The chefs in their whites along with the medical staff. The cleaners in their black and white blouse and trouser combo. The life guards from the pool house in their red and yellow. Even the bridge crew were there.

"As soon as this is over, I'm outta here. I should've quite the last time 'round." Jarret grunted.

The youngest worker looked at him.

"Thisis happened before?" He asked, eyes wide.

The oldest man shook his head.

"Nay. The last big thing that happened to our lot was that one of the boiling tanks nearly blew up." He said.

"Ruptured the main heat pipe." Jarret added.

"Oh..." The younger man said.

Right then, the sergeant came into the hall. All went quiet, and the staff gathered around the big man.

"We've searched your quarters and work spaces." He said. "And you'll be glad to know, that your alibies are now deemed completely feasible. You can move on and continue with duties from deck One-A through to deck Two-B. And don't venture beyond these decks, because myself and the lads are still working our way through the passengers and their rooms."

"How long will that take?" A cleaner asked.

"At the rate we're moving through each room and its occupant, about three hours." He replied. "Good day." He tilted his hard beaked cap and turned on his heel, striding off.

"I'm packing my bags." Jarret said abruptly.

All faces of the water workers turned to look at him.

"Handed in my letter of resignation this morning. I ain't staying in this job anymore. Not after last night. I hate diving those tanks." He said with a visible shudder for the last few words.

"Well, good luck to ya, then." The middle aged man said after a moment with a slap to Jarret's back. Jarret nodded.

"I'll see you guys around, eh?" He smiled then walked off, toward his quarters.

Stuffing his case full of his clothes and various other personal belongings, Jarret looked out of the small, round window. The planet below swirled with the whites and greys of clouds as they scudded and danced through the sky above the lush green lands and purest of blue oceans. He sighed and paused in his actions. He really didn't know what to do next. Once he left this liner, that was it. There was no going back. He had money to hand and also in his bank account. He was only two planets away from his own. And he knew he had a relative or two on this world. Maybe his aunt was still alive. But he couldn't recall what her number was, only dimly remembering where her house was situated. Forcing the lid down on his suit case, he clicked it locked and heaved it off the low bed. Seven years of bugging about with sludge filled tanks had lent him some good muscles, which he was grateful for. His otherwise heavy suitcase weighed as much as a shopping bag to him. He walked out his room, leaving the key in the door and made his way down the hallway. Climbing into a lift, he made his way to the middle decks where the passengers were slowly filing in in groups of four by groups of four. A few of the upper class, snootier passengers looked him over with disgust, wrinkling their noses. He ignored them. If it weren't for people like himself and Morgan, their waste wouldn't be treated daily on these grand outings. Though the lingering smell of the boiling waste lingered on him, he knew that it wouldn't last. Several thorough washes of himself and the clothes would provide his nose and the noses of other's with relief. He walked down the tunneled gangway and stepped onto the station, looking around at the clean, steel and glass surroundings. He spotted a small, electric train and boarded it. It would take him to the station to planet shuttle bay, where he would be able to get his ticket. As he made himself comfortable on the bench seat, he looked back at the massive liner. One guard was escorting a woman off the ship and onto the station. Three more were carrying her luggage, one of which was a sealed glass tank full of small red and blue spikey creatures...

The woman looked as impassive as her coat of Polar Minks. She didn't look at all bothered about being escorted into a police car, or bothered about the fact that her pets had been confiscated, possibly to be destroyed later. The door on the small, station bound police car shut and pulled away, vanishing into the

network of wide corridors that laced the orbital station. The sergeant stood there for a moment, watching the receding vehicle. Then he looked over at Jarret and gave a solemn dip of his head before making his way back to the ship. The train gave a whistle, the shrill noise breaking through the sudden silence before moving away. When Jarret arrived at his aunt's house, he'd have to have a drink for Morgan, a friend and co-worker who kept him amused through the long boring hours of water work with his random, obscenely accurate comments about life in general. Assuming, that is, his aunt still lived or hadn't moved away.