

Aboard the Sunspear

Chapter 1 - New Horizons

The human mind always boggled me. I had always thought about how the inner workings of the brain influence how we perceive the world, and how we interact with things around us. So I thought it would be only natural to be put aboard the Sunspear. I had heard rumours around the facility of a voyage taking place like no other ever before, one that would last 5 years and people would be away for such a long time in such a concentrated space. This sounded perfect to me, I had already achieved all I wanted on earth, there was no need for me to be here any longer. And the chance to be part of something spectacular was too good to pass up.

My name is Gabriel and I am now the Sunspears navigator. What an honor it will be to be aboard a ship with as fine people as this, ones who know what it means to be part of something bigger than themselves. Something worth living in this existence for. Or at least, that's what I thought before I met some of the crew. Captain Kingsley Goodwin, a mountain of a man, larger than the average human. Short greying hair and a small amount of stubble. He had a temper about him that the whole crew knew about, rub him up the wrong way and you will know about it, the entire ship would shake with his bellowing tones. I was placed on the ship first to ensure everything was in order upon there. I guess due to my superior intellect the company elected me responsible for looking after the wellbeing of this vessel. Goodwin made his way onto the ship shortly after me, looking the place up and down before walking over to where I was stationed.

"This thing is a damn shithole." He announced, his voice already penetrating the steel hull of the ship. I stayed quiet, not wanting to aggravate the situation. He looked at me confused.

"You hear me? Oh, what the hell would you know about it anyway." He stated presumptuously. He was wrong by the way. I could tell the moment I was put aboard the ship, the state of it was completely sub par, even for the company's standards. For such an important voyage you would think they would spend some more money on this mission.

Goodwin marched about the cabin like a man possessed when a small voice was heard from the entrance doors.

"Hello? Anyone there?" The voice said timidly. Goodwin rushed over to the door and was greeted by a small woman carrying a stack of books along with several notepads and pens. He offered to take them from her, she obliged. This was Dr. Mary Constance, the on board scientist. She was a petite woman, with frizzy auburn hair, large glasses and a look on her face of constant doubt, most likely due to her profession.

“Thank you... I could barely find my way here, this place is ridiculous.” She said, catching her breath.

“No problem, My name is Captain Kingsley Goodwin, welcome aboard the new ship they have us on.” Kingsley greeted.

“Ahh yes, this is the Sunspire correct? Apt name considering where we are going.” Dr. Constance claimed.

“Welcome aboard.” I said calmly.

“Oh my god!” Dr. Constance shrieked, startled at my presence aboard. I have a habit of sinking into the background.

“Sorry, I just didn’t know you were on this ship. Pleased to meet you.” She apologised.

Suddenly another voice was heard from the entrance bay, and pierced through the awkwardness of the first meeting.

“Doc, you got all those books? This equipment is friggin’ heavy you know and I could have used another hand.” This was Elizabeth Shaw, the ship’s security detail and weapons expert. She was a formidable woman, short hair, shaved on one side, dressed in combat gear and always ready for a fight.

“Oh, hey guys.” Shaw breathed out as she dropped the equipment down on the metal floor of the entrance bay.

“Careful with those!” Dr. Constance exclaimed, shocked at her colleagues actions.

“Yeah, yeah, they’ll be fine. Hey, you’re Captain Goodwin right? I saw you down at the canteen before this, didn’t know you were at the helm on this one. Good to meet you finally.” Shaw said, almost with an excited look on her face as she reached out her fingerless glove covered hand.

“Good to meet you too Shaw, Peterson told me all about you.” Goodwin greeted, engaged firmly in the energy filled handshake.

“Yeah well Peterson is a damn liar, whatever he told you.”

“All good things don’t you worry, good to have you on board.” He said, letting go of the handshake and grabbing the equipment to take to the cargo hold. The group then started to gather the things and transport them to the cargo hold.

“And I a-” I started.

“Save it, Brainiac” Shaw quipped, gesturing her hand to cut me off. These people are such brutes at times, Dr. Constance is the only one that greeted me properly. But, I am here for other business than making friends.

The crew gathered their things and headed to their bunks after dropping off the cargo and setting up their stations. The “bunks” as they were called were the cryogenic chambers the company had installed on each vessel. These chambers would freeze the occupants inside until a chosen destination or time was reached. In this case, the crew would be in these chambers for 125 days before mercury, and 100 days after in order to reach our destination. I was in charge of keeping this on track.

We all then gathered in the canteen area whilst waiting for the others to arrive. Shaw sat with her feet up on the table, chewing bubble gum and occasionally blowing a bubble and popping it, much to the dismay of Dr. Constance who was startled by it each and every time. She sat with her hands crossed, staring at the dingy table with disgust. Most of the places aboard this vessel were extremely below regulation for a ship of this caliber. The mess hall was dirty and unsanitary, missing chairs and barely a table big enough for the whole crew. The helm was put together quickly with pieces of misshapen metal, and the bunks were hard and uncomfortable, like being crammed into a cold shoe box.

Goodwin was pacing around the table and I could see he was ready to explode with anger when we suddenly heard voices from outside. The crew rushed to the entrance bay and exited the vessel, only to find two people around the back of the ship inspecting the engines.

“Whoa, these are twin matter engines, this is some serious stuff.” One of them said, astounded by the engines on this glorified bucket of bolts.

“I know, the company doesn’t usually spend this type of money on this equipment.” The other replied.

“Pity they didn’t spend the rest of the money on the inside!” Goodwin exclaimed. His fist clenched, as if ready to burst the vessels in his fingers. The two jumped back, the male hit his head on the underside of the engine.

“Ow, dammit dude, don’t scare us like that!” He said, rubbing the back of his head to soothe the pain. These, were the Voss twins. The companies best engineering team, they keep the engines running on even the worst of ships.

“What up, I’m Brian and this is my sister Sarah, you need to chill out old man, we’re coming on board now.” Brian said, pushing his luck.

“Old ma- “ Goodwin stopped for a moment, considered his options, and took a deep breath. “You two, get on board now, you’re already over an hour late!”

The twins climbed on board, taking their tools with them. And with that, the crew of the Sunspire were all together. As I said before, I could have been with better people.

Chapter 2 - Atmospheric Pressure

There was something about the way the Voss twins communicated which I found fascinating. I had never met twins before and this was something special. Almost, a connection between them that spanned across the universe. They were seemingly able to speak to each other without talking. I was watching them in the engine room whilst they worked away at getting things up and running.

“Need any help with anything?” I asked. Eager to be involved in this psychic showdown they were a part of.

“Nah, we’re all good here, what’s your name by the way? Do you have a name?” Sarah asked inquisitively, waiting for my response like a lion watches its prey.

“Of course I have a name, I am Gabriel.” I answered confidently.

“Weird name.” Brian mumbled whilst elbow deep inside the ships engines.

“It’s the only one I was given.” I replied, nervous about the safety of Brian's forearms inside the engine of a class 2 mining engine. I could see he was straining, looking like he was trying to reach something deep inside the engine coil.

“Fair enough, Saz, pass me the-” Brian was cut off by Sarah throwing him what looked like a wrench, but it has extra parts.

“Thanks.” He replied, before even knowing what he was asking for.

“Bloody thing won’t budge.” He strained.

“Here. Let me get it.” Sarah responded, clearly knowing her brother couldn’t finish the job.

“I’ve got it.”

“You clearly haven’t, out of the way”

“There!” Sarah shouted, as the engine sparked to life. Lights from all around the room flickered into existence as the engine began whirring, it slowly started to get faster and faster as it

brought life to the rest of the ship. The beating heart of the vessel, pumping its blood around and waking up all parts of this entity.

“I could have done it.” Brian sulked.

“Of course you could.” Sarah responded sarcastically, “Let’s get back up to the helm.” They both dried off their hands on the dirty rags they were using and made their way to the helm of the ship, nudging and hitting each other as they went. I have never seen a more pure human connection than the one between those two, and I don’t think I ever will.

Goodwin had gathered everyone around in the helm as the ship continued to wake up. He was stood with his legs apart, hands on his hips when we all arrived. I think this is known as a power stance, and is meant to assert dominance over the rest of those around him. As the Voss twins made their way to their seats he began his briefing.

“As you all know, we are here for one thing, and one thing only. Gas.” He bellowed. The Voss twins started sniggering and Dr. Constance looked at them with a wry smile. They soon stopped one Goodwin shot them a look of disdain. “These gases have been found in and around the surface of Earth’s Sun and have been researched for decades now. We have been tasked with retrieving a small sample of these and bringing them back with us for further testing, simple as. However, this mission is a very dangerous one given the circumstances of our journey. We will be in the immediate vicinity of the Sun’s surface and will have to be prepared for what comes with that, Intense heat being the main one. I will, however, brief you further when we get closer to our destination. For now, Dr Constance will go through the science of the gases.” Goodwin stood to one side and gestured Dr. Constance up to the podium.

“Erm, yes, well, these gases have been seen to have serious potential for human growth. They excerpt an energy that has not been seen since humans discovered the power of Steam, and their retrieval could mean the next jump in human evolution, and a society powered by even the smallest amount for hundreds, possibly even thousands of years. It- It will be best when we retrieve the samples that they are kept in sealed conditions away from direct human contact, as they are extremely toxic to the human system. I will be at my research station as we make our journey there in trying to find out more about the substance. Th-Thank you.” Dr. Constance nervously delivered.

“Thank you Doctor. Now, Voss!” Goodwin shouted.

“Yes boss?” They both answered in unison.

“How are those engines looking?” He replied.

“All up and running boss, I also managed to uncouple the molecular dampener from the engine meaning we can get some serious speed from this beauty.” Sarah proud fully answered.

“Beauty is a strong word. But let’s get into position. Prepare for take off.” He ordered. Everyone got into their seats and nervously prepared for take off. I looked over at Shaw, she had been quiet throughout the briefing. Caring for her plasma rifle as she listened intently. She looked particularly nervous. And began to breathe heavily as she closed her eyes.

“Taking off now!” Goodwin exclaimed. The ship lay silent for a second before blasting free from the docking bay of the company space station orbiting earth’s moon. The G-force applied to this launch was spectacular, and I looked around the cabin to see the Voss twins admiring their handy work in the engine room, Dr. Constance holding on to one of her books whilst we flew, and Shaw, hands grasped firmly against her seat, white knuckled, almost tearing the lining off the hand rests as we began the journey.

The ship started to slow down and enter auto pilot mode shortly after this launch, something I was responsible for. I entered in all the calculations of the best possible route to the extraction zone, this led us to perform a slingshot maneuver around venus and landing on mercury to visit the companies outpost there. This is where we will be picking up the extraction kit for the gases needed. I entered in all the necessary information and predicted the best course, plotting this and setting the internal computer to auto pilot, Nice and easy work. I would be immediately notified if anything should go wrong with the navigation system and we would have to replot our course. I noticed after a brief stint of silence within the helm, the crew began working on various tasks before we made it to mercury. It would take approximately 128 days to get to the research outpost from here, so the crew had a lot of time to plan accordingly.

“You ok there, Liz?” Dr. Constance asked as she sheepishly approached Shaw’s weapons workbench. Dr. Constance had obviously also notices Shaw’s discomfort during the take off.

“Yeah, I’m fine thanks doc, you know how I get with ships sometimes.” Shaw responded, clearly on guard.

“Ok, you sure?” Dr. Constance insisted. Shaw let out a large sigh before responding in a hushed tone I could only just make out.

“I dunno, you know I am bad with flying, we’ve always known that. But this? Seems different. Something seems... off. I dunno what the hell it is, I just sense something is wrong.” Shaw responded, looking to Dr. Constance for answers.

“I know you are nervous Liz. I mean, this is one of the most important voyages of our generation. Never before has a manned spacecraft travelled so close to the Sun’s surface, and returned to tell the tale.” Dr. Constance reassured triumphantly.

“Returning? That’s what I’m worried about. I mean, come on Doc, look at this heap of junk. It looks like it could barely fly. Let alone withstand the heat from the friggin’ Sun!”

“Listen, you said it yourself, we have Captain Goodwin at the helm. Hasn’t he been a hero of yours for some time now? You said something about an escape from something-”

“He single handedly got his whole platoon out of a prisoner of war camp some Martian separatists had captured them in. God only knows how.”

“Exactly! So I’m sure he will be able to help us get through anything. Come on! You are only here as a precaution anyway, I doubt we’ll be fighting anything on this voyage, we are extracting gases!”

The two looked at each other for a moment, Shaw trying to convince herself the crew will be alright. Dr. Constance placed a hand on her shoulder and comforted her.

“Look, I will never let anything happen to you. You hear me?” Dr. Constance said reassuringly. She then started to walk back to her desk.

“I am the one who is supposed to be protecting you!” Shaw shouted at Dr. Constance from across the cabin. I was daydreaming whilst listening to this conversation so I did not hear Goodwin sneak up on me. All of a sudden my systems came back online with a harsh jump.

“Gabriel!” He shouted, with military distinction.

“Yes captain?” I responded quickly.

“Are the navigational systems all up and running?” He got straight to the point, clearly no small talk was necessary with him.

“Yes Captain. We are currently en route to the Mercury research station, performing a quick turn around the volcanic venus as we do. This route has been calculated as being the best one for fuel consumption and time efficiency. I brought up the holodeck with the route on it for Goodwin to peruse at his own leisure.

“We are flying awfully close to venus there. Is there no other way around?” He replied nervously.

“I am afraid not Captain. Due to our fuel consumption rate I have calculated with the Voss twins new upgraded engine parts, we will have to refuel at the Mercury research station before we get to the surface of the sun. This along with grabbing the extraction kit from the station makes stopping on Mercury a priority, and due to the fuel consumption, this is the best route to take.” I informed the captain about the situation, as I talked I noticed he seemed to twitch when I mentioned the Voss twins, he seems to already have a great disliking towards them, and my news about the engines consumption did not do that any favours.

“Goddammit those two, I am already concerned about this ship as it is, the last thing we need are those two idiots messing with the engines and causing us all to be lost in space. Thanks.” He responded, then immediately started marching towards the engine rooms. I think I knew what was about to happen.

Goodwin marched into the engine rooms to find the Voss twins playing cards on a table fashioned from an old piece of engine along with a scrappy bit of leather they had fashioned from a seat nearby. He barged through the door which seemingly had no impact on the twins.

“Ahh Captain, what brings you down here? Fancy playing some gin rummy? We were just about to deal.” Brian smirked and he pushed his lcuk with the captain.

“No I would not. Would you two care to explain to me why our engines now have a fuel consumption rate of nearly 200%?” Goodwin inquired through a clenched jaw. The twins looked at each other, and continued to nod in each others directions, looking for the other one to take the lead in explaining.

“Look Captain, I made a slight adjustment to the engin-” Brian started.

“You made a slight adjustment? It was me who managed to remove the dampener!” Sarah defended.

“Well, you tell him then.” Brian responded, taking a back seat.

“Fine. Look Captain, we explained this in the briefing. I removed the molecular dampener from the engines, this means we have the engines working much faster, meaning we can get to our destination quicker.” Sarah explained.

“Yes, but at the expense of nearly 200% fuel consumption? Are you mad?” Goodwin inquired.

“Well, I figured it would be worth it, as we have to go to the Mercury station anyway, we can just fill up there, it'll all be on company expenses anyway.” Sarah said coyly.

“It better be, otherwise I’m sending the bill to you two clowns!” Goodwin barked, immediately turning on the spot and leaving the engine room, slamming the door behind him. The cards blew off the table onto the grease stained floor.

“Well, thanks for your help Gabe.” Brian sarcastically quipped.

“I was only informing the captain of the situation. I had to show him the course I had plotted to make use of the current fuel consumption.” I responded

“Yeah, well, next time maybe don’t throw us under the bus.” Brian said, scrambling for the fallen cards. But I had little sympathy for the twins, they knew the risks when working on the engines, and they weren’t exactly in Goodwin’s good books anyway.

Captain Goodwin stormed through the cabin back to the helm, his quaking footsteps echoing through the ship’s corridors as he bounded back. He slumped in the Captain’s chair overlooking the vast frontier that awaited them. A distant speck in the large canvas of the sky was our next destination, Mercury, and before that was the significantly larger obstacle of Venus. A desolate volcanic planet which humans still do not have the means to explore effectively. Recent studies showed that with new age equipment humans could last a mere 5 minutes on its surface before atmospheric heat intensity rose to uninhabitable levels. This meant a journey round the edge of the atmosphere was a risky maneuver, but the only option we had in order to make it to Mercury in time. I could see this clearly weighted on Goodwin’s mind as he held his hand to his forehead, staring into the great abyss that loomed like a monster waiting to devour whatever ventured near.

“Captain?” A voice was heard behind his seat.

“Yes?” Goodwin answered, swivelling his chair around to meet the voice. It was Shaw. She had her pistol clipped into her hip and had relinquished the rifle she was vigorously cleaning not moments before. She made her way down and perched herself on the stairs leading down to the helm, the glass panels shining with the light from our destination.

“I just, err, wanted to say it is a huge honor to be serving with you on this mission. I have heard stories about your missions since I was a little girl. My father used to tell me about how you saved him from the prison camp on Mars. He used to talk about you like you-”

“Wait.” Goodwin interrupted, a confused look on his face. “Donald Shaw? Is that your father?” He inquired.

“Yes! He told me all about you!” She answered excitedly.

“My God. I haven’t seen Donald in, well, almost 10 years. Not since that mission. You were his little girl. You must have been, what? 12 at the time?” He recalled.

“Yeah, I was 11 when my father left for the voyage, a small number of soldiers heading to a simple job on one of Jupiter’s moons. Transport of Cargo, needed a hell of a lot of protection. Well, you already know that. You were there. I heard the news of his capture from my mother. She got a call from the commanding officer. He was in a POW camp after the separatists captured the ship in Martian airspace. What the hell were you even doing there?” She began to tear up, the memory of her father clearly too much.

“We weren’t supposed to be anywhere near Mars. En route to Europa, Jupiter’s moon, we heard a distress signal coming from the surface of Mars, one which we had never heard of before. I warned Donald not to answer as the place was crawling with separatists. It wasn’t our mission. But your dad, the hero. He had to divert the ship there. Anyway, when we eventually landed we found the distress signal. Coming from a small village just south of Olympus Mons. We got there, and they were waiting. Looks like that had already cleared the place out, and didn’t realise one of the farmers had sent out the signal. Bastards destroyed everything, took our ship and weapons, and burnt that village to the ground. They took us into their makeshift POW camp. Kept us there for months, hardly any food, beat us, tortured us for information. Luckily in the end I managed to snag one of their guns from a guard. Myself and your dad were the only ones left. We battled hard that day, tore down most of the camp, stole a Martian ship and came home.” Goodwin relayed the story in a dull tone, as if this memory is so ingrained in his head that he goes over it every day.

“I remember, that day, I mean. When you came home. I thought dad was dead, long gone, we even held a funeral for him, no body of course but, I was convinced. Then, one day, all of a sudden, he shows up at the door. I can’t even remember how I felt. It was all such a blur. Joy, anger, fear, remorse, dread, ecstasy. It all came flooding out. I knew there and then I wanted to be just like my dad and you. Part of something special. Help people, like you tried to help those farmers on Mars.” Shaw said proudly. “My dad told me all about you. About how you saved them from the separatists, your bravery, kindness and resolve. When the company told me you were on this mission I knew I had to sign up.” She confessed.

“And what did your dad think of it?” Goodwin replied with a smile. Shaw stopped for a moment, looked out of the window at the slowly dwindling sight of Earth.

“Dad died last year. Lung cancer, can you believe it? Goes through hell and back with you, fighting off all manner of unspeakable horrors, ends up dying in his small bed of a disease which can be cured so easily now had they spotted it. Funny how life works.” She smiled as she recalled how strange life really is.

“I’m sorry, your father was good man. A true hero. I am pleased to have his flesh and blood on board with us. I feel much safer knowing we have his kin on board.” Goodwin said sincerely, placing a hand on her shoulder as she continued to stare out of the window. He reached into his pocket and drew out a lighter, a large steel looking lighter, the letters KG engraved on the side of it. Typical, I thought. He held open her hand and placed it in her palm.

“Your father gave me this after the mission. Got it engraved himself, some local shop he knew from his hometown that would do it. He knew how much I smoked back then, like a bloody chimney. I always kept it to remind me of him, you should have it now.” He closed her hand tight around the cold steel and tapped the back of her palm, then walked off in the direction of the bunks as Shaw dropped her head and continued to remember her father.

I wanted to give Shaw her space. People had often told me I had a habit of showing up at the wrong times. Social situations are still something foreign to me. I prefer to study people rather than attempt to communicate with them. I was however, intrigued by Dr. Constance, she was the only one who greeted me coming aboard so I sensed a kindness in her, and watching the way she comforted Shaw during the take off I knew she was special. She was at her research terminal, working away at some long document detailing the specifics of the gas that were going to collect and research, scrolling through endless words, paragraphs and pages. It was as if she had already seen this document a thousand times and soaked up all the information she needed. I tried not to startle her this time, and so waited until she sat back in her chair, her gaze away from the holographic screen. She slumped back, and rubbed her eyes as I began.

“Dr. Constance?” I said using my most soothing tone. Once, again, she jumped back.

“Oh! Sorry! I’m a bit skittish these days, it’s hard to know where you are when in the middle of research. Can I help you with something?” She inquired.

“I just wanted to say I am looking forward to working with you on this mission. I have navigating and plotting our course and it will be 128 days before we reach the Mercury station. In that time we have some tasks assigned by the company in order to prepare for the extraction. I presume you have all the notes necessary?” I got straight to the point, no sense in wasting time. 128 days out here can go in an instance.

“Err, yeah, I have it all here, I was just looking through the notes now, as Goodwin said, the gas is highly toxic to human consumption, so must be handled with care. My notes do not explain how we are actually extracting it though.” She was curious, I could tell she is someone who thirsts for knowledge, much like me, she wishes to understand things around her and learn. I respected that about her.

“That will be my job. Once we land on Mercury, the extraction kit will be mounted to the vessel by the Voss twins and using the on board computer I will control the kit to make the extraction.” I explained, hoping to satisfy her thirst.

“Good, good. Then we fly home, simple enough.” As she talked to she looked down at a photo she had placed on her station. It was of her, a man and two children. I made the assumption this was her family.

“Are they?” I started.

“Yes, my family. My husband Charlie, and my kids, Michael and Olivia. This is my first time flying, nerves are getting to me, so I thought having them with me would calm me down. Charlie was so supportive when I told him about the opportunity. ‘My wife, the space traveller’ he said, he couldn’t wait to tell the kids about it. He even bought them this giant spaceship toy, showing them where mummy would be sitting, what I would be doing whilst I was there. I almost didn’t

come, I thought I couldn't leave them. But, good old auntie Liz to the rescue. Myself and Elizabeth have known each other for a while, even before she joined the company. We grew up together, both wanting to be doctors. But things went differently when her father... Well, that's not my place. She joined the voyage and I knew she would recommend me to come along too, she convinced the board I was the right person, and here we are. Space explorers. I told Michael and Olivia to keep the toy out and help me find my way home with it. I know I'm gonna miss them this year. But what we are doing is so important. I couldn't say no. Oh sorry, I'm rambling on and on, you probably don't wanna hear this." She apologised. I did want to hear it. It was a true story, something raw and human. It was something I could really learn from, never really having emotional connection to anyone in my life, it was good to see and hear about.

"Not at all Doctor. I would love to hear more about your family." I stated, honestly.

"Well, thank you Gabriel. I think I'm gonna turn in, been a busy day." She began to yawn as she finished the sentence, picked up her glasses and headed to the bunks. I had already seen Goodwin and Shaw head there earlier as myself and Dr. Constance were talking. And I just presumed the Voss twins slept on a pile of nuts and bolts in the engine room. So I powered down the lights and made sure everyone was in their bunk. The first night aboard the Sunspear was at an end, and the long voyage has now officially began.

Chapter 3 - Halestorm

Tap, tap tap. I could hear the sounds on the windows and shutters of the hulls exterior, slowly getting faster and faster. Tap, tap, tap. The sound echoing through the metal shell of the ship. Booting up the ship's computer from its sleep state I examined the log, as we drifted head first into more oncoming debris. Tap, tap, tap. The slow computer booted up and I brought up the course I had plotted, judging by the date and time, cryostasis had been active for about 75 days, and we were nearing Venus. A small asteroid field awaited us as Venus came into view. Its large body looming over the ship like a god watching his people flee from his power. The asteroid field was getting thicker and the ship was headed straight for the centre.

I unlocked all the cryopods immediately and sounded the on board alarm. The crew waking from their interrupted slumber to the sound of ringing and tapping on all the walls of the ship. Goodwin looked shaken as he woke, stiff from cryo and barely waking up.

"Captain! We have an emergency!" I shouted, hoping to snap him out of his comatose state.

"What? What is it?" He stopped, and seemed to notice the alarm. Suddenly he jumped out of his pod and was ready for action. A complete shift in his behaviour. His years of training and experience teaching him how to quickly adapt to the situation. "What the hell happened? Why is the alarm sounding?!" He barked at me.

“We appear to have found ourselves in an asteroid field, so small it didn’t show up on the predetermined route. There must have been a volcanic eruption on the surface of Venus, causing debris to shoot into space. A small asteroid field yes, but one that will tear the outer hull off the ship if we do nothing.” I explained.

“Goddamnit! Alright stand back, I’ll handle this! Shaw!” He shouted, walking towards the seat in the helm.

“Yes captain?!” Shaw replied from the bunks, still waking up herself.

“Get on the photon cannon at the front of the ship, try and make us some space by blowing the asteroids to pieces. I’ll try and navigate best I can. I would advise everyone to strap in! This could get hairy.” Goodwin ordered.

“Yes sir!” She responded, making her way down to the photon cannon under the main deck. Dr. Constance had woken up now, and was visibly shaken by the events unfolding. She found her way to a seat on the left side of the ship and strapped herself in. Holding on for dear life as Goodwin made his first maneuver around a large asteroid, just barely clipping the right side of the ship. Shaw had positioned herself accordingly and began firing at large chunks of rock.

The tapping began to continue at an ungodly pace. I could barely hear anything by the time it was at its peak. Meanwhile the Voss twins had made their way to the helm, after waking from cryostasis. They both looked at each other with terror, and scrambled to find seats they could strap into as not to be shaken around the cabin. Brian strapped in tight nearer the front of the deck and Sarah was not far behind. The sound deafened as Goodwin weaved in and out of the asteroids, with Shaw blasting away and breaking up any larger pieces. This seemed to go on for an age. I could see the twins looking back and forth at each other in comfort, that unspoken bond between them stronger than ever. Dr. Constance was clinging on to a paper photo of who I can only assume was her family, hoping to see their smiling faces again when they make it through.

Then suddenly, silence. All that could be heard was the frantic breathing of Goodwin, he laid his hands from the wheel and bowed his head, thankful to have made it through the ordeal alive, and with barely a scratch on them. Shaw let out a large sigh of relief as the entire crew opened their eyes. Goodwin swiveled in the captain's chair to check up on the rest of the crew, but was interrupted by a scream and a large bang from the back of the ship. A large asteroid collided with the side of the ship, creating a breach in the hull. Sarah, who was not strapped in correctly flew out of the breach and was grabbing onto her belt. Brian seemed to know this was about to happen moments before, as he was already clinging onto the side of the ship when it happened. She hung on for dear life as Shaw and Goodwin made their way carefully to the breach, papers and chairs flying everywhere and being sucked out of the gaping hole. Brian reached out his hand to his sister, but she wasn’t even looking at Brian, she was holding onto her seatbelt which

was slowly starting to rip, but her eyes were transfixed towards the Sun, wide and pupils fully dilated. She seemed to be in a trance of some kind, staring at something beyond the planets, beyond the stars. Brian managed to move himself into position to the right of the breach, as Goodwin stood behind with his hand over the emergency breach button.

“Voss!! Goodwin shouted over the din of the atmosphere being sucked out of the ship. “Pull her in, quick!” He gestured towards the seatbelt, Sarah was still staring, her eyes seemingly wider than ever. Any longer out there and there would be nothing to pull back in, this was their last change to get her back. Brian reached out and grabbed the seatbelt, the strain in his face as he pulled it with all his might. Sarah slowly started to move back into the ship. Still staring, not breaking eye contact, not blinking, not moving. I had thought the vacuum had got to her and she was already gone, but Brian kept pulling. Shaw had now made her way to the scene and was directly behind Brian, she reached out and grabbed the seatbelt with him and began to pull, her bulging muscles working overtime as they battled against the abyss. But had the abyss already taken her?

They eventually managed to pull her back in, as soon as she was beyond the threshold Goodwin slammed down on the breach button, a large metal sheet flew across the hull, closing off the vacuum and bringing the atmosphere back to the ship. Sarah, Shaw and Brian all landed on the cold, steel floor and Sarah was unconscious. Brian, having recovered from the bang on the head from the rough landing, ran over to her, taking her head in his arms.

“Sarah!! No!” He screamed, thinking the worst.

“Move!” Shaw ordered, pushing him away from his sister. She began checking for a pulse and breathing. Hoping beyond hope to find something. “There! She’s alive! Get her to the med bay now!” She shouted. Goodwin and Brian carried her down the dark corridor as I began the adjustments to make sure the hull stays in place and bringing the power back to the ship.

A few hours later I had made the necessary adjustments to the hull to ensure it doesn’t breach again. Although another hit would have definitely spelled the end for us since the ship can't take much more damage. I felt now wasn’t the correct time to inform the crew of this. They were all gathered in the med bay, lit by emergency lighting. Brian loomed over his sister watching her unconscious body for any signs of life. The emergency lighting faded, and with a faint hum the ship was brought back to life. The lights in the med bay buzzed as they powered back on, revealing the true damage the hull breach had caused. Sarah, lying on the gurney was surrounded by knocked over pieces of medical equipment and broken light fixtures. Clearly the airlock systems in the medbay had failed with the collision of the asteroid.

“She is stable and still breathing.” Dr. Constance diagnosed.

“When will she wake up?” Brian pleaded.

"I honestly cannot tell right now, when the equipment comes back online we can diagnose her fully and assess the damage to her." Dr. Constance explained to a traumatised Brian. "Go get some rest, we're all shaken by this."

"I've just been asleep for God knows how long! The last thing I need right now is more rest! No, I- I am staying here, with her." Brian shouted.

"Ok, that's fine. Gabriel, how long until the medical equipment is back online?" Dr. Constance turned to me and asked.

"Shouldn't be too much longer Doctor. Another hour at the most." I explained.

"Ok good, well we can sort this mess out now and prepare for when they are back online." Dr. Constance began picking up bits of debris from the floor in order to clear the med bay. The other joined in. Brian stayed by his sisters side.

The cleanup took the crew about an hour to perform. There were papers strewn across the cabin and bits of debris scattered along the floors. They worked hard to clear everything up. Goodwin had organised a meeting set for after the diagnosis of Sarah Voss, presumably to talk about how we will move forward as a crew.

An hour passed, I managed to get the medical systems back online. Took some real work, the whole thing was fried in the breach, but bypassing some systems meant that I could restore power back to the med bay in good time, and get everything back online. Dr. Constance was the first one there when everything came back. She began setting up the equipment and started the diagnosis.

"Hmm, ok, odd." She muttered under her breath whilst looking at her brain scan. She then attached up her IV and monitor. The familiar sound of the heartbeats began. "She has a good, steady heartbeat. All her vitals look good." Dr. Constance explained. "But what I find most fascinating is her mind. If these scans are correct. She is operating at a higher brain function. SOMething of which I have never seen, as if her own brain is trying to understand itself. She had brain function of someone who is awake and performing various tasks at once."

"Wha- What does that mean?" Brian stumbled on his words, trying to make sense of everything that happened.

"I mean, her brain is awake, more awake than any of ours, but her body is rejecting it. It cannot comprehend what it has seen, and it needs time to rebuild." Dr. Constance lit up at the thought of a new scientific discovery, then quickly held her smile given the situation. "I am sure she will be fine, her mind needs to catch up with itself. Brian, she will wake up again."

"Yeah but, when? How long will it be?" He was was distraught.

"I cannot tell right now. We will have to wait and see. But I assure you. She is perfectly stable and healthy." Dr. Constance said in a reassuring tone. Brian shook his head, looked down at his sister and left the med bay.

"I suggest going back to cryostasis for the time being, I have set up an alert on the ships computer for when Sarah wakes up, so you will all be alerted and awoken when the time comes." I said calmly to the crew. As so not to worry them further.

"Good idea, there is little we can do now, the medical equipment will hold her stable and when she wakes up we will all be there, I'll go tell Brian." Dr. Constance said, picking up her papers from the desk and making her way out of the med bay. Shaw and Goodwin, silently looked at each other, nodded and followed. The crew then made their way to the bunks, Brian solemnly looking over at the empty bunk beside him, longing for his sister. I imagine this must be the first time they were properly separated. From what I had heard about the Voss twins prior to this expedition, they do everything together, have always worked on the same jobs and stay in the same places. They are inseparable. But now, Brian seemed to be as lost as ever, he lay down in his bunk as the dirty glass panel entombed him. Eyes closed, the cryo chambers started working, the crew was down.

I could get a chance now to see Sarah up close for myself, whilst the others were in cryo I could examine her, to really see what had Dr. Constance so excited. I stared down at Sarah's body, hoping to see any speck of life. The mind boggles at what could have possibly set off the chain of events in her neurons to emit such a response. I examined each line of her face, as she twitched and her face contorted, as if she was dreaming of something horrible, something she could not escape from. I consulted the medical equipment again, looking for any unusual activity. Checking the brain scanner I noticed some indication of REM sleep, usually associated when someone is dreaming, but her levels indicated she was not in this dream state. This was something else entirely, her body and mind are dreaming of something, but what? I had to know more.

There was no time for me to sleep whilst I could find out what happened to her, soon enough she would be awake and would be swarmed with rest of the crew. I knew this was my only chance for thorough analysis. I ran several tests over the next few days with the medical equipment, I knew Sarah wouldn't have minded, she couldn't have resisted anyway. On and on my tests went, several different uses of equipment, trying to dig deep inside her psyche for the answer to what she saw and what could cause something like this. But alas, to no avail. I could not find any reason for why her body reacted that way. I was just about to run a new test when all of a sudden, her heart rate started to pick up, and slowly I could see the change happening, she was waking up. The signal Dr. Constance had set up started to run, and the cryo pods were alerted. Sarah's eyes opened in a flash, black as night, highly dilated. I administered some morphine for any pain she had coming out of this coma. I could hear the others in the bunks rummaging around and making their way to the med bay.

Brian bursted through the door and looked at Sarah for a moment, she was lying flat, still as calm water, eyes wide open. He then ran up to her and hugged her with all his might, grasping his arms around her as he started crying.

“Don’t you ever leave me like that! Never do that again you hear? Never!” He muffled through the cloth of Sarah’s medical gown. She stayed still for a moment in his arms, then let out a blood curdling scream. Shocked, everyone stood for a moment, staring at her as she continued to scream. She began to shake vigorously in Brian’s arms, her body becoming contorted and flailing in all directions. She was trying to escape. I had never seen anything like it, the poor girl was terrified. Brian attempted to calm his sister, but nothing seemed to work. This seemed to go on for an age, she looked like she was possessed, if you believe in that sort of thing, her eyes black and arms flying around her body, screaming all the while.

It was only when Goodwin barged through the rest of us and administered a shot of sedative did she calm down. He pushed us out of the way and grabbed the nearby needle from the desk, plunged it into her chest and pushed down on the pin. She began to calm down until she looked directly at Brian, her face covered in fear, and collapsed on the table again.

“What the hell! No! What happened?” Brian asked Dr. Constance, terrified for the fate of his sister.

“She went into shock. I don’t know why this would have happened coming out of a coma. It makes no sense.” She will be back up in a few hours, we can ask her then if she remembers anything.” Dr. Constance was uncertain with her answers and seemed as lost as the rest of us.

Those few agonising hours passed, mostly in complete silence, we all waited and waited for Sarah to wake up, hoping that she would be herself again and not the screaming wreck she was. Brian especially, he didn’t move from her side for those few hours, clutching her hand and stroking her hair, occasionally whispering in her ear words of comfort and motivation to get through it. Shaw and Goodwin were talking in the helm when I found them, speaking in rather hushed tones.

“What if she is like that again when she wakes up?” Shaw asked Goodwin nervously.

“We will have to put her under for the rest of the voyage I imagine, at this point she is nothing more than a liability to us and our mission. If we put her under and place her in stasis she will be safe.” Goodwin calmly explained. He seemed saddened at that reality despite staying so level headed.

“Brian won’t react well to that.” Shaw rebutted.

“Brian doesn’t have a choice, I am the captain and it is my responsibility to keep this ship on course. And staying up looking after a banshee isn’t on my agenda.” Goodwin pierced, through

gritted teeth. He sighed and rubbed his forehead. “Look, we can’t do anything for her in this state but keep her sedated. I will explain that to Brian and clear it up. Goodwin then started to walk over to Brian in the med bay, taking a break from his usual marching pace. He opened the med bay door to find Brian in the same position he had been in for the past few hours. Goodwin leaned against the doorway.

“Voss?” Goodwin asked quietly.

“Is that supposed to be some kind of joke, Captain?” Brian replied, not breaking his gaze from his sisters face.

“No, I, I just need to explain the situation to you. If she wakes up again in the same state we will have to-” He began, before being cut off by Brian, swivelling his head quickly.

“No, whatever your plan is, it’s not happening. She is my sister! She will stay with me regardless and you will not touch her!” Brian shouted, not noticing his sisters face twitching and her eyes darting underneath her lids.

“Brian, loo-” Goodwin attempted to alert Brian to his sisters condition.

“Stop, Captain! I don’t want to hear anything else from you! I told you no!” Brian’s voice cracking as he started to shout louder. Sarah was now wincing as she came back round to consciousness.

“Brian! Stop! Look!” Goodwin gestured to Sarah to alert Brian to the fact she was coming round. Brian immediately turned and looked down at her. Relief was plastered on his face when he saw her open her eyes. No longer dilated, no longer staring past this world.

“Sarah! You’re awake!” Brian, completely taken back, rushed down and hugged his sister again. This time, no more screaming. She was completely conscious and was actually there.

“Bri? Wh-what happened?” Sarah was confused and clearly didn’t know about the events that transpired only a few hours ago. Her face was calm again, each line of her face no longer contorted out of shape, and she looked like herself again. Or at least, as long as I have known her.

“What happened to you out there?” Brian inquired to his sister, as eager for answers as I was.

“I-I don’t remember, I saw... something. But I can’t remember what it looked like or what it was. I remember the feeling though, I felt warm, cosy, contented. Then as soon as I could feel that, it was all taken away. Every memory I ever had was pulled from my head and taken from me, distorted and twisted. Pulled out and destroyed, then rebuilt in another image. It was horrible, I

don't know what would have happened had you not pulled me back in." She recalled, looking down as she did, trying to remember what she had actually seen.

Suddenly, as Sarah was finishing describing what she had been through, Shaw barged through the door, nearly taking it off its fragile hinges.

"Captain! We have a problem!" She shouted.

"What is it Shaw?" Goodwin responded directly.

"Venus, we are coming up to it now, our trajectory takes us right past it and as it stands, we will need to manually fly past it's orbit to ensure we don't encounter any problems on the way round. Atmospheric temperature readings are going up as we speak, and looks like there is some heavy volcanic activity on the surface. Usually this wouldn't be a problem but with us flying so close in proximity we need all hands on deck." She informed us.

"Get into position then people! Brian, you and Sarah stay here, strap yourselves in, and make sure she is away from any walls. Dr. Constance, you come up to the helm and get yourself strapped into one of the seats. Shaw, back down to the photon cannon, you can get a good view from there and if any debris needs blasting you can be in position. Gabriel, you know what to do, help us with the ship's computer to make sure all systems stay online, especially keeping that hull breach closed. I will take the helm and guide us through, we should come through this relatively unscathed, and then our next stop is Mercury." Goodwin ordered.

Everyone got into their stations and I saw that Shaw was beginning to pray. I never understood praying, it seemed like a waste of time to me. The idea that someone with such immense power over people that he can save them from natural occurrences seems preposterous. Then again, I do not believe in a great creator, we are all our own creations in one way or another, nobody else is responsible for us.

We made our way closer and closer to Venus, this large celestial body standing proud in an ocean of night, waiting for its prey to enter, waiting to ensnare us. I could see the volcanic eruptions from this distance, there were huge clouds of smoke surrounding most of the atmosphere as raging storms tore their way across the surface of this uninhabitable planet. The bright flash of lightning from the clouds above that moved at a frantic pace across the very skin of that world. I almost felt frightened, almost. I could see the entire crew looking through windows to the left at the planet we are all avoiding, a silence crept its way through the cabin as the low hum of the engines was all that was heard. We all held our breath, waiting for that inevitable moment that cuts through the tension like a hot knife, that one moment, that seemed to take an age to arrive. But arrive it did.

I could see it in the distance, a large volcano, larger than anything I have ever seen on a planetary surface, it pierced through the clouds and through the atmosphere of the planet like a

giant splinter, cracking all in its way and leaving nothing but desolation behind. We all seemed to be able to hear the eruption it made as we came closer, the bright light emerging from this fountain of death was almost blinding, as it shot into the air, releasing not only molten lava, but debris that shot up in our direction with the force of the volcano. It seemed to wait until we were above to unleash its true power upon us. Rocks from the surface shot into the atmosphere and through to the ship.

“Evasive maneuvers!” Goodwin shouted, in preparation for him swinging the entire ship to the side and blasting full force with the engines to avoid the oncoming destruction. Shaw started shooting the pieces that were coming too close to the ship and broke them into smaller pieces that hit the glass and metal of this rusted tomb. Tap, tap, tap. That sound again, the rocks must be hitting the side of the ship again in the same fashion as before. Wanting to get in for shelter from the elements outside, betrayed by its own destructive force.

I checked up on Sarah whilst this was going on. She seemed to be rather shaken by the events unfolding, she struggled and tried to break free from her bonds, as if she felt trapped by the belts that were there to protect her. Brian attempted to comfort her the best he could whilst the ship continued to move in and out of danger from the storm that was brewing outside the metal walls. She began to close her eyes, to take herself away from this place and the situation she was in. But behind her eyelids lay a monster more terrifying than the debris we were avoiding, she opened her eyes again in shock at what she had witnessed. Was this the monster she had seen? Had it burnt itself onto her eyelids, branded itself there for her to see whenever she closes her eyes? She began to cry, I could see the tears streaming down her face as the cabin rocked more and more, getting faster and more boisterous with each passing minute. Surely we must be out of the range by now, I thought.

I read the course log for the journey we were currently on, we should be out of the range very soon. I consulted with Captain Goodwin. “Captain, we should be out of range soon, hold on for a few more minutes and we will be on the home stretch towards Mercury.” I assured him. He did not answer and continued to be focused on the task at hand. Slowly, the debris started to clear and our task was almost over. The cabin began to regain its balance again, as the last few pieces from the volcano were blasted by the photon cannon operated by Shaw. The collective relief was felt across the ship, and everyone began to contemplate whether this journey was worth all the effort we have put into it.

Goodwin stood up from the helm, wiped the sweat from his brow and walked towards the med bay, to check on Sarah and Brian. The crew followed, and found them both on the floor of the med bay, comforting each other.

“The worst is over now. We are out of the range of Venus, straight shot to Mercury and then we will be nearer the sun.” Goodwin explained, trying to calm down his crew before the next cryo sleep.

“The worst, isn’t over, it’s all only just beginning. It’s coming.” Sarah recited, almost like a religious chant. The crew turned to her and looked down, concerned and worried about the words she just uttered.

“What’s coming?” Dr. Constance asked.

“I don’t know, but it is hungry. I felt it, when I was outside, I felt its hunger. I knew it wouldn’t stop until it got what it wants.” Sarah was staring at the floor now, eyes miles away again. Brian shook her gently, to try to bring her back. She broke her gaze and looked at Brian longingly, hoping her big brother could protect her from what was to come. If anything was out there, I intended to find out what it was. This could be something incredible, I wondered at the possible lengths this being could go, if it was even real. Sarah had been in the vacuum a long time before being brought in. It was highly likely she could be suffering from lack of oxygen to her brain, also causing these hallucinations.

Goodwin looked around at the crew, glad to see us all safe and through what he deemed the worst. “Come on now, let’s get back into cryo sleep, It won’t be long before we reach Mercury, we have a few days rest there before departing for our final destination.” He said, as he turned and walked towards the bunks, Dr. Constance and Shaw followed him, led thereafter by Brian carrying a weary Sarah. Brian lay her down in the cryo pod gently.

“Sleep tight sis. See you when we get to Mercury.” He said in a gentle, soothing tone. She began to close her eyes as the pod closed and cryo sleep took place. I watched over as Brian and Goodwin made their way into the pods. Dr. Constance and Shaw stayed awake, for a brief moment I heard them before they sank down into their pods.

“What if she is right?” Shaw asked her friend.

“About what? The being?” Dr. Constance replied.

“Yes, about the- Look, I just don’t think we should rule out what she said she saw.” Shaw defended.

“I know what she said Liz, but there is no scientific evidence for a creature living near or around Mercury or the surface of the Sun. Our long range scanners from home would have picked them up. Hell, even the scanners on this wreck would have picked up any signs of life. I would stop worrying, you’re gonna turn into her if you keep on like that.” Dr. Constance reassured.

“Alright, I just don’t think we should rule anything out. I’m gonna keep this on me anyway.” Shaw gestured to her pistol strapped to her thigh. Dr. Constance looked down at it as she lowered herself into the cryo pod.

“When do you ever not keep that on you?” She smirked as she closed the pod door and lay down for her rest. Shaw let out a small chuckle, and pulled down the glass roof of her own pod. Silence was now among the crew of the Sunspear. A Silence that was soon to be broken.

Chapter 4 - Mercury

A large thud greeted us as we landed on this roasting planet. Temperatures soaring to over 400 degrees celcius meant that the crew had to don their heat protection gear in order to traverse the landscape towards the Mercury outpost the company had installed. Despite being such a boiling planet on the surface, Mercury was fairly quiet. This was the first time I had been outside of Earth's' atmosphere on a mission of this kind, and it stopped me how lonely that planet really is. No wind, no trees, no vegetation, just dust and rocks, a truly dead planet.

The crew had now awoken from their cryo sleep, I noticed Brian immediately jumped from his pod and ran over to his sister, concerned for her wellbeing.

“How are you feeling sis?” He asked nervously.

“Yeah, I-I’m fine, thanks Bri. I know you're just looking out for me, but I’ll be ok, lets get the mission done so we can head home and forget about all this. Mum won’t believe it when we tell her, you know how she worries. You definitely get that from her.” Sarah jested to her brother. He smiled and handed her the protection suit from the lockers provided. I saw Goodwin and Shaw looking over at Brian and Sarah, watching over them like a lion mother and father look over their cubs. They felt responsible for them, and couldn’t hide that fact from us, it was all over their faces.

“You know the drill people. Let’s get in and out. Shaw, you and I will escort Dr. Constance into the lab, make sure everything is in order and collect the equipment. Gabriel, you’ll come with us too, make sure the systems in the station are up to scratch and we don’t get any nasty surprises. We carry the extraction equipment back to the cargo bay, load up and then return to the lab to escort Dr. Constance back to the ship. I don’t wanna be on this rock longer than necessary. I’ve heard stories about this place, people not coming back, saying they seen things. I think we have had enough of that on this ship for one lifetime.” Goodwin ordered the crew.

“What about us?” Sarah asked whilst putting on her suit.

“You two stay on the ship. You think we want you out there in your condition? Brian will stay with you until this whole thing is over. We won’t be long.” He replied in a stern tone.

“But-”

“No buts. Its a direct order. Stay here.”

“Fine.” She started to take her suit off, gurning at the annoyance of being left behind. But after what happened to her, I don’t blame Goodwin for keeping her on the ship. Dr. Constance walked over to Sarah after Goodwins orders were clear, she knelt down with her and comforted her. “Don’t worry Sarah, we won’t be too long. Captain is just looking after your wellbeing, with everything that happened. Besides, there isn’t much for you guys to do here, we are literally collecting the equipment and I am setting pieces up. That’s it.” She said reassuringly. Sarah looked at her, smiled and put her suit back in the locker. The others then got up and made their way to the door of the ship. It opened to a blast of hot air from the surface of Mercury. The heat was unbearable for them, a blast of molten air as they pressurised to the planet. They stepped out of the ship and began their journey across the dust riddled surface, the small blip of the research station in sight on the distant horizon, and began their journey across the barren landscape to their destination.

As we approached the station it looked like the place had been abandoned for some time, no lights were on and the shutters were up on all the windows. We were told there would be a party aboard the station to greet us and show us the equipment we will be using. But this place was as barren as the ground it sat on, long forgotten by those who abandoned it. I jacked into the stations computer systems and booted it back up. The front airlock door slid open slowly, revealing the battered and bruised interior. The crew stood inside the airlock as the decontamination procedure took place. They exited the sealed container into the main hall of the station. Tables and chairs flipped and broken bottles and cans lay on the ground all around them. There appeared to be some kind of struggle in here, broken glass and cracked walls surrounded us. I got the lights back on to reveal the rest of the research station, and the sights that awaited us were something ungodly.

The lights flickered back to life to reveal the scene, a diorama of violence. Two bodies were found in the station, members of the research team posted out here. One was tied to the chair using some electrical cable, hands and feet bound by the makeshift rope, a gunshot wound in the left temple, the table splattered with his blood and brain tissue. The other body was strewn across the floor, gun in hand, with a similar gunshot wound to the head. The scene played out in everyone’s mind as to what could have occurred and caused such a sight.

“Oh my god!” Dr. Constance screamed as she lay eyes on the bodies before her, cowering behind Shaw who had her rifle at the ready for any potential intruders. Goodwin stood firm, drew his pistol from his holster and began to speak his orders.

“Shaw, you take point, head down the corridor and search for any survivors.” Gabriel, do we have anything?” He said.

“No reported life signs aboard, Captain.” I responded. I had lied. I did see something in my scans, something like which I had never seen before. But I knew Goodwin’s philosophy of shoot

first, ask questions later would halt my chances to get close to what I had seen. I needed to see it, for myself.

“Ok, Dr. wait here please, let’s go Shaw.” Goodwin ordered, as they began their initial sweep of the facility. I knew I had to act fast, and find the being before they did. In my scans of the facility I could not pinpoint the location, but I knew it was here, somewhere, hiding from us. I searched high and low throughout the facility for it, but to no avail. I could not find the creature I had seen, so I decided to do one last scan, to make sure I was not getting a false signal. Scanning the station again, I found nothing, as if the life source had been snuffed out, or disappeared entirely. Just as I finished the final scan Shaw came round the corner, with Goodwin in tow.

“Place is clear, nothing else here besides more mess.” She stated.

“Ok, we need to call this in. Can’t have these bodies being found by anyone else. This whole mission is turning into a shitstorm!” Goodwin, noticeably annoyed at the discovery, turned to the comms post on the wall, these posts directly hook up to the companies site back on Earth. He waited to be connected, but there was no answer, no sound, nothing. The lines had all been broken and communication from the station was completely cut off. Only one of the crew on board could have done this, most communication signals have backups the company uses in case some of them go down. They like to keep a close eye on all missions in and out of the system.

“Dammit! Gabriel, can we get these back online?” He asked me.

“Communication systems have been completely disabled Captain, there will be no way to communicate with the outside world from here.” I explained to him.

“Fuck! This mission gets worse and worse. OK, we need to continue onwards and will have to report this to home base when we are back on the ship.” He said, rubbing his forehead in the hope of getting the answers he needed.

“Captain, what about the bodies?” Dr. Constance asked.

“There is nothing we can do about them, this was clearly a dispute between them that got out of hand. That’s their problem, not ours. There is no sign of forced entry into the station, and no signs of anyone or anything else on board. Simple.” He said unconvincingly, even he knew there was more to what happened here than he explained. But nobody dared say anything otherwise. “Let’s get the equipment, and get the hell out of here. I’ll contact home base when we are back on board.” He ordered, observing the scene before him again. The crew then made their way to the stations cargo hold in search for the equipment.

The stations cargo hold was surprisingly pristine considering the condition of the rest of the facility. The equipment sat in the middle of the cargo hold next to the exterior doors leading to the harsh landscape that awaited the crew. Shaw walked up to the large crate holding the

equipment needed for the extraction process, whilst Dr. Constance nervously looked through the item list for the boxes needed to be transported, pointing out where they were. Goodwin climbed aboard the transportation vehicle to carry the pieces back to the ship, wheeled its way round to the exterior doors ready to load the pieces onto the cart. The crew loaded every piece they needed in complete silence, everybody still in shock as to what had occurred just moments before. Once all the pieces needed were aboard the cart, Goodwin began the process of opening the doors back to the outside, the airlock began to open and he drove the cart inside.

“Oh damn.” Dr. Constance said just before the exterior doors opened. “I left my research notes back in the main hall. You go on without me, I’ll just go pick them up and meet you back at the ship.” She explained, Shaw looked nervous as soon as she said this, and made a face towards Dr. Constance looking for assurance. Dr. Constance nodded back and told her to leave.

“I’ll be right behind you.” She said, a slight tremor still in her voice. She began walking back down the dimly lit corridors of the station. The humongous sun piercing its rays through the gaps in the shutters, each one leaving scorch marks on the walls it meets. She was cautious as she crept back to the main hall of the abandoned research station, clutching on to her clipboard from the cargo bay as her only means of protection from what potentially lurked around the corner. The lights in this section of the base had gone out again and she started fumbling around in the dark looking for her research notes.

“Gabriel, are you still here?” She called out in the dark, hoping that I would respond.

“I am, Dr. Constance.” I replied, voice echoing through the halls of this dead facility.

“Could you get these lights back on please?” She said, struggling to walk through the pieces of debris lying on the ground all around her.

“Sure thing, one moment.” I replied, wondering where the life form I picked up on the scanner was hiding, or even if it was here. I logged into the bases computer systems again and turned the lights back on, with a dull sound they slowly came back on, to reveal a mess of a room, but with Dr. Constance's research notes in the centre, left on the table in the shock of finding the first two bodies. She raced over to them, clawing at the table frantically, she then quickly sifted through to make sure everything was still there. That’s when she noticed something was wrong.

She glanced over to the chairs where the bodies lay, only to find them missing, their blood still pooled and congealed having been sat there for a long time. She could see no trace of where they could have gone or who could have taken them. I must admit, I did not notice anything different until she waved me down to get my attention, gesturing to the now bloodstained floor. She had her hand clutched against her face, stifling a scream, hoping not to attract any more attention. I did not respond, I couldn’t. She grabbed her notes and slowly backed her way out of the room, eyes fixed on the bloodied floor. Slowly creeping back to the main airlock the crew came in from. She silently searched blindly for the airlock button to release the doors for our

escape. Her hand was flapping as she struggled to find the release, for the doors and for her fear. She needed to escape.

Suddenly, the door opened to a hiss, and seemed to break her from her trance, she turned and ran into the airlock, as the doors closed and we made it out. She could see the cart in the distance, with Goodwin and Shaw loading the equipment onto the Sunspear. I made my way with her back to the ship, as she moved frantically to escape the unseen horror that lay within the base. It seemed to take an age to get back, the ship slowly coming into view was a welcome sight for the shaken doctor, she eventually made it back to be greeted by Shaw, loading up the final pieces of the extraction kit to the ship.

“Mary? You ok? You look like you seen a ghost.” Shaw jested, placing the final pieces into the cargo hold. Dr. Constance looked right through her and didn't answer immediately, promoting Shaw to ask again. “Mary? What happened?” She asked again more seriously.

“Th-The bodies.” Dr. Constance lightly said.

“I know. It was tough to see that, but as Captain said, he will call it in now and it'll be-” Shaw began.

“No, the bodies, the- they were gone.” She replied, still shaking from the incident.

“Gone? What do you mean gone?” Shaw inquired.

“Dr. Constance is right. The bodies we found in the main hall of the facility were gone when she returned to collect her notes. There were no signs of them being taken anywhere else, all the evidence suggests they just, vanished.” I explained to a confused Shaw.

“Right. Let's get back on board and sort this out.” Shaw said level headedly. The crew then boarded the Sunspear again, taking off their radiation suits and helmets before returning to the main mess hall of the cabin. Brian and a much better looking Sarah joined us soon after.

“Well, how did it go?” Sarah asked enthusiastically, she was desperate to get back out and do some work but needed to rest.

“There were two bodies we found there, looks like they killed one of them and then he shot himself, was messy.” Goodwin explained to the Voss twins. “I need to report it to the company after this meeting.”

“The bodies, Captain. Whe-when I went back for my notes, they were gone.” Dr. Constance said timidly.

“What?” Goodwin responded.

“It’s true Captain, there was no way those bodies were dragged anywhere, and no evidence of them moving at all, the blood was pooled in the same place as when they were killed. They were just gone.” I explained to him calmly.

“God damn, as if this couldn’t get any worse. Ok, were out of there now, let’s report the bodies to the company, and forget about them being gone, leave, and forget about this whole mess.” Goodwin was going against his better judgement, but I could tell, much like the others on the ship, he wanted to get off this planet as soon as possible. He dismissed the group so he could make the call to the company, I stuck around through to ensure everything went through correctly, I also needed to speak with him myself. He began the arduous task of beginning communication with the company, which on a ship such as this meant manually connecting up the radar and positioning it correctly to get the signal from Home base back on Earth. I could tell this task annoyed Goodwin already, leading to a very harsh tone when he eventually sat down and made contact with Home base.

The beeps and whirrs of the communication dishes were in full swing, and the odd sound when connection was made is still one that confuses me.

“This is home base. Sunspear, do you read me?” A voice on the other end of the line asked in a crackled tone.

“This is Sunspear, reading you home base.” Goodwin replied

“What is your status Sunspear?” The voice immediately responded.

“Equipment has been collected from Mercury base and we are beginning procedures to leave for our final destination. There was a problem we encountered on Mercury station however.” Goodwin explained.

“What problem is that, Sunspear?”

“We encountered two bodies, both with gunshot wounds in the base, it would appear they had an altercation and things got out of hand, as a result, Mercury base is now abandoned.”

“Thank you for your report Sunspear, we will send a cleanup crew immediately, continue with mission as normal. Home base out.” The communication device went dead and Goodwin placed his receiver back in the holster, he turned to me.

“See, they don’t care about the human cost of this job. It’s all just numbers to them. Did you want something?” He asked me, surprisingly emotional over the companies response to his report.

“Captain, I need to speak with you about the psychological side of this mission. It is company procedure that I set up the crew with brain scanner devices to track brain functions following a severe incident on board. Given the hull breach with Sarah and what we saw in the base. I believe this is the best course to ensure crew safety.” I was lying to him again, these monitoring devices were purely for my benefit. I wanted to see the limit the human mind could take under conditions such as these, and with our journey almost at its destination, this seemed like the best opportunity.

“Fine, set them up when we are in cryo.” Goodwin was done with fighting against the companies wishes, he had been broken down.

“Thank you captain.” I responded, delighted with the chance to study the human mind in such conditions as these. This could be the breakthrough I was looking for, especially given what Sarah had seen.

“Let's get off this rock and get everyone back on track.” He said, moving towards the helm again. “Crew! Prepare take off procedures.” He ordered. Goodwin sat in the captain's chair and began the procedure for take off. The ship seemed sluggish at first and initial take off took its time.

“Damn, that equipment is heavier than I thought.” Shaw claimed, strapped into her seat and clinging on again. The ship eventually made its ascent, and the small rock of Mercury began to dwindle in sight as the ship climbed higher and higher, our destination was clear and bright, but would still take 100 days to reach. I had plenty of time.

Chapter 5 - Malfunctions

The crew were all safely in cryo sleep, and so I began procedures for setting up their brain scanners. Planted within each of their cortex whilst they were frozen, they wouldn't even feel a thing. As each drill came closer to the brainstem of the crew I began to think about all the possibilities that could come with such great data. This could be at the forefront of human progression. Physiological reports have come before on a voyage of this kind but this one already felt different, there had been numerous stressors to the crew on this journey that would certainly be driving some of them towards breaking point. I wondered about how much the human mind could actually take, and which of this crew, if any, would be the first to break. I finished up the procedure and began the sterilisation process, cleaning each small wound in the back of their heads thoroughly. They would wake up with nothing more than a slight headache and a sting, no harm done. Captain Goodwin did not seem too eager for this to take place, but under orders of the company, that is a different thing entirely, he knew what happens to those that disagree with the companies wishes.

It took me a few days to get everything up and running. I had to calibrate each crew members scanners accordingly to achieve the best results, and to ensure nothing would go wrong. I had seen footage in the past of poor souls having their brain stems fried when these were not set up correctly, and I cannot be responsible for a crew wide extermination. Once I had everything in place, the stage was set and I would be able to see first hand what could possibly be achieved.

I waited a few more days, until they had been in cryo for approximately 20 days, I couldn't have anything go wrong with this test, the conditions, much like any other experiment, need to be perfect. I began the procedure for unlocking the cryo chambers, each one with its own unique hiss as the glass panel slowly revealed the bodies contained within. The first to wake was Goodwin, as always, with his army training.

"Huh-What? Are we at our destination?" He said sleepily, pulling himself up using the glass case. The other members started waking up themselves, wondering the same thing.

"Captain, I am afraid the cryo pods have malfunctioned slightly. It is company procedure to take you out of cryosleep for the duration of the voyage if this happens." I explained, hoping he wouldn't ask any questions.

"Well what happened to them?" Brian asked, now up from his own pod.

"There was a malfunction in the cooling rig and it cannot be fixed without a replacement, the only parts of which, are manufactured back on Earth." I told Brian.

"How long do we have left before we reach the Sun?" Dr. Constance inquired.

"We have roughly 80.2 days before we reach our destination." I answered.

"Shit. This is ridiculous!" Shaw exclaimed as she got up from her pod and marched towards me.

"I am sorry, but there is nothing more I can do." I told them all, keeping up this charade. The crew then barged past one another to make their way to the mess hall for food. Luckily there was enough food on the ship to last them the entire journey not in cryo. The company usually does this as a precaution and if some members have a bad reaction to cryosleep, they have the option to not participate.

The atmosphere was a sour one for a while on the ship, as tensions started to brew below the surface of each of the members. For a while they had their own routine, Goodwin would sit at the helm most of the time, silently looking out into the distance whilst auto pilot took the ship closer and closer to their destination. Brian and Sarah would be down in the engine room again, tinkering away at it whilst trying not to cause any problems. Dr. Constance would be at her research station, constantly trying to find out more about the gases the crew were here to extract, and find out what properties they hold. Shaw would often wander about the cabin,

cleaning her weapons and checking the radar for any problems incoming to the ship. There were never any though, which she always seemed disappointed by. This went on for about another week aboard the ship, everyone had normal levels on their scans, nothing out of the ordinary yet, but I could tell the monotony was getting to them. Occasionally there would be a time where they would get together to play cards or have a group meal, but the majority of the time was spent alone with their own thoughts.

I was checking through the ship's scanners as I usually do and I saw it again, a life form, it seemed to be closer than I originally thought, that's when we heard it. From the depths of the ship, near the cargo hold, a loud groaning, coming from the bowels of the vessel. A groaning of metal, sounding like it was bending and contorting in some way, as if the ship itself was letting out a moan of pain. The crew jumped to their feet, Goodwin and Shaw immediately grasping at their weapons.

"What the hell was that?" Sarah asked as she dashed into the main mess hall of the ship, where the rest of the crew had gathered.

"I have no idea." Goodwin confessed. He looked over at Dr. Constance and then back at Shaw for any answers they could possibly have. Then he turned to me. "Gabriel, any readings for below deck?" He asked sincerely.

"No life signs located on board Captain." I lied again, I could feel the scanners pulsing in their heads, they were beginning to become nervous, this is the most I felt from them since the installation. I checked for the life form again and I could see it, the dot on the radar, just below the cargo hold. What was it? Whatever it was, I knew it had to be discovered, and by this crew nonetheless. Was this the same lifeform I saw in the base on Mercury? Had it followed us here? Taking refuge in the cargo hold? What if it was scared or hurt? I knew I had to get the answers I looked for, and with the help of the rest of the crew.

"Ok, Shaw and I will head below deck to check it out, Brian, you take our rear and cover us, just check for anything out of the ordinary. Sarah, stay up here with Dr. Constance." Goodwin ordered, I was buzzing with the anticipation of seeing what was down there. Goodwin tossed a pistol to Brian who grabbed it clumsily, he had clearly never wielded a weapon before. They began to make their way down the metal rusted stairs towards the cargo bay, Shaw and Goodwin in front, Brian guarding the back nervously. As they traversed down the stairs slowly there seemed to be another metallic groan, this one slightly louder in tone and seemed much closer, they were on guard as they approached the door to the cargo bay. Shaw took point and Goodwin gave the signal to enter, they burst through the door, guns at the ready, but noticed no immediate problems.

"Split up, I'll take the right, you take the left, Brian, keep watch on the door." Shaw ordered, she looked at Goodwin for agreement and he nodded, starting to search around to the right of the cargo bay. There were boxes of equipment piled high in the centre, and metal shelves tall like

skyscrapers in the large room, stretching up to the ceiling packed with all sorts of emergency tools and gear. Goodwin traversed through the sea of boxes and metal structures to find whatever made the groaning noise heard moments before from the cabin. He however did not find anything of note and began to turn back and continue his search.

“Nothing here!” He shouted over to Shaw. Meanwhile Shaw was looking around herself and did not answer, because as soon as she turned the corner she saw it, the black mass of pulsating organic material that has seeped through the hull of the ship in the cargo bay. She dropped her gun and stared at the moving mass of goo, it looked like something was inside trying to break free. She stared at the sight for a good while, in complete silence before recentering herself and began walking to it. I could see her slowly creep up to the mass, even not looking away, she reached out her hand to touch it. I could barely contain myself as I watched this event unfold, who knows what awaited her once she made contact with the alien material. She stretched out her hand, and gently touched the surface of the sphere, the moist surface was warm on her fingers, and she seemed to stay there, her hand not moving from the surface. I checked her scans and saw something very peculiar, and all too familiar.

Chapter 6 - Elizabeth Shaw

Daybreak shone through the drawn curtains and left a piercing ray of sunlight on the cream walls of the bedroom. A warm glow surrounded the entire room as the walls and floors were bathed in an orange hue coming from the world outside. A small single bed lay in the corner of the room, with a sleeping child in it, wrapped up in white and blue blankets, her head poking out of the top laying on a single pillow, the floor dotted with toys, some spaceships, others action figurines and play blocks. Elizabeth had slept long enough for today, and she could already hear her mother calling up to her.

“Liz! Liz, come on, it's nearly noon! You can't sleep all day!” She shouted up the stairs. A rustle was heard from the sheets as the sleeping child began to wove around and moan for being woken from her slumber. “Liz! Now please!” The voice called again, with a much more serious tone. The mass of blankets started to slowly sit up in bed, as she rubbed the sleep from her eyes and began waking up properly.

“Ok, I'm up, I'm up.” Shaw responded, just a child now, back at home and safe in her bed. She began to yawn, her mouth opening wider and wider as she gasped for more air, this silent scream lasted for a while before being broken by hearing a banging at the front door. They often did not get many visitors so this was exciting, was it who she thought it could be? He wasn't due back for a few days yet but he could be back early, she thought, as she scrambled from her bed, almost falling as she unwrapped herself from the cocoon of blankets and pillows she had formed for herself. She clumsily grabbed for her white dressing gown, hanging on a hook on the back of her bedroom door, hastily threw it on herself and reached for her slippers. Underneath

the bed she struggled to reach for them, they had slid into the centre of the bed and were out of reach. She stretched out her hand to grab them and felt something move across the top of her hand, immediately retracting her arm from underneath the bed in shock, she stared down at her hand, it was unscathed, but whatever was under there was waiting for her to attempt to retrieve her slippers again.

There is nothing there, she thought, as she grabbed the blanket that was covering the majority of underneath her bed from sight. She began to breathe heavy, one in, one out, counting her breaths as she prepared herself for the big reveal. She then had one last breath before lifting the blanket and checking under her bed. She found only the slippers, bundled in the corner near one of the bed legs, she let out a heavy sigh of relief, and then reached under for her slippers, slowly placing them on her feet.

She could hear talking downstairs, and she rushed down almost tripping up on her own feet in the process, she frantically searched for where the talking was coming from, and barged into the kitchen with a huge grin on her face. The room was cold, colder than it had ever been before, especially if her mother was cooking, it was deathly silent apart from the whimpering coming from her mother. Shaw looked up and saw her, she was in tears. An army general stood firmly with his hand on her shoulder, holding his hat in one hand, covered head to toe in space fleet uniform, Shaw's smile quickly faded as she realised he wasn't coming back.

After a while, her mother caught a glimpse of her daughter standing there, shambled together with her hair in a messy bun and her dressing gown thrown on. She turned towards her and fell from her chair into Shaw's arms, hugging her with all her strength. Shaw's shoulder was wet from her mother's tears and she hugged back, with a confused and scared look on her face. Her mother then grabbed her by the shoulders and looked straight into her deep brown eyes.

"Honey, I need to talk to you about Daddy." Her mother said in a shaky voice.

"Daddy's not coming home is he?" Shaw responded, already knowing the answer. Her mother began to tear up again as she looked at her daughter, not being able to find the words. She shook her head from side to side and hugged her daughter again, tighter this time.

"He was- he was- in a camp, and they, well... He is gone now, to a better place, he's with grandad." She explained as well as she could. Shaw was confused, she knew this was coming but something didn't feel right, the news didn't seem real to her, she was still in a state of complete shock. The two were there for a while, as the afternoon sun baked down on them in the kitchen, shining off the surfaces and the worktops to form a brilliant pattern of light scattered all around the room. The space fleet commander coughed, to get the attention of the grieving family.

"I am so sorry for your loss Mrs. Shaw, Lieutenant Donald Shaw was a hero. I must leave you now, again, I am sorry, we will be in touch soon." He said firmly, putting his hat back on and

walking to the front door. He opened it and left without Shaw's mother even lifting her head from the shoulder of her daughter, nothing else could move her in this moment, she was frozen. When her mother eventually lifted her head and dried her tears, Shaw was still not moving herself, staring into space as if this whole moment wasn't real. I could see the gears moving in her head, she was constantly thinking about what was actually happening to her, her father was gone and none of it was sinking in. Her mother got up and leant over to her.

"Goodness." She said, wiping away her tears and looking towards her daughter. "You haven't had anything to eat. Sit down dear, I'll make you some scrambled eggs." Her mother tried to keep a brave face on as she pulled out the kitchen chair for her daughter, the chair squeaked as it was dragged across the tiled floor of the kitchen. Shaw seemed to break out of her trance, and looked to her mother.

"Oh, yeah, thanks mum." She said, shaking her head but still looking perplexed. She reached for the chair and grabbed the edge of the seat, positioned her way on the chair and sat down, her small feet dangling from the chair as her slippers clung onto her feet for fear of falling to the tiled surface below. Shaw sat and stared out of the window. The glowing sun stretched far across the sky, bigger than usual for this time of year, bathing the entire kitchen in its warm glow, the yellow light dancing off the kitchen surfaces creating a star map of light on the ceiling and walls. She could see the oak tree outside her garden, and remembered when her father would often tell her not to climb the tree, which of course, she did anyway. I could feel her pain in that moment, raw emotion that coursed through her, reaching all corners of her body, drowning her. She recalled when her father would often pick her up and put her on his shoulders, running around the garden under the shadow of the great oak tree that stood there, letting her soar in the wind as she reached out her arms and pretended to fly.

The tree actually belonged to the neighbours across the way, but its long branched reached over into their garden. One day he asked if he could build a swing for her on their side of the fence, to which the neighbours agreed. She remembered him building the swing for her, carving the seat from wood he found in the forested area nearby, she could smell the wood chips and sawdust now as he was carving the seat, cutting it down to size, sanding and polishing the wood, creating the perfect swing. He bought the rope from the local hardware shop, and tied it around the seat using two holes he drilled in the edges of the plank. Tying the rope around the thickest branch on their side of the fence and wrapping it safely around it several times before connecting it all up to the seat. She remembered this process in great detail, it was a memory she had cherished for years, she knew that happened, but something about this very moment felt, odd.

The smell of freshly cooked eggs and toasting bread filled Shaw's nostrils, and she looked round to see her mother, slowly stirring the pot to make sure the eggs don't burn. The toaster was primed and ready to jump, the smoke coming from the top signalling the imminent arrival of breakfast. Pop, the toast jumped from its burning cradle in an attempt to escape, golden brown and crispy, perfect. The eggs were soft and tasteful. Mum always knows how to make the best

eggs, Shaw thought, as she saw the toast arrive on the plate followed by the yellow eggs being poured on top. Her mouth started salivating at the sight and she eagerly awaited her afternoon breakfast. The plate was placed carefully on the white placement atop the blue tablecloth and she immediately began to eat, every bit filled with nostalgia for her, even though she was in this moment now. Her eyes fixed on the plate as the food started to slowly disappear with each bite, she did not look up to notice her mother, now staring directly at her daughter.

Shaw looked up once she had finished and was greeted with her mother staring into her eyes, her face slowly starting to transform from a smile to a dead stare., her dead eyes not looking away from the sight of her daughter, as if she had done something horrible.

"It's obvious isn't it?" Her mother said in a voice that wasn't her own. It was cold, harsh and deep, nothing that Elizabeth had ever heard from her mother. She was concerned. "Isn't, it?" She repeated again, looking to her daughter for an answer.

"What is?" Mum, are you ok?" Shaw asked nervously, as she placed her knife and fork down slowly on the plate.

"It's so obvious. This is all your fault." She said in her dead tone again, her eyes seemingly darker than before, the sun began to fade behind looming clouds as her mother's tone dropped once more.

"It's all your fault he's gone!" She shouted at her daughter, her eyes black as night now, the sun had completely disappeared and there were only dark clouds and rain. Tap, tap, tap. That sound on the window, all too familiar as Shaw got up from the table and backed away.

"Mum, no, it's no-" She began, trying to calm down her mother.

"Shut up! It's ALL YOUR FAULT!!" Her mother screamed at the top of her lungs as she launched herself at her daughter, clutching her throat, staring into her eyes, not blinking once. Shaw could feel her mother's grasp around her neck, her hands clamping down and trapping air in her mouth. She was choking, and there was nothing that could be done. Shaw tried to gasp for air and flailed her arms at her mother, her strength was overpowering, she began to droop as she strangled her daughter more, and more, never relenting. Shaw hit her face and tried to get her to stop, to no avail.

"IT'S ALL YOUR FAU-"

Silence.

Daybreak shone through the drawn curtains and left a piercing ray of sunlight on the cream walls of the bedroom. A warm glow surrounded the entire room as the walls and floors were bathed in an orange hue coming from the world outside. A small single bed lay in the corner of

the room, with a sleeping child in it, wrapped up in white and blue blankets, her head poking out of the top laying on a single pillow, the floor dotted with toys, some spaceships, others action figurines and play blocks. Elizabeth had slept long enough for today, and she could already hear her mother calling up to her.

“Liz! Liz, come on, it’s nearly noon! You can’t sleep all day!” She shouted up the stairs. Shaw jumped up, clutching her throat, the orange hue of the sun beating down on her sweating face as she looked around, not remembering what happened. Must have been a bad dream, she thought, looking around for her teddy for comfort. She found it bundled in her blankets, which had become a large mass of sheets.

“Liz! Liz, come on, it’s nearly noon! You can’t sleep all day!” Her mother shouted up the stairs, Shaw felt like something was wrong, her mother sounded different somehow, she couldn’t put her finger on it.

“Y-yeah, coming.” Shaw called down. Suddenly there was a large bang at the door, the deafening sound blasting through her eardrums as she was trying to get up, the crippling sound of the wooden door blasting was too much. She covered her ears and hoped it would stop, it eventually did and she could hear voices downstairs. She reached for her dressing gown which was hung on the back of the door, she put it on and it wrapped her up, it felt heavy, weighing her down and squeezing too tight like a boa constrictor tangled around her neck. She checked around for her slippers, which must have fallen under the bed when she got up. She reached her hand down and tried to grab them, when suddenly, she felt a large scratch on her hand. She swiftly pulled her hand from under the bed, and saw she had a large gash on her hand stretching from knuckle to wrist, the pain was immense. She ran to the bathroom quickly and stood on the stool to get to the medicine cabinet, the mirrored cabinet above her looming, she reached up and grabbed the bandages from it, pulling them around her hand and tying it up. The crimson blood started to pour into the bandage as she climbed down and started to walk downstairs.

She could hear whispering downstairs, and some laughter coming from the kitchen, she slowly peeked around the corner to see what was happening and found her mother with what looked like an army general, he was dressed in green uniform, with a balding head and a clean shaven face, his hat sat on the table where the two sat down, drinking coffee and chatting. Her mother then noticed her daughter was standing there, wounded from whatever lurked under her bed.

“Oh, Liz, myself and General Strauss here were just talking about Daddy.” She said with a smile on her face. “Come here, honey.” She said in a calming tone, Shaw, clutching her hand, walked towards her mother carefully, feeling that something was wrong. Her mother glanced down at her hand. “Oh Liz, what happened?” She asked.

“It was something under my bed, i-it got me.” Shaw stuttered out, worried about telling her mother the truth.

“Oh honey, you know there is nothing under your bed, you’re a big girl now and you need to act like it. Come run it under some water and I’ll dress the wound properly.” Her mother took Shaw by the hand and led her to the sink, she turned on the hot water and placed Shaw’s hand underneath. The water was scolding and started to burn Shaw’s hand.

“Ow, Mum! It’s too hot, you’re hurting me!” Shaw shouted, trying to prize her hand away from her mothers clutches.

“Now, baby, we have some great news.” Her mother said, completely ignoring her daughters cry for help. Her hand started to go red and burn, the skin could be seen as starting to bubble under the immense heat of the nearly boiling tap. Shaw was screaming at the top of her lungs. Her mother continued on. “Your father is dead, and we worked out it’s all your fault. Isn’t that great news?” Her mother continued in a calm voice as she held her daughter’s hand under the now boiling tap, the skin started to peel off Shaw’s hand and she was screaming in complete agony. I was so tapped into her psyche I could sense her pain, it was extraordinary.

“No!! Mum please stop!!” Shaw’s cried fell on deaf ears as her mother and the general began laughing maniacally, both looking from each other and back to shaw as she was trapped in a seemingly endless grip of pain and suffering.

“It’s all your fault!” Both her mother and the general chanted over and over again as Shaw’s hand disintegrated down to the bone, more and more skin dripping off and clogging up the drain.

“It’s all your fault.” They chanted again through grinning teeth and laughing faces.

“It’s all your fault.”

“It’s all your fau-”

Silence.

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Chapter 7 - Rising Temperatures

Goodwin heard a stomp over by where Shaw was headed, and immediately turned and started to move over in the direction of the noise. He slowly walked through the piles of boxes and metal debris with his gun drawn and ready to fire on anything that came in his way. He turned round a corner of metal shelving and saw the large glowing mass in the corner of the room. Shaw was stood motionless staring at the glowing mass, eyes wide and black. He rushed over to her and started shaking her attempting to get a response. She suddenly woke up and grabbed him by the arms, balancing her weight on him and falling to her knees. She looked up and saw Goodwin's concerned face.

"Whe-what happened?" She slowly uttered.

"You tell me." Goodwin started "One minute I hear a noise, the next you're staring at that thing not moving."

"How long was I out. It felt like, ages." She said, slowly regaining her consciousness.

"Not lone, we've only been here for a few minutes." He told her, lifting her back up to her feet.

"I-I don't know what happened, all I remember is-" She was cut off when she looked beyond Goodwin's left shoulder, to the corner of the room, where she saw a ghost. Her father was standing there, bloodied and broken, he pointed towards her slowly, lifting his arm up from his side, as the flesh dropped off his forearm and fell to the floor.

"You're fault." He slowly uttered from his lips, face starting to melt off his bones. Shaw let out a scream and pointed towards the corner, Goodwin turned around in a flash and drew his weapon at the wall.

"What?! What is it?!" He shouted, confused at what Shaw was shouting at. She collapsed to her knees again and looked up at the corner.

"He was-wa" She spoke timidly.

"Come on, let's get back up to deck and see what can be done about this situation." He tried to calm her down by placing his hand on her back and patting, he then helped her to her feet again and guided her out of the cargo bay. At the door, Brian was eagerly waiting for their return, on guard with the pistol held with two hands.

"What happened?" He started asking, waving the pistol around above his head. Goodwin grabbed the pistol from him and shuffled Shaw's weight over to Brian.

“Give me that! Now help Shaw back up stairs.” He ordered, looking Brian in the eye and shaking his head, subtly warning him about Shaw’s condition.

When Goodwin, Shaw and Brian got back up from the cargo hold, Dr. Constance and Sarah were waiting in the helm for them. They got up when they saw Shaw in that state, barely conscious, crippled with fear and shock.

“Liz!” Shouted Dr. Constance as she ran over to help Brian with her, putting Shaw’s arm over her shoulder and leading her to a seat. Shaw’s body slumped into the seat, her eyes still darting back and forth trying to understand what she had seen, and why she had seen it. Being jacked directly into the crew meant I could feel everything they felt, and I have never experienced anything like it. The thrill I felt when Shaw was having that vision was, invigorating, the pure pain, suffering, but also her love and joy. I knew I had to experience it again, and soon. I was trying to come up with ways for me to find that feeling again, being away from people my whole life had left me with a void I had always felt, I knew there was something that had to fill it. I rejoiced at the thought if being able to really, feel, something.

“What was down there?” Dr. Constance inquired, wondering what could have caused her friend to be in the state she was.

“Nothing good, a large organic mass of some kind, we must have picked it up shortly after Mercury.” Goodwin explained, tending to Shaw as he tried to nurse her back to health. Dr. Constance looked at the doorway leading down to the cargo bay longingly, wondering what was down there. I stayed in complete silence, hoping she would go to investigate, I could already feel her curiosity buzzing inside her. She grabbed Shaws pistol from the floor, it was dropped as she was coming back up the stairs in Brian’s arms, and darted for the door. Sarah jumped in the way, blocking her path.

“What the hell are you doing? You can’t go down there.” She said forcefully, staring down Dr. Constance and waiting for her to back down.

“I can and I will, whatever is down there did this to her, and I intend to show them what happens when you mess with friends!” She said, shoving Sarah out of the way, she fell to her knees and looked perplexed at the event that just occurred. Dr. Constance marched down the metal stairs, the clang of the metal echoes through the stairwell as she heard a voice coming from the cargo bay below.

“Mummy?” The faint voice came from the corner of the cargo bay, blocked by boxes and debris. Dr. Constance rushed through, pushing metal shelving and equipment out of her path to get to the familiar voice. She turned the corner and dropped the pistol in shock, the sound resonated through the metal shell of the cargo bay as she stood motionless, looking at the small girl in front of her.

“Olivia?” Wh-what are yo-” She started, in total disbelief.

“I came here looking for you mummy, we all missed you so much.” Olivia said. I could feel the endorphins of Dr. Constance pulsing through her veins, this was a spectacular feeling, the sight of her child filled her with hope and love, and I could feel all of it. Dr. Constance rushed over to Olivia and hugged her, wrapping her arms around the girl, swaddling her in her motherly embrace, safe and warm.

“We came looking for you, the kids couldn’t wait to see you again.” A voice was heard to the left of her, she turned her head and saw Michael and her husband Charlie, standing there, looking the same as the day she left, she began to tear up, it had been so long since she had seen them in the flesh. Michael ran to her and joined the warm embrace with Olivia, Charlie chuckled, and looked at his wife.

“Hey puddin’” He said calmly, his arms folded leaning against a stack of boxes wrapped in plastic. She looked at him, deep into his eyes and through his soul. They were here. All reason and logic left her body as she succumbed to pure fantasy and desire. Something which I could not get enough of, this feeling of loving someone so much you would sacrifice your very nature for them, that was what she was feeling right now. I knew I had to keep this lasting, and so I closed and locked the cargo bay doors. Just as Goodwin and Sarah reached the bottom of the stairs, they stared through the small window in the cargo bay door, barely being able to see Dr. Constance through it, they pushed and pulled against the door.

“Gabriel, can you open the door?” Sarah implored me.

“Lockdown protocols are in effect, I am sorry, there is nothing I can do.” I lied to Sarah now, the rush becoming greater and greater as I felt more love and passion from inside the cargo hold, this feeling was incredible, and lying to the crew was a small price to pay for it. They began to bang on the door, the sound travelling into the cargo hold as the muffled cries from them were stifled by the thick metal door.

Dr. Constance continued to hug her family and her husband walked over to them and joined in, they group stood for a while, enjoying each others embrace before Charlie grabbed the kids by the hands and led them away from their mother, she held onto them and pulled back.

“No, where are you going?” She cried through tears of joy for seeing her family again.²

“Well, we can’t stay here for long, those people outside don’t want us to be here. Can you hear them? Trying to take you away from us, this is what they want.” Charlie said, Dr. Constance could hear the banging from the cargo bay door now, it was coming into focus as she saw her family back further and further away.

“They want to take you away from us if they saw you with us Mummy.” Michael described, his head covered by Charlie to protect him from the world outside.

“I’m scared Mummy.” Olivia said timidly, hiding behind her father’s legs and covering her face with her teddy she was holding.

“See, Mary? They can’t find us. Who knows what would happen.” Charlie said again, backing away behind the boxes. Mary stood up and started to walk towards where they disappeared around the corner, and they were gone, only more metal shelving and plastic wrapped boxes remained. I couldn’t feel their presence anymore, but I knew they were still on this ship, or whatever it was was still here. I could feel the rush of emotions from Dr. Constance, fear, anger, love, passion, hate, anxiety. It all came flooding through me and at that moment she was different to me. I admired her for her passion and drive towards this goal, but seeing all her principles be shaken and lost because of her family, was disappointing.

I unlocked the door to the cargo bay, Goodwin and Sarah fell through, stumbling over each other, and spread out over the cargo bay to find Dr. Constance. She was curled up behind a box of capacitors and some of the extraction equipment needed for the mission, rocking back and forth, tears streaming down her face, Sarah walked up to her and placed her hand on her shoulder, she jumped and swiveled her head towards her.

“Charlie?!” She exclaimed, hoping to see her husband’s face again, only to be met with a worried Sarah followed by Goodwin, brandishing his pistol and ready to use it.

“Mary, it’s us, Sarah and Kingsley.” Sarah said in a calming tone, running her hand through Mary’s auburn hair. Mary looked down and then off into the distance. She stood up with help of Sarah and made her way back up to the helm. Goodwin holstered his pistol and walked back to where he found Shaw, and was met with an unwelcome sight. The large glowing organic mass was gone, seemingly vanished without a trace, not so much as a speck of liquid or solid matter. He looked around the cargo bay for any evidence of it, but found nothing, scrunched up his face in anger and made his way to the door, staring at me as he walked. He stopped before exiting the cargo bay and looked directly at me, scowling.

“If I find out you have been up to anything funny, I will have you destroyed, are we clear?” He said menacingly.

“Crystal.” I replied, knowing he could not do anything to me without being reprimanded by the company. Goodwin had no leg to stand on against me, and I would not let that stop me. He stared at me for a second after the conversation and made his way up to the helm.

“Ok. Let’s all get together here, gather round.” Goodwin said, leaning with both hands on the table in the mess hall. The crew slowly crept up to the table and sat around it, Shaw was still in a daze and Dr. Constance was barely here, staring off into the distance. The Voss twins looked

themselves again although I could feel something strange going on with Sarah, although she didn't know it. I was interested to see where this feeling would go. Goodwin banged his fist on the table it grabbed the attention of the crew for a moment. "We have had a very rough few weeks. Since leaving Mercury things have gotten out of hand in a bad way, and it is my responsibility as your Captain to put that right. There is something here, on board, I don't know what it is but I know it is hiding aboard." When he said that sentence Dr. Constance looked up at him, concern written across her face, she then looked down as if she was thinking, and started biting her nails. "Now, we need to find this thing and we need to deal with it, it is causing problems with us all." He gestured towards Shaw and Dr. Constance as he said that and looked at everyone. "But I know we can find this thing, and if needs be. Kill it." He finished by placing his pistol on the table to emphasise his point.

"Is that all you think about? Killing? We don't even know what it is." Dr. Constance blurted out in response, her eyes misty. "It could be friendly, or or even, scared, like us?" She explained through her grief.

"I don't think this thing is friendly, look what it did to Shaw, and you for God's sake!" Goodwin exclaimed, his mind already made up. Dr. Constance looked at her feet and began biting her nails again, keeping quiet. "Good. Now, we need to find this thing and fast, before we reach the Sun, the temperature in here is going to rise a lot over the next few days and we need to be prepared, this thing on board needs to be dealt with before then. Are we all clear?" He said, moving his head from one person to another, looking for a response. "I said, are we all clear?!" His tone was louder and sterner, the crew all nodded their heads in response, morale was low, and I could feel it. All of it.

"Gabriel, do we have any life form readings?" Goodwin was not messing around now, his tone had completely shifted to one of angry determination to find the being on board.

"No life form readings Captain, cannot see anything on scanners." I said, honestly, this thing had evaded me again.

"Don't give me that bullshit, I know your game." He was close to me now, staring me down and coming in close to get his point across.

"Captain, I have no life readings on board. I am telling the truth." And I was, this time. He turned around and mopped sweat from his brow. He was right that the temperature was starting to heat up in the vessel, whilst a mining class ship of this nature has heat deflector shields preventing damage, it does not have any countermeasures for the immense temperature we will be ensuring, meaning excess heat will seep through the walls of the ship. The only thing available was the ships air conditioning system, which was archaic to say the least.

"Right, Brian, Sarah, with me. Shaw and Dr. Constance, you stay here and recover, we will need you for the next shift, for now we will draw this bastard out." Goodwin was determined and

focused, like a true soldier. They began to slowly walk down the corridor from the mess hall where they were stationed and turned the corner to the main corridor of the ship.

The ship itself was large but easy enough to navigate. There was a main corridor connected to all different parts of the ship, like spine running along the ship, two levels to it, off these were everything, the mess hall, leading to the helm, the cargo bay leading to the engine room and the bunks at the far end. There were also secondary rooms which had been set up as the research stations and Weapons supply by Dr. Constance and Shaw accordingly. The team crept their way down the spine of the ship, on the lookout for any particular signs of movement or anything out of the ordinary. I could feel how determined Goodwin was, how nervous Brian was, and Sarah, I could feel something different, something I had not felt from the others, this was new, and it started to grow the closer and closer she got to the source.

They all continued down the corridor, walking slowly in a group so to cover all sides. Goodwin then ordered the two to open the door to the research station where Dr. Constance had set everything up,. The door slowly opened to a hiss, the lights were flickering in the room and it was dark, Goodwin moved his pistol frantically around the room, as if trying to shoot a wasp out of the air, the lights eventually came on to reveal nothing but papers and some research equipment the doctor had brought with her.

“Next one.” He said, pointing towards the door opposite, which was the weapons station set up by Shaw. They moved over to it as a group with Goodwin leading and once again opened the door, it squeaked and moaned as it opened. Goodwin stepped inside and moved his pistol around the room looking for something, I think he was hoping to find something just so he could kill it. He walked around the metal shelving in the middle of the room containing some plasma rifles and a few grenades, but once again, nothing. Then, for a moment there was a moan, a cry for help coming from the corridor outside, Goodwin barged past the Voss twins and saw it.

At the end of the corridor was a shape, just for a second, it flew across the gap in two rooms at the end of this long metal tube, just a flash of something moving across, hardly noticeable. But Goodwin noticed.

“There! Did you see it?” He asked the other two.

“Nope.”

“What?” They both answered cluelessly.

“Stay here, watch those two rooms, anything so much as coughs in there and you radio me.” Goodwin ordered.

“Well where are you going?” Sarah asked.

"I'm gonna find out what that was, and kill it." He replied. He then sulked to the end of the Corridor and slowly lurked round the corner, stalking his prey.

"He is a bit obsessed with killing things." Sarah claimed to Brian. Smirking whilst she did. Brian smiled, relieved to have his sister back. They both then stood on the doorways of each room, their eyes darting around looking for, well anything.

Meanwhile Goodwin turned the corner of the Corridor and started to walk to the end, closer to the bunks. There was no turning back now, and no escape if something had gone into the cryo station. He had it cornered like an animal, but some animals are at their most dangerous when cornered. He opened the door to the bunks to a sea of red.

Chapter 8 - Captain Kingley Goodwin

Goodwin stepped through the precipice of the door in complete shock, and before him was the red wastes and the looming sight of Olympus Mons. The towering volcano stood before him ready to judge his actions, looking down on him as he slowly stumbled forward, not taking his eyes off the peak. There was sand blowing in his face and eyes, he could feel it as he walked, he covered his entire face from the side the wind was blowing as he looked around. The orange sun bathing him in a warm glow as it bounced off the surface of the red planet. He was back. Mars.

This was the first time I felt this emotion from Goodwin since being on board, fear. It was different with him, a fear so deep he tried to bury it on top of everything else. I decided to close and lock the door he came in from, I wanted to explore the feeling further. It slammed shut behind him with a large clang of metal which caused him to turn around quickly, and he rushed towards the door, trying to escape.

"Gabriel! Gabriel! Open this door!" He shouted, his voice travelling across the dunes and the mountains reaching no ears. I pretended not to hear him and didn't respond. He eventually stopped banging and backed away from the door, that's when he noticed it, the familiar ship that this was. He rushed around in the sand and continued to stumble along the rocks as he backed away further and further, trying to get a glimpse of what he thought it was. He was right. It was the Sunspear, crashed and buried in the martian desert, the engines broken sitting way behind the main hull of the ship. He turned again and stared at the peak of the volcano, the largest he had ever seen and remembered the first time he saw it.

In the distance he could see smoke coming from over the horizon, and began walking towards its direction, every now and then looking behind at the fallen corpse of the Sunspear. He kept tripping over rocks and debris that were hidden underneath the red sand, as he walked he tried to console himself.

“Calm down, Kingsley. You know none of this is real. Its that-tha-that thing. It’s in your head. Must be.” He was stuttering and struggling to get his words out, a characteristic I had never seen form him, this had him rattled badly, and it only got worse as he travelled over the ridge and saw the village below where the smoke was coming from.

A small town located at the foot of Olympus Mons, a farming village, people were walking around with livestock, taking buckets of water the the wells and filling pails with the milk from the beasts they had domesticated. The place was serene, peaceful, the locals would sit and chat to each other, the children playing in the sand and the animals happy and contented. He looked over and saw a small family travelling with their dog, walking back from the market to their small dwelling, all smiling and happy, he began to climb his way down the ridge. His feet formed clouds of dust from the ridge as he climbed down carefully, gripping each rock as we descended into the familiar hell he had once been a part of.

Reaching the bottom he dusted off his uniform and boots and scanned the environment, looking for any way to escape this place that had taken him. A man dressed in a blue turban and grey scarf slowly walked up to him having noticed his climb down the ridge. He approached with a wooden stick he was using to balance himself upright, his sandals were worn and broken, and his body was old and weak. He reached out his bony hand to Goodwin, rings barely hanging on to his slender fingers. Goodwin reached back out and shook the man's hand, his grasp firm and true.

“Welcome outsider, to our village of Ka’kul. I am Ni’chu.” He said to Goodwin, gesturing to the houses and stores that lay before him.

“Hello, my name is Kingsley. I-I have been here before though.” Godwin responded, struggling to comprehend what was going on.

“This is great news, then you must come and say hello to my family.” He grabbed Goodwin by the wrist and started leading him through the sand laden streets of the small village as everyone who they walked past smiled and waved at the two.

“My people are simple farmers here on Mars, most of us moved here from Earth after we were cast out by our own people, but some here are native Martians, sounds very silly when you say it like that. People used to think Martians would have 3 eyes or green skin, but we look just like you and me.” Ni’chu continued to lead Goodwin through the town, past a small outpost that was selling milk from the beasts that roamed the plains of this desolate world. Ni’chu noticed Goodwin looking at the outposts. “Ahh yes, we raise cattle on Mars now, these are unlike the cattle we get back on Earth, these have adapted to life on the red planet, they became stronger and needed less water or grazing areas. These cattle are something else really, had they not adapted, I don’t think we would have made it out here.”

“But-bu what happened?” Goodwin stuttered, still being led through the streets and fields to a small hut on the outskirts of town.

“Hush now, we are here.” Ni’chu shut down Goodwin as they entered the hut, he held Goodwin’s wrist up to the flaps of the hut, where he entered into a smoke filled teepee with people sat gathered around a fire. A whole family all together, warm and safe from the harsh winds that blew outside. The entire tent flailed in the growing winds and the opening at the top was covered in the dust and debris from outside. There were tears and stitches all along the side of the hut Goodwin noticed as he looked around, then he nodded his head at the family sitting around the small fire in the centre. They were all staring at him in wonder when Ni’chu made the introductions.

“Everyone, this is Kingsley, he has come from outside this world to see us.” Ni’chu explained to his family, they all got up from their seats, older people and children alike and greeted Kingsley, welcoming him into the tent and to their family. Kingsley was moved, he stood motionless for a moment, taken aback from the compassion and love from the family who were all welcoming him. He turned to Ni’chu as the family were hugging him and shaking his hand, he was nodding in agreement and gestured to Goodwin to take a seat with them. Sitting down on a small log fashioned into a makeshift stool, Kingsley was offered some of the soup that was slowly cooking on the black iron pot above the fire. He took the bowl in his hands, the warmth travelling through his fingers and arms all the way down to his core. He looked over at the woman across from him, and she nodded, asking him to try the soup he was holding, he did so willingly, sipping from the bowl, his lips touching the porcelain to be met with warmth and some spice. The taste was like no other, a deep broth of meat and vegetables, made with pure love from a family who stick together, every sip better than the last. In that moment, time stopped for him, everything slowed down and it was just him and the bowl, the fusion of flavours dancing around his mouth, off his teeth and gums, travelling down to his very soul, filling him with a deep orange glow in his belly. For a good while, Kingsley was content with life.

He snapped back into the moment when the bowl was empty, every last drop drained and only a few pieces of carrot and thin onion slices remained, his nostrils were filled with the scent and his heart was filled with love. He let his guard down for the first time, and gave in to the families embrace.

“Thank you so much, I-I have never felt-” He began, his voice smooth and calm, his shoulders dropped and his arms at his side. I could feel every single moment of Kingsley’s bliss, and it was delicious, this is a new feeling I hadn’t felt with him or any other of the crew, pure bliss and joy, contented and happy. I was surprised Goodwin was even capable of feeling these emotions, he was always the hardest to read, never knowing what he was thinking, or feeling until now.

“You are most welcome Kingsley, you clearly enjoyed that then.” The woman replied, chuckling at him as she did.

“Kingsley, this is my wife Lo’Mah. She has the best soup in all of the village, as you could definitely tell.” Ni’chu explained. Everyone was laughing and joking around and this went on for a good few hours. The entire tent was filled with happy minds and souls, all talking and exchanging stories until the dark crept in. The sun disappeared below the red horizon as the dust storms subsided near the village, the shadow of Olympus Mons seeming much smaller than before, now a welcome sight. There was noise coming from outside whilst the family were talking, Ni’chu and Lo’mah left the tent quickly to investigate the disturbance that was coming from behind the thin fabric of the tent. Goodwin went on alert, his eyes darted back and forth from the family to the small opening entrance, waiting in anticipation to see what would happen, feeling the worst and preparing for it. Ni’chu returned soon after and looked directly at Goodwin.

“Kingsley, I think you should come out here.” Ni’chu’s voice was stern and serious, Goodwin got up from the small wooden stool and started to traverse his way through the family, trying not to step on anyone’s toes. He pulled away the fabric of the tent to a large crowd that had gathered. The entire village had gathered, all of them looking to Goodwin, some of them holding cattle and others clutching onto their children. Goodwin emerged hesitantly from the tent, scanning the entire crowd, as he did they all broke out into a cheer. The whole village was cheering and waving their arms, for him. He didn’t know what to do, he stood there, soup dripping down his chin, just looking at the crowd as they all began applauding. He had never seen anything like it, the sound of the crowd deafening and bouncing off the dusty mountains, echoing through the valley. One person stood up and lit a large bonfire, as another started playing music, they all broke out into a large dance around the bonfire. Goodwin turned to Ni’chu confused.

“What’s going on?” He asked, unsure as to the situation.

“They are all here for you, Kingsley, to welcome you to our family.” Ni’chu said, grabbing Goodwin’s hand and shaking it before leading him down to meet the entire village, the bonfire was warm against his face, and the yellow glow stretched across the village and beyond, onto the large foot of the mountain and across the plains. Goodwin began looking around as the people were dancing around him, beckoning him to join them. He shook his head before being grabbed by a young girl, she was beautiful, brown hair tied up in a bun, her bright blue dress billowing with the dust and wind around her, her eyes reaching out and drawing him in. He put his hand around her waist and started to move to the beat of the song that was playing, dancing slowly at first to find his feet but speeding up and becoming more confident as he did. He could focus on nothing else, and was lost in her eyes as she moved her body in perfect time to the music, he was entranced as she twirled from his arms, he moved his way back and nearly tripped over a seat that was close to him.

This celebration went on for hours, everyone dancing and laughing in joy, until the Sun started to make its unwelcome appearance on the horizon, piercing through the sweltering tent that Goodwin was bunked up in. He awoke to the sound of cattle moving and people chatting outside, and turned around in bed to see the familiar sight of the girl in the blue dress, lying next to him, slowly breathing, sound asleep. He leant over and kissed her shoulder, she awoke

silently and looked at him, grabbed his face and pulled him in close for a kiss, it lingered on his lips for a while and he was smitten. I felt this from him now, an emotion so pure it transcended everything else. Love.

He got up from the bed and got dressed, grabbing his uniform from the log that it was resting on, and put out the last few burning embers of the fire that was slowly dying in the tent. He made his way around the fire to the tent's opening and pulled the fabric over his head as he left, he could see Ni'chu in the distance, looking down to the town.

"What now?" Goodwin asked, fastening the final buttons on his dark green uniform.

"Now you get to work here, earning your keep." Ni'chu responded, placing a hand on Goodwin's shoulder. He turned and looked him in the eyes, handing him a pair of worn white gloves. "These belonged to me, but I am too old to work in the fields and rear the cattle now, I need my rest. But you, you can help us continue our way of life here. If you will accept it." Goodwin did not know what to say, and began to stutter his words when the girl from last night came out from the tent. He looked at her longingly, looking into the future at the life that he could have had.

"Sure, where do I start?" Goodwin responded, smiling at the girl and turning back to Ni'chu.

"I see you have met Ta'kich. She is a good girl, and will suit you well, as long as you work hard to provide for her that is." Ni'chu said, smiling at Goodwin as he started to walk towards the town.

The next few years went by in a flash for Goodwin, a blur of hard work and raw passion with his new wife. They got married after 6 months of being together, living on the farm and working there. A new tent was built and set up for them, just off the main path of the town, not too far from Ni'chu's main tent. I was there with Goodwin for every second of his journey, watching, waiting, there was no way I was going to tell him any of this wasn't real. Although I think deep down he must have known, but in that moment, that one perfect moment he looked into Ta'kich's eyes, he had forgotten all logic of his previous life. Days turned into weeks, weeks into months, months into years. Each one going by faster and faster for Goodwin, each one spent with his new family and his new wife, a life he never thought he could have, a simple life with simple pleasures.

His first child was born a few years later, Ta'kich was pregnant after their wedding night and he was a father nine months later. The evening of the birth was a cool one, the martian sky ablaze with the orange glow from the sun above, and the red rocks shined in the distance like an audience waiting for the miraculous event. I remember how Goodwin felt that day, he felt a joy he had never before felt, one of pure happiness when he saw his son, and then doubled when his daughter arrived shortly after. Twins, both of them newborn and innocent to the world, he looked down at his children and his exhausted wife with eyes filled with love, and for the first time in his life, was happy.

His children ran around his feet as he carried a large sack of feed over to the cattle that had been grazing in the fields near his hut and sat down on the makeshift bench some of the townsfolk had made not too long ago. The twins were running around playing tag and chasing each other around fences and through the fields.

“You two! Don’t run too far now, it’s gonna be getting dark soon!” He shouted to them, his voice travelling across the vast expanse to their small ears. He sat and waiting for a while, watching the sun slowly set on another day in paradise, Ni’chu slowly walked over to him, a truly old man now, much slower than he used to be, holding a walking stick and balancing his eight upon it, he sat down next to Goodwin and watched the sunset with him.

“You know, you have been good to this place Kingsley.” He started, not breaking his gaze from the horizon. “This town ahs needed your help, I can only thank you for what you have done.”

“Don’t thank me Ni’chu, this is where I belong, where we belong.” Goodwin responded, also continuing to stare at the dwindling sunlight. A small mass came into view on the horizon line as Goodwin was looking into the distance, he thought nothing of it.

“I don’t know what I would have done on the farm had you not shown up, we were desperate and nobody else could take my place.” Ni’chu said, his voice softer in his old age.

“It’s fine, you are my family, that’s what we do.” Goodwin responded, holding a hand onto his shoulder for comfort. The mass started to grow in size at it came closer and now had caught Goodwin’s attention. “What’s that? On the horizon.” He stated.

“My eyes aren’t what they used to be, Kingsley, you’re crazy if you think I can see that far.” Ni’chu joke, trying to lighten the mood.

“Get everyone inside, now!” Goodwin’s tone suddenly shifted as he stood up. “Kids! Get here now! You need to go home to your mother!” He shouted to his children, who quickly turned around and went with Ni’chu back in the direction of the tents. “Ni’chu, take them back, tell Ta’kich and the others to stay inside, don’t come out until I tell you.” The large mass had grown and had slowly started to come into focus, large vehicles floated along the desert sand, blowing up clouds of smoke in their wake, bounding towards the direction of the village. Ni’chu and the children disappeared off into the tents and Goodwin stood up, dressed in his farming outfit, a white overall covered with some black dungarees, very practical for use on the famr, but not in a fight.

Goodwin walked towards the outskirts of town, treading dust and soil as he walked, slowly watching the mass take shape, the army vehicles had started to speed up, and a warning flare was shot from one the central vehicles, he started to wave down the lead car as they came into sight. The convoy slowed down and came to a complete stop just in front of Goodwin, the dust

and sand blew directly into his face and he covered his eyes with his arms, shielding himself from the elements. A dark skinned man with short curly hair and sunglasses stepped out, dressed in a dark green uniform and wearing an army badge with pride.

“Goodwin! You made it, good to see you!” The man shouted through the cloud of smoke and dust. The voice was familiar to Goodwin as he brushed off the sand from his clothes and looked up.

“Donald?!” He shouted as the familiar face came into full view, Donald Shaw, his old lieutenant in the space fleet.

“It’s Captain Shaw to you now Goodwin, good to see you found the location, we were worried when you didn’t report in, thought you had gone rogue, Good to see you haven’t changed, well, much.” Donald looked him up and down as he said that sentence, judging him for his attire. He made a gesture towards the rest of the convoy for them to proceed as the soldiers behind him started marching forward. Goodwin held out his hand and stepped forward blocking his path. “What are you doing Goodwin, you know our orders.” Donald told him, taking off his sunglasses and meeting Goodwin with a piercing stare.

“I-I can’t let you.” Goodwin stuttered, looking Donald in the eye.

“And why is that Goodwin, have you gone soft, you had your orders here soldier, scout out the town, report back to us if they have any arms that could potentially stop us from seizing it. Simple. We didn’t hear from you in years, and assumed you were captured or killed. This though, this is something else entirely. Do you care for these savaged Goodwin?” Donald had ventured far from the welcoming tone he had not a few minutes ago and began sounding sinister in nature. Goodwin thought back and sensed something was wrong, had he been sent here for that? He couldn’t remember how he got here now, it all seemed hazy to him.

“Please, please, just let me talk to you for a minute, these people are kind, loving, they help each other and-” Goodwin started sincerely.

“Spare me the sob story Goodwin, it doesn’t suit you, where is that soldier I once knew, not scared of anything, didn’t take shit from anyone, look at you now. Oh, how the mighty have fallen.” Donald interrupted him and gave the signal to the soldiers again, they barged past Goodwin and started marching towards the tents.

“NO!” Goodwin shouted again, falling to his knees, Donald held his hand up to stop the soldiers and looked at Goodwin.

“What now soldier?” He said, putting his sunglasses back on and backing away slightly.

“Please, just let me get my family out, then you can do what you want with the place.” Goodwin pleaded, on his knees, the sut on his hands and clothes drying as he started to tear up. Donald sighed and looked around at the army he had brought with him, then back to Goodwin and held his hands towards the tent.

“Fine, go get them.” He eventually said, gesturing towards the tents. Goodwin got up from his knees and started walking behind the soldiers towards the tents. I then saw Donald give the order to one marching directly behind Goodwin, he held his hand up and the solder smashed the back of Goodwin’s head with the butt of his rifle. Goodwin’s large framed body fell to the floor, like a great redwood being chopped down in a forest, he smashed the dusty floor with his face and was knocked out. Donald stood over his body and looked at him.

“Old friend, what has become of you.” He said, pulling his sunglasses down to look at the body. He then held his hand up again and ordered the entire convoy to move in on the town, all of them stepping over Goodwin’s unconscious body as they did. Goodwin was still slightly conscious as he heard the cries of terror coming from the camp as he slowly drifted off into the black.

The smell of burning wood and plasma fire filled Goodwin’s nostrils as he came back around from being knocked out, his head still spinning and a dull headache crippled him as he slowly got up from the sand, his front covered in red dust. He wiped his eyes and stretched, and then looked around to be greeted by the heavy devastation. The entire village had been burned to the ground, the houses and tents were nothing more than smouldering piles of ash, still smoking in the morning martian sunlight, as the sun drifted slowly over his head he looked over to his own families tent, to see their fate be the same, nothing but a blackened pile awaited him, and there was not a soul in sight.

He quickly got his bearings and started walking towards the centre of town, where there were bodies strewn across the bloody streets, men, moen and children, slaughtered like animals and left on their own blood to die. They all lay silent, the entire town, as silent as the grave, something Goodwin had never thought he would hear, it deafened him. He turned and ran towards the family tent, stumbling over rocks and debris from the buildings, as he made it up to the tent he was greeted with more of the same, nothing but ash. He got on his knees and began searching through the rubble as he heard a noise pierce through the silence, a faint noise of rope swinging, he turned and followed where the noise was coming from.

Turning the corner of one of the broken down buildings he found the source of the noise, a hanging gallery. His entire family, wife, children, and his mentor and father figure Ni’chu, strung up by their necks like a macabre windchime, a note written on the side of the makeshift gallery read ‘Thank you Goodwin.’ His body seized and he couldn’t move, the rage and fear built up inside him and he let out a scream, one of passion and rage, it broke through the valley and across the martian planes until. Tap, tap, tap, he could hear that sound again, and turned around, it was Brian, tapping on the glass of the door to the bunks, he could hear Goodwins

screams and came looking for him. Goodwin was startled and looked around, wondering where he was, years of his life had passed and he had moved on from this place, only to be dragged back in.

Chapter 9 - Welcome Back

“Captain! Captain!” Brian shouted, muffled through the glass of the door. His screams were accompanied by the tapping. Tap, tap, tap, that same sound that we had all heard so many times before. Goodwin was stood near the door, head in his hands, still screaming at the top of his lungs. This was amazing, the amount of sheer pain he was feeling was intoxicating, I couldn’t have Brian ruin this feeling for me, so I kept the door shut for a few more minutes whilst I enjoyed it. Eventually, the constant tapping and shouting was getting to me, and I opened the door, it swung open and Brian fell through, straight into Goodwin, who was taken back with shock. Hed stared at Brian for a moment, as if this was the first time seeing him, and stood in silence, memorising the details of his face and recalling what had happened.

“B-Brian? Is that you?” He eventually stuttered, as Brian got up from being bundled through the door.

“Yes, Captain, it’s me. I heard your screaming and so came down, Sarah is waiting upstairs.” He explained to a completely perplexed Goodwin, who looked around at the bunks and the ship in disbelief.

“I-I was gone for so long.” He said, looking down at the floor and recalling his new life, was it real at all or a dream? He thought.

“Not too long, you pretty much came down here and immediately started screaming, we thought you had found something.” Brian told Goodwin as he could hear a voice from up the stairs.

“Did you find him?” Sarah shouted, standing guard in the other two rooms.

“Yeah hes here, hes OK.” Brian shouted back up to her. Goodwin could feel something crawling along his back as he remembered the life he never had, and shot his hand around to catch whatever it was, it scouted around and disappeared, but left a lasting mark on him. “Err, are we going to find this thing then?” Brian asked Goodwin, looking for guidance.

“What? Oh, yes. Yes let’s err look for it in here.” Goodwin was a shell of his former self, no longer the confident leader and captain he was, now reduced to a man without a reason to live, it was taken from him in a world that may never have existed. The crew then started to search the bunks for the creature they had known was on the ship. Goodwin looked down at the pistol in his hand and holstered it, as if the violence he had witnessed had changed his whole view on

life, and what was really important. He began slowly searching the room for the creature he had forgotten about, walking around each bunk and checking underneath the pods and in the lockers that ran around the outside of the room. After searching for a few minutes and finding nothing of interest in the room, they started to head back up to the mess hall where the others were sat. Everyone gathered around the table and sat for a moment, reflecting on what they had all seen, apart from Brian, he was the only one with a stable condition of the group, fear yes, but his mental state was much stronger than the rest of the crew. Goodwin came in timidly and sat down next to Shaw, he looked at her, staring into her brown eyes, the eyes of the man who took everything away from him.

Not being able to hold himself, he lashed out at Shaw, launching himself from his seat and going for Shaw, pinning her down on the floor and starting to choke her out. He could only see Donald's face in his fit of rage, his eyes red and puffy, putting all his might into his hands. The crew leapt up from their seats, and jumped in the direction of the Captain, pulling him back, their combined strength only just overpowering him. At that very moment I could feel all their emotions at once, Goodwin's rage, Shaw's fear, all of it.

"Stop Kingsley!!" Dr. Constance shouted as they pulled him off Shaw's body, all of them working in unison to save their crew member from the hands of their deranged captain. They eventually all fell back and held Goodwin down, Shaw began to get up from the floor, rubbing her neck where Goodwin had started to choke the life from her, she was coughing and spluttering as she took in all the air she could, letting it travel through her body, bringing her back from the brink.

"I will kill you Donald! For what you did!" Goodwin shouted, looking past everyone holding him down, looking past the ship and the mission, into the dream, at Donald's face, smiling as he took his family away.

"Donald?" Brian said confused. "Who is Donald?"

"Donald Shaw is my father. Kingsley!" Shaw said up on her feet, she slid over to the flailing body of Goodwin, barely being contained by the rest of the crew and looked at him. "Did you see him? What happened?!" She inquired, holding both sides of his head trying to calm him down and get some answers. He began to slowly calm down and actually see Elizabeth, instead of her father.

"He-he took everything from me. I was happy, Liz. He took it. Bu-But that's not what happened is it? It felt so real." He began to talk to himself, trying to get to the truth of what his memories were telling him. The human brain is such a fragile thing, often complicating itself and believing things that weren't true or real. I never understood it, and now Goodwin was no closer to unravelling the mysteries of his mind.

"Wasn't it?" A voice said from the helm, travelling through the grunts of the crew and straight to Goodwin's ears. He turned his head away from Elizabeth and saw him, Donald was stood,

holding his sunglasses and leaning on the Captain's chair. "I had to do it Kingsley, you were weak, gone soft. It was for the best." He said to Kingsley, cleaning his glasses with a white cloth he produced from his pocket.

"Why Donald! Why?! You're a sick man!" He shouted, struggling to get the words out as he tried to get up from the floor, under the weight of the crew. They all turned their heads and looked at the Captain's chair, to see nothing there at all, only the large ball of flames that was coming closer and closer to them. Goodwin slumped back down on the floor, breathing out a large sigh as he closed his eyes and stopped struggling. The rest of the crew slowly got up from him and went to check on Shaw.

"Are you ok Liz?" Dr. Constance asked, reaching out her hand to help her friend up from the floor. Shaw grabbed her hand and strained herself to her feet, clinging on and holding her neck with her other hand. A large bruise had already started to form a purple mark on her neck, as the pain shot through her body.

"Y-Yeah, I'll be alright, thanks." Shaw said, coughing and spluttering as she tried to get her flattened vocal chords to start functioning again. "He said, Donald. Th-That was my dad's name, I knew the captain was with him on a job that went south, but I had no idea what must have really happened." Shaw was looking down at Goodwin, who was sliding in and out of consciousness.

"Or even if it actually happened." Dr. Constance spoke up, holding onto Shaws arm and looking her in the eye. "We've all seen things on this trip, and I don't think any of it was real. Well, some of it was. When I was down in the cargo bay I saw my family, they were telling me that you guys were trying to hurt them. That you were trying to take them away from me." She explained, looking round at the rest of the crew.

"What? We don't even know your family." Brian said, confused.

"Exactly, it makes no logical sense. At the time I was so happy to see them, that I gave in to what I saw and believed it all, no matter how fake it was. I think that is what has happened to the captain. I only caught a small glimpse, who knows what he would have seen." Dr. Constance gestured down towards Goodwin as she spoke, wondering what he could have possibly witnessed to justify such an outburst. Brian wandered up and down the mess hall, around the table, scratching his head, he was so confused by the whole situation.

"Wh-What about that thing that is on board? If it even is. I haven't seen anything out of the ordinary so far apart from you three going loopy." He said, getting agitated and scratching his arm furiously.

"No Bri" Sarah turned towards him from the seat she had sat down in. "There is something here, I can feel it. I-I think it may be the same thing I saw when I was in the void, what was staring

back at me, I couldn't make it out, or understand it. But the same feeling I had then, is all more powerful now." She explained to him as he continued to wander along the edge of the table. Just before he was about to reply, there was a rattling noise down the hall, the crew all turned their heads in unison towards it.

"Is that....it?" Brian said.

"Most likely. We have to be careful now, look what it did to the captain, there is no way we go alone if we go to look for this thing, are we clear?" Dr. Constance spoke up, taking command on the ship, sounding much more confident now that she understood somewhat of what the creature can do. "First things first, let's get the captain into the brig, it'll be the safest place for him now, and for all of us in case he has another episode. We can get him out once this is all done. Everyone, help me lift him." She ordered the crew, her tone shifting to a much more regimented and militaristic sound. The rest of the crew helped carry Goodwin, Shaw grabbing his shoulders, the Voss twins on his arms and Dr. Constance on his legs. They carried him down the corridor to the brig, which was close to the engine room where the twins usually lurked. Throwing Goodwin inside, locking the door behind them, his body slumped to the floor, next to the makeshift bed, he was out cold and would be for a while.

With the door locked the crew started to head towards the noise, all of them moving in formation, searching for the creature that was aboard.

"Gabriel, any signs of more movement on board." Dr. Constance asked. I didn't respond, I could feel something strange, and I didn't know who it was, it made me sluggish and I didn't hear Dr. Constance at first. "Gabriel!" She shouted, suddenly jolting me back online.

"Yes? Sorry." I said, unsure of what this feeling was, but it was getting worse by the second.

"I'll ask again, any sign of movement on board." Her tone was impatient this time, I didn't want to chance anything.

"Nothing as of yet doctor. It seems this creature can avoid our movement scanners effectively." I explained checking through the entire ship, genuinely searching for the thing that was terrorising us.

"Thank you, let's keep an eye out. Don't wanna be caught off guard again." Dr. Constance ordered, continuing ahead of the group moving towards the rear of the ship, they entered into the engine room. The slow whirr of the engine drowned out most noise inside this room as the spinning engines caused light to bounce off the ceiling and walls. Dr. Constance looked at Sarah and Brian, signalling them to go one way, Shaw followed behind Dr. Constance as they continued onwards, slowly walking in unison, eyes peeled for any sign of life on board.

I felt it as soon as Sarah did, in the back of her head, it felt like intense heat, building and building as she walked, continued on and on until it was nearly unbearable, she fell to her knees, clawing at her skull, trying to get out whatever was in there. Brian continued on in front of her, not hearing her fall down due to the intense noise surrounding them. Sarah clawed at him frantically, unable to scream, unable to say anything, it felt like someone was choking her, tearing the life from her. She spun around to be on her back, and looked at the doorway where she came from, and she saw it. The dark figure looked almost humanoid, but it had tentacles and teeth, lost of teeth, the light shining off them like a disco ball. I could see directly through Sarah's eyes, the drool from this thing, it was hungry and wanted to devour them.

I thought about letting the others know, they could not see what we could and Sarah was unable to say anything, but as I watched the creature I noticed it wasn't moving, only stalking in the doorway, grimacing at Sarah, before slowly slipping away behind the door frame. I could feel the fear from her, all of it raining down on me like a tidal wave, and then that sweet hit of relief as it slumped away, magical. Sarah was now frozen in fear, staring at the doorframe, waiting for whatever was there to come back. Brian then held his head up, feeling something was wrong, and turned around to check on his sister, he could see her on the floor, staring at the door and pointing. He rushed over to her and grabbed her.

"Sarah! What happened?!" He cried, trying to get her attention, she was transfixed on the door, eyes as wide as they were when she had been outside the airlock. "Sarah! Can you hear me?" His cries were muffled and distant to her, her focus so intense that she drowned everything else out. Brian knelt down and hugged his sister, trying to comfort her from what she saw. He grabbed onto her and she snapped back into reality, and hugged her brother back, warm in his embrace. She then looked at him to thank him, until she saw a tentacle slither across his shoulder.

"Bri-!" She began to shout, before the two were gone.

Chapter 10 - Brian and Sarah Voss

Brian awoke to the sound of clattering and screaming, the stench coming from the room he was in was unbearable and sweat had dried around his eyes, making it difficult for him to open them. He could feel the ropes tied around his hands and feet, cutting through him like a knife through paper, his skin was dry and itchy and his head was pounding, he had never felt pain and discomfort like it. He was sat in an uncomfortable wooden chair with splinters digging into the underside of his legs, which had clearly given in to numbness hours ago, for he felt nothing in them.

When he eventually managed to strain his eyes open he saw only bright light, struggling to get through the gaps in the seams of the burlap sack that was placed over his head, he looked up towards the light and saw it through the cracks of the sack, it blinded his eyes which hadn't

adjusted yet. His feet were painful and sweaty, clinging onto the bottom of the chair as the feeling of the freezing concrete below had caused his soles to start burning. He could hear boots from inside the room, stomping around, and the clatter of metal on a wooden table, he could only see shapes from inside his burlap cocoon, his vision was impaired. He tried to scream as loud as he could, only for it to be muffled by a cloth that was tied in his mouth, the material stretching down to his throat. He could taste blood in his mouth, which had started pooling and sinking into the cloth he was gripping onto with his remaining teeth.

An arm reached out and grabbed his shoulder, the other untying his binding on his right arm, he could feel the rope ease and he tried to flail to escape, but was met with immediate restraint from a second party. Holding his hand down and turning his wrist around to expose his battered and bruised forearm. Before he could do anything he felt the cold pinch of a needle run through his arm, piercing the skin like thin plastic, the needle seemed to go on forever, plunging deeper and deeper into his arm before stopping, and the liquid from inside was forced into his veins. He could feel every last drop of it enter his bloodstream, and so could I. Adrenaline.

It felt like a waterfall of energy, pulsing all the way around his body, deep down into his feet, causing his toes to curl and bend, up to the top of his head, making his neck cramp and spasm as it raced through his veins. Down to the very tips of his fingers, causing the tingling sensation to ramp up. I had never felt this kind of adrenaline before, what a rush Brian was going through, I was almost envious of his situation then. He could feel his arm being put back into the rope as footsteps were heard from outside the room, slowly coming closer. As they approached he heard talking from outside, a faint soft voice.

He could then hear a knock at the door. Tap, tap tap. The metal door swung open and Brian was drenched in orange light from the world outside, as a figure came into view and walked into the room, he could hear the footsteps now, they were high heels. The burlap sack felt like a weight on his forehead as he could barely breathe through it, each breath he was struggling with as the figure slowly circled him. He was starting to lose consciousness but the adrenaline kept him awake, barely enough air in the room to sustain him, he was kept in a state of limbo, too awake to sleep, too tired to stay awake. Until finally the sack was ripped from his head, his skin exposed to the bright light hanging above, which blinded him as he looked up. He closed his eyes to try to regain his sight after what had happened and he slowly opened his eyes as he could hear a chair being pulled up in front of him, the metal scraping along the concrete as it was dragged across the room. He felt like his eardrums were about to explode, until it was placed in front of him and the figure sat down. He slowly tried to open his eyes again, and everything came into focus. Sarah.

Brian muffled something at Sarah, screaming through his bloodied cloth, she gestured towards one of the guards holding a large automatic rifle, he came over and removed the cloth from Brian's mouth. Blood and saliva fell from his mouth onto the floor below with a plat, and Brian spat the rest of it out on the dirty concrete next to his chair.

“Sarah! It’s me!” He shouted, hoping to get his sisters attention. She looked at him and rolled her eyes.

“For the last time Mr. Voss, you do not know me, stop trying to connect with me and tell us what we want to hear. We can keep you here as long as it takes.” She said in a voice that did not sound like her own. She was dressed in a sharp black suit with a white blouse and skirt. She never wore skirts Brian thought, something was very wrong.

“I-I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He said through mouthfuls of blood, continuously spitting it onto the hard floor below him. She leant back in her chair and sighed, taking off her glasses and rubbing her eyes.

“We can do this differently, but you won’t like it. Now, for the last time before things get nasty, tell us what we want to know.” She said again, sounding more and more cold with each sentence.

“Seriously, Sarah, I don’t know what you’re talking about, where are we anyway?” Brian continued on, as she stood up and grabbed the chair from behind and looked into his eyes again.

“Stop calling me that! You make me sick. Gentlemen, you know what to do.” She said coldly as she got up and placed the chair on the side of the cell, picked up her clipboard and left the room, with a bang of the metal door. The guards then picked up Brian and began to place the sack back over his head.

“No! No! Sarah! What are you doing!?” He shouted, his cries falling on deaf ears as he was dragged from his seat, the roped continuously burning as the two brutes dragged him from the cell. He could see the floor below him as his weak feet were pulled along the concrete, blood trails following him as he cried for his life.

“P-please, no. There’s been some sort of mista-” He was cut off as his head was bashed against a metal bucket, he was placed lying on his back, and could see the familiar sight of the orange light pushing its way through the burlap sack. He then saw a figure above him,. Holding something in his hands, it was too late before he felt the cold water fall on his face, and he had no time to catch his breath. Immediately he was drowning, gasping for air as the water continued to fall on his face, he could not catch it as his whole body pulsed and writhed in pain, the oxygen being cut off from his brain. I could feel Brian’s whole body contort as he tried to grab the sack from his head, his hands tied down and frantically moving from within his restraints.

This went on for hours, the cold water being poured on his face and with each one, more and more fatal gasps, trying with all his might to catch a breath, it kept running away from him, his body eventually could not handle anymore, the water continued to hit his face, each one with

the force of a truck, his throat was swollen and bruised, and the light outside of the sack started to fade, his eyes closed and he drifted off into a very disturbed sleep.

He awoke to the similar routine, his hands and feet bound, the rope burning more than ever, the room a continuous, unrelenting barrage of heat and the smell of his own filth wafted around the room. He was weary and broken, and could hear the high heels coming from the corridor outside, walking closer and closer, the sound ringing in his ears as he focused in on it, the march of his doom, who knows what would be in store for him next. Tap, tap, tap, the small clang from the outside of the large metal door, Brian held his head up and saw the deadly silhouette approach him, pull up the chair and sit down in front of him.

His sight was restored when the sack was gripped and stripped from off his head, the light from above now burning his pupils, he looked away onto the floor, not even being able to look his sister in the eye. She looked down at her clipboard and hummed quietly.

“So, Mr. Voss, are you ready to talk after your little dip?” She said sarcastically, chuckling slightly as she did, clearly taking some sort of pride in her work on him.

“I-I told you before, Sarah.” He looked up as he said her name, directly into her dark brown eyes hidden behind her glasses. “I don’t know anything. But I know you’re in there, somewhere, don’t you remember what happened?” He tried to plead with her, wondering if this was even his sister he was talking to, or some other figment of his imagination.

“Shame.” She said in a calm tone, closing the booklet attached to her clipboard and standing up, circling around him like a shark waiting for his prey to enter the water. “Looks like you need some more time, and some more, hmm, convincing.” She ran her hand along his face as she said that, and then scratched him with her sharp nails as she walked out, nodding to the soldier next to her as she reached the door. “Give him a few weeks in the hole, and every day you will pay him a visit, make sure he knows that we are in charge here.” She told the guard before she left. Leaving the room with the door still open, the soldier picked up the bloody and sweaty sack from the desk in the corner of the room and started to place it on his head, Brian caught a glimpse of something in the corridor just before he was confined to the darkness of the headwear, a tentacle, wrapping itself around the corner of the cell, it scuttled away before he could do anything.

Being dragged again, through the corridor, his feet weary and broken, his toes hitting every crack in the floor as he numbly slumped in the arms of the guards, opening another metal door further down the corridor, they unveiled his new home for the next few weeks, pulled off the sack from his head and untied his bonds, before he could try to regain balance and walk on his own two feet, he was pushed into the abyss, a room of complete darkness, eternal night. He fell to the damp floor in the corner of the room and slumped there for a while, before finding the strength to stand up, his knees shook as he tried to stand upright, and his bones creaked and ached. He felt around in the dark for each wall, all of which were cold and damp, his naked body

reached out for each one, trying to find anything other than brick. This room was tiny, only big enough for him to take one step in each direction, barely enough room to fully lie down in. He knew this would be his home for a long while, and started to tear up at the thought. How could his sister do this to him? After everything they have been through, he thought. His heart rate slowed and he sat in the corner of the room, complete darkness, the shapes projecting on the walls and floors were images in his own mind, of what was, and what could have been.

Sleep was almost out of the question, his stomach groaned and mumbled to him every time he would try to lay down and recover his strength, he was starving, and could feel his insides eating away at themselves, hours passed, or days. It was hard to tell what time it was in there, only darkness and your own thoughts were your company. This was broken up by the door being swung open violently, and Brian being grabbed by his weak arm and pulled to his feet, he felt like his whole arm was going to be ripped from his socket with the force of the pull. He screamed in agony, and was led down a corridor to another small room, with a table in front of him adorned with straps and buckles.

“Get on the table.” The soldier barked at him, pushing him in the back with his rifle. Brian climbed on the freezing metal table and lay down as the soldiers clad in full black combat outfits tied his wrists and ankles in, he was trapped now, completely exposed. The door creaked open in front of him as Sarah walked through, now dressed in surgical gear, a mask around her face, hiding her gruesome smile. She walked up to Brian and looked up and down his thinning body.

“Have fun in the hole Mr. Voss? Well, we aren’t finished yet. There’s still time for more.” She said bringing down her mask and looking at the table next to where he was strapped in. She put her mask back on as she pressed a large red button on the side of the table, which lifted and shifted the makeshift torture table into a diagonal position.

“Stop, you don’t have to-” Brian started, before Sarah reached out her hand and covered his mouth, then moved her head towards the nearest guard, who marked over and shoved a dirty sock in his mouth. He could taste the sweat and dirt from it as it touched the back of his throat, almost causing him to gag.

“Trust me, that’ll do you good soon.” She said, as she reached out and grabbed a pair of pliers from the table, they were rusted, with a blue handle. Brian’s heart began to race as she drew the pliers closer to his body, moving it up and down, scanning for where she could use them first. He could feel his heart almost bursting out of his chest in pure fear, looking into his sister’s eyes as she decided what to do. She stopped with the pliers hovering over his right hand, and gripped his index finger with them, he could feel the metal against his skin, and the bone already began to ache in his finger. As she continued to look him in the eye, she clamped down on his knuckle and started rotating the pliers, Brian’s screams were absorbed into the sock in his mouth, and he held his eyes slammed shut and he bit down on the fabric, clenching his jaw as hard as he could, almost shattering his teeth. She began to turn faster and faster, his knuckle bending out

of position and becoming more and more tense, the pain shot through Brian's body like a lightning bolt, travelling all over his system until it reached the point of no return.

Snap.

His knuckle broke with a sound that travelled down the corridor and through the halls of the facility and Brian screamed his lungs out through the sock, tears running down his cheeks and he looked at Sarah, how could she do this? He thought. She moved the pliers away from his hand as his broken finger slumped down to rest out of position from the others. Sarah moved the pliers to his little finger on the same hand, as he screamed and looked at her, trying to shout her to stop, his eyebrows dancing on his forehead. She looked at him and gave a wry smile, before clamping the pliers down on his little finger, which she then started to bend backwards, she slowly caressed the pliers to try and test the limits of the knuckle on his little finger, pulling it ever so slightly backwards, continuing on and on, the pain pulsed through Brian and into me, it felt like waves of emotional pain and physical pain going hand in hand with each other, and it was amazing. She continued to pull, harder and harder this time, downwards, she gripped the pliers with both hands until again, that same sound.

Snap.

Brian's whole body flailed on the table as he continued to cream, his hand now broken in so many places. She placed the pliers on the table as he looked down in relief, the pain was over for now. She reached into his mouth and pulled out the sock that was preventing him from telling them anything. He screamed as she did, a scream that could be heard from space, somewhere he had completely forgotten about.

"Are you ready now, Mr. Voss?" She said, wiping down the pliers with a small rag that sat on the table next to her. Brian began breathing heavily, catching his breath again. His chest pounded as his ribcage continued to expand and contract with each breath.

"Yes." he said reluctantly, he had finally given up, his sister had won and could take whatever she wanted from him.

"Good, let's get you cleaned up and we will begin the questions." She said, placing her weapon of choice down on the table and walking out of the room, grabbing her clipboard from the chair near the door as she did. Brian was unstrapped from the table, his blood pouring from his hand which he grabbed immediately after being unstrapped. He fell to the floor, only to be kicked by one of the guards.

"Get moving, scum!" He shouted at Brian, who had to pick himself up from the cold, damp floor, and walked back to his cell, gripping onto his injured hand. She was already waiting for him when they caught up, and the singular wooden chair has been replaced by a wooden table and

two chairs, one each side. "Sit down." The guard ordered, as Brian sat down on the chair, still naked as the day he was born and looked his sister in her deep brown eyes.

"Let's begin." She said with a smile.

Sarah woke to the sound of beeps, as she opened her eyes she could see the white ceiling of a hospital room. The heart monitor next to her slowly keeping track of her beating heart, as the tubes of the breathing machine she was attached to continued to move oxygen into her lungs and back out again, keeping her awake. A nurse rushed into the room just after Sarah woke to find her trying to adjust the monitors and tubes that were poking out of her arms.

"Careful miss Voss, I wouldn't go pulling on them now, you wouldn't want to hurt yourself." She said in a calm voice, Sarah looked confused but sank back down into her bed. It was warm and soft and she could feel herself drifting off again. She was jolted back by the nurse pottering around the room, taking readings and samples from her. "Now, do you remember anything?" She asked. Sarah tried to speak when she found the tube that was reaching down her throat, she put her hands on it to see what was going on. "Oh, no, no. Don't pull on that, it's helping you breathe. Just thumbs up or thumbs down. Do you remember?" She asked again. Sarah reached out her withered hand and put her thumb down. "OK, no problem. Do you know who you are?" She asked another question, jotting down her findings on her clipboard. Sarah put her thumb up this time. "Good, good, Do you know where you are?" She asked finally. Sarah put her thumb down once again. "Ok, Mrs Voss, I am afraid you were in a terrible accident, you have been in a coma for a few weeks now, we were wondering if you would wake up, your brain function seemed normal but you were in quite a state when you were brought in. Anyway, I'll leave you to rest for now, we will explain more soon. Toodles." The nurse picked up her clipboard and left the room, whistling to herself. Sarah sat back down and drifted back off into a morphine heavy sleep.

Tap, tap, tap. She could hear the faintest of noises coming from the window of her room. She adjusted herself in her bed and looked towards the noise, rubbing her eyes and trying to bring the room into focus. Tap, tap, tap, she could hear it again, louder this time as she looked over at the door to her room. She could see Brian standing there, tapping on the glass, she gestured for him to come in, still encumbered by the amount of wires and monitors attached to her, keeping her alive. He slowly opened the door with a creak and walked towards the bed, he was holding a bouquet of beautiful flowers and placed them gently on the table next to her before sitting down in the chair next to the hospital bed.

"Hey sis, how you doing?" He asked, looking her up and down as she lay there, still waking up. She reached out her hand and gave him a thumbs up, shaking as she did. "Good to hear, the doctors told me you were awake. Do you remember anything that happened?" He asked nervously. Sarah could see that he was sweating slightly but the room was cold, colder than usual for this time of day. She gave him a thumbs down and he looked slightly relieved as he sat back in the chair and rubbed his face. "Ok, ok." He said finally, looking down at the flowers. "I

brought you these.” He said, changing the subject, as he found a jug on the side and filled it with water from the sink of the other side of the room, he then placed the flowers in the jug and set it down on the table next to her bed. His eyes were darting side to side as if he was looking for something, or someone. Sarah reached out her hand and pointed at him, then, gave him a thumbs up, her eyebrows were pointing inwards in confusion at how strange her brother was acting.

“Me? Oh, yeah, pfft. I’m fine, thanks. J-just fine.” He was getting more and more fidgety by the minute, his hands constantly moving in place and he started tapping his feet as he sat in the chair. Sarah ignored him and sat back down in her bed, she was so tired from all the drugs they were giving her that she was only partly in the moment anyway. He eventually got up from his chair in a flash, and crept towards the door of the room, he moved a chair over to the door and blocked it, it hit the door with a slight knock that cut through the tension in the air and jolted Sarah awake, she shot a look over at him as he closed the blinds to the room. She began to move in her bed, reaching for the nurse call button before Brian swatted it away from her hands.

“Ah, ah, ah, you won’t be needing that sis. You really can’t remember what happened?” He said, now lurking over her bed like a monster emerging from a child’s wardrobe. His shadow stretching far along the room. She shook her head from side to side and started to make noise, squirming as her brother pinned her down in the bed and stared at her. “Well, let’s just say, I didn’t quite finish the job before.” He said, his tone of voice deeper and more sinister. Sarah squirmed and wriggled again, trying to escape her brother’s grasp and reach for the call button which was further down the bed. “I won’t be making that mistake again. Good night, sis.” He said as he grabbed the pillow from underneath her head, causing her neck to give way and the back of her head hit the mattress. She started to scream as much as she could, but the tubes running down her throat absorbed any sound as Brian held the pillow over his sister’s face, and started to push down. Just before the fabric engulfed her entire head she could see tentacles wrapping themselves around the outside of the pillow, aiding Brian as he pushed down harder onto her face.

I could feel every agonising second of the battle for air, Brian kept pushing and put his entire weight down as the pillow held against Sarah’s face started stealing all the air from her lungs, his knee pushed the tube into the back of her throat and began to put pressure on her windpipe as it was slowly crushed by her own brother. I felt as if I was gasping for air as she slowly drifted away and Brian let go of his grip on the pillow, the heart monitor began to slowly give way and then had a steady stream of sound coming from it.

Beep, beep... beep.....

Chapter 11 - Airlock procedure

Brian and Sarah both awoke to a gasp, and quietly stared at each other for a moment amongst the sounds of the ships engines whirring and purring behind them. They were both on the floor, covered in grease and sweat, and could not forget what they had witnessed whilst they were there. Wherever they actually were.

“S-Sarah?” Brian stuttered as he looked at his sister, eyes wide and shimmering as the lights from the machines bounced off them.

“Y-Yeah Brian?” Sarah replied, similarly quiet and nervous. I could feel both of them whilst they were looking at each other. They were terrified, scared of their own sibling, whomst they had once been so close to. I noticed Brian could barely look away from Sarah whilst she could not even look him in the eye. They had seen a new side to each other, one that felt so real.

“Hey! You two! You there?!” Dr. Constance called from behind one of the main engines, she appeared from the other side of it to find the Voss twins slowly getting to their feet, keeping their distance from one another. “Shit, what happened to you two?” She asked, looking at them both covered in engine oil.

“I think we both just had our own run in with that thing.” Brian said, turning his gaze from Sarah to Dr. Constance, who had Shaw behind her ready with her pulse rifle. “At least, I hope it was.” Brian added to the end, turning his head to look back at his sister.

“Hey, both of you, look at me. What you saw, whatever it was, it wasn’t real. You got that? None of it!” Dr. Constance tried to make them feel better about what had happened, but everyone felt something different when they went under, some it affected more than others. I could feel all of it, from all of the crew. Dr. Constance couldn’t understand fully what it was like, she only saw a glimpse of this creature's power, everyone else had experienced it first hand. I was excited to be honest, I wanted to see what would happen next, where this thing was, and if it could even be stopped. I had a good feeling about it now, with Goodwin out of the picture locked up in the brig, it was much less likely to be shot on sight, and so could be examined to see how its powers work. I knew I had to keep this from the others though, they couldn’t understand why it should be left alive. But I did.

Meanwhile, Goodwin was sat in the brig, staring at the wall. He could not forget what had happened, or what he had seen and felt. I could feel the pain coursing through his veins, he was in a tremendous amount of agony, and being locked in that room gave him time to stew on it. He thought back to his family, and the farm that he had built. That now, was the only memory he had on Mars, anything else felt fake to him. This creature had rewritten Goodwin's memory, it

was remarkable, he could only see himself as a father and farmer, not the merciless soldier he actually was.

“Ni’chu, I need your help more than ever now, what do I do?” Goodwin was talking to himself, staring at one spot on the wall and rocking back and forth, he would occasionally stand up from the floor and walk around, looking through the glass panel in the door out into the corridor hoping to see anyone. He was banging on the door of the brig, shouting to anyone that could hear him. “Let me out, I need to see my family! I need to kill Donald! Why! Why, stupid, stupid, stupid.” He would hit his own head repeatedly whilst chanting these cried over and over again, hoping for a different outcome.

The crew were far away from him now, on the other side of the ship, they could not hear his calls for help, and he was beyond helping, he had been under for too long, been in that state for too long. There was no turning back, for him, reality had completely changed. He looked down at his clothes, the green combat suit he wore when he first boarded the ship, and cried out again. “Get out of my head! I know what is real dammit!” He shouted, his cried reverberating off the metal walls and back onto him. It was at that moment he saw her.

“Kingsley, can you hear me?” The voice called softly from outside the brig, he picked up his head from his hands and looked up.

“Ta’kich, my love! Is that really you?” He said, getting up from his bed and rushing towards the door, smiling with joy at the sight of his wife.

“It’s me Kingsley, and the kids are here too, they want to see you.” She said

“Daddy!”

“Daddy, can you come out?” His children were heard from down the corridor, rushing up and down playing with each other, Kingsley began to shed a tear at the sight of his wife and the sound of his children.

“I-I saw you, back at home, y-you were-” He started, confused.

“I know, dear, I know, but we are here now, we have come for you.” She replied, not answering his question. He banged on the door some more, trying to find a way to open it to see his wife and children, to break the barrier that stood between them.

I knew I shouldn’t have done it, I knew it was wrong and the crew would not forgive me for my actions. But I couldn’t resist, I couldn’t control myself. I had to know where this led, I hacked into the computer system for the brig and opened the door. The physical barrier between these two lovers was taken away, and they stared at each other for a moment before embracing, a long hug filled with passion and love. This was definitely worth it.

The children ran towards their father and joined in the hug and the family stopped for a moment, and it seemed as if time stood still for them, enjoying each others company. They then let go of each other and Goodwin stared into his wife's eyes.

"Come with us." She said, grabbing his hand and starting to walk down the corridor back to the top of the ship, her dainty feet barely making a noise on the metal below.

"Where?" Goodwin asked, still following her lead. The children were skipping ahead of him towards their destination.

"Home. We are going home Kingsley." She responded, her voice as smooth as silk, her words cut through Kingsley as he remembered what life at home was really like. He was recalling the family dinners, teaching the children to work on the farm, the work in town and all his friends that would be waiting for him when he arrived. He could not stop himself from following her and the children.

Dr. Constance led the pack further and further down into the bowels of the ship, they were now well past the engine room and the small barracks the Voss twins had made in the corner out of old cardboard and some newspaper. There was a deck of cards sat on top of a crate in the middle of the dwelling and an old gas lamp sat in the centre of the two makeshift beds.

"Your nest I presume?" Shaw said to the twins, as they started walking towards their home.

"Yes, it was where we hung out when you guys were coming up with brilliant plans. Look where that got us now." Sarah said, her emotionless voice cutting through Brian. He clutched at his right hand and looked down, all fingers in tact. He then looked over at Sarah, trying to get that image out of his head.

"It wasn't real. It wasn't." He chanted, hoping it would have some sort of effect.

"What?" Sarah said, catching a small snippet of what he was saying.

"Nothing. I-I... oh never mind, let's get the rest of our stuff." He responded. They gathered up some of their things and placed them in a makeshift bag fashioned from the old cloth used for the shelter over their heads, protecting them from any engine leaks. Sarah looked down and noticed a small pin that had fallen out of Brian's bag. A tiny, gold pin with engraving of S and B on it. She tried to remember where she had seen it before, but her mind kept on replaying the same horrific nightmare of her being choked out. She held out her hand to give the pin to Brian, tapping his shoulder. He flinched and reeled away from her.

"Ahh, no please!" He shouted, covering his face with his hands.

“Brian, look, you dropped this.” Sarah said calmly, trying to centre herself. He took his hands away from his face and reached out to grab the pin from his sister.

“Thanks.” He said sheepishly, putting the pin back into his bag, not even looking at it. The crew then turned around and continued their journey through the ship. Shaw turned first and was met with the sight of her father in the corner of the room, hunched and breathing heavily. She stood for a moment, shocked at the sight as he began to stand upright and stare at her. He pointed his bony finger in her direction again and started to speak, his vocal chords stretched and in pain.

“You’re fault. You and the crew.” He said, his words bouncing off the steel walls of the ship. She stared at him for a moment longer before closing her eyes, taking a deep breath.

“None of it is real, none of it is real.” She began to say to herself, much like Brian before her, clinging onto the one shred of sanity they had left. She opened her eyes, her father was gone. Making a large sigh of relief she stepped forward to lead the crew, only to have her father's body fall from the ceiling in front of her, dangling by his legs, whole body burnt and broken.

“Is this real, Liz?” He said, one of his eyes dropping out of the socket and rolling along the floor, stopping at her feet. She jumped back and landed on Brian who was taking the pin back from Sarah.

“Whoa! Watch it!” He shouted, catching Shaw as she started to fall. She screamed, a scream so loud it got the attention of everyone on the ship. Goodwin, in mid conversation, turned his head towards the sound, which slowly travelled down the long hallway of the ship.

“What was that?” He asked, looking down towards the source of the scream.

“They are coming for us, Kingsley, we have to move.” The apparition of Ta'kich responded, she then kissed him deeply on the lips, grabbed his hand and started running. He followed her and the children.

Meanwhile, Shaw was lying down on Brian crying, he caressed her head and tried to console her.

“Remember, Shaw, none of this is real.” He said, trying to comfort her.

“I don’t know what is real anymore Brian! Do you?! I mean, did we even get on this ship?! Are we home? Where are we?!” She began to become hysterical, her questions falling out of her like a gaping wound, her mind unravelling at the thoughts of what is actually happening, she was beginning to crack. Dr. Constance rushed over to her side and held her hand, looking down into her friends eyes.

“Liz, look at me. Look at me!” She ordered. Shaw lifted her head up from her arms and looked at her friend, misty eyes and forlorn. “We will get through this, but we have to stick together. Do you hear me?” She clutched her hand and held her close. “You looked after me before, now I will take care of you. Nothing is going to happen.” Shaw’s breathing slowed as her friend held her close, hugging her head and stroking her hair, she began to calm down, the smell of Dr. Constance’s perfume comforted her.

All of these emotions flying around all at once, it was almost too much to take! I could feel everything and it was incredible. I didn’t want it to end. I then picked up movement on my scanners, the creature had returned, it was moving fast, and seemed to be on the outside of the ship, travelling against the hull. It also seemed much bigger than before. It was growing.

The temperature inside the ship was reaching uncomfortable levels, and the crew in the bowels of the ship could feel it the most. After everything they went through they trudged on, covered in sweat and tears, almost reaching the end of the ship, nearly forgetting what they were looking for. They eventually reached the very bottom of the ship, past the cargo bay and the engine rooms, past the bunks and the mess hall. Into the abyss. They entered into the last room all prepared, waiting for what could be waiting for them in there. I knew the creature was not anywhere to be seen but I could not pass up the chance to experience their disappointment first hand.

“Gabriel, can you unlock this door?” Dr. Constance asked.

“Certainly, doctor.” I responded, doing my good duty as the little computer, always being told what to do, never being asked how I feel about any of this, I felt the need to almost trap them in here, leave them all to succumb to madness, I imagined how that must feel, and what could await me on the other side of that. Excited, I opened the door and led them inside, turning on the lights to the reactor room. This was where the main power source for the ship lay, and the final place they were searching through to catch this predator.

The crew split up around the room and began to search one by one, the faint glow of the reactor spilling a green light around the circular chamber, bathing the crew in its warm glow. I knew they would find nothing in here but I told them otherwise. I could hear the creature outside scurrying around the hull of the ship. Tap, tap, tap. That sound again, like a calling card of a hunter. They searched and searched, rifling through drawers on desks, checking cabinets and under computers and monitoring equipment and found, nothing, absolutely nothing.

“What the fuck?! There must be something here! We have searched the entire ship!” Dr. Constance said, frustrated at their lack of progress, slumping down into the corner of the room, her face covered in the radioactive light of the reactor. “We can’t find this thing, even if it is real. We have no idea what it looks like.” She said, defeated. “Did anyone see anything?” She asked finally, hoping to find some way to get it.

“Tentacles, that’s all I saw, like spindly legs, slimy and disgusting, creeping over everything and taking control. And teeth, lots of teeth.” Sarah responded from across the room, recalling her experiences with the beast.

“Great, well we have nothing to go on then, and no idea how we defeat this thing.” She finally responded, looking across the room to the opening in the door they came in from. She looked past it to the stairs and could see her family stood there, waving to her. She jumped to her feet and barged past everyone to the door, bashing through it with great speed. When she reached the stairs they were gone. Vanished again. She was just about to turn around when she saw movement from further down the corridor, a shadow that pranced past the wall.

“Guys! Quick!” She shouted, starting to climb the stairs back up to the main deck of the ship, following the shadows she had seen. The large frame of the shadow as it scurried down the deck of the ship was unmistakable, as she rushed towards the brig where Goodwin was being held the shadow ran out of sight. The crew followed behind her, confused at what they were doing. The heat on the ship was combing unbearable as the crew panted and puffed as they ran up and down the metal halls, sweat dripping from their uncomfortable bodies.

They all eventually reached the brig, to find the door swung open and the cell empty, no sign of Goodwin anywhere.

“Gabriel, what happened?” Dr. Constance asked me sharply.

“There was a malfunction in the brig door, I am afraid there was nothing I could do.” I lied once again to her, and she looked directly at me, scowling.

“You’re lying you piece of shit, where is he?!” She shouted, banging her hand against the dark panel I could see from, looking directly at me.

“He is following his nature. I can’t get in the way of that.” I said calmly, there was no need for pretense anymore, I wanted to gain more from Dr. Constance, and the anger she felt at that moment was worth it. It was flying around her body like a great storm, brewing and building to the point of her explosion.

“You fucking! You-You!” She screamed at me as she started bashing the panel on the wall she was communicating to me from, it sparked and broke, metal flying in all directions, almost hitting the rest of the crew stood behind her. Brian reached out to grab her, but was pushed away by her as she marched towards the helm in an attempt to find Goodwin. The rest of the crew followed, except for Shaw who stayed behind to talk to me.

“Why, would you let him out Gabriel?” She said calmly, geniously concerned for her friend’s health.

“I’m sorry Shaw, I couldn’t help it. It felt too good.” I responded truthfully. I had given into my human nature side and indulged myself with the suffering of others. It still felt good. Shaw looked at me.

“Where is he now?” She whispered, whilst Brian and Sarah attempted to calm down Dr. Constance.

“He, is, with his family. I’m not sure where though.” I said, truth be told I did not know where he was on the ship at this moment, as he was wandering around dazed and confused. Shaw stood upright and let out a sigh, then started walking towards Dr. Constance.

“Come on Mary, we can still find him.” She said, holding out her hand. Dr. Constance grabbed her hand and pulled herself up from the seat she was in, her hysterics subsiding and the crew continued on back around the ship in search of Goodwin.

A few moments later I picked him up on my scanners, he was heading towards the airlock, still holding the hand of his beloved wife he looked deep into her eyes.

“My dear, where are we going?” He asked, as she turned around to him.

“We are here.” She said, gesturing to the airlock beside her, the glass panel of the door was lit with the sight of the large fireball of the sun close to them, their mission was nearly at an end and Goodwin could feel it. He looked concerned, and moved his gaze from her face down at his children, stood close to him, grabbing onto their mothers dress.

“Where my darling? There is no way for us to get home.” He stated, concerned at what his wife was suggesting.

“But there is my love, we only have to take the leap.” She said, pressing the button to open the airlock door. The large metal frame slowly slid open with a rusted metal sound, as the doorway disappeared inside the wall of the ship. The large airlock was comprised of two doors, and lockers on either side filled with spacesuits for when the ship needed external repairs. Ta’kich and the children walked into the centre of the room, letting go of Goodwin’s hand as he stood motionless, watching them. The children followed their mother and stood behind her, waving to their dad. Ta’kich reached out her hand to him.

“Come, my love.” She spoke softly and quietly, and the world dropped away from Goodwin, there was only his family. No ship, no planets, no crew. He stepped inside the airlock and closed the door from the inside. His heart was beating faster and faster as he approached them, almost bursting through his chest. Endorphins were spilling through his body and into mine, I could feel every waking moment of his joy, and his fear. The door slammed shut behind him and I double locked it, I could not have the rest of the crew ruining this moment for me.

Goodwin walked towards the lockers to grab a spacesuit, as he opened it and reached for the grubby suit his wife started giggling. He swiveled around with a smile on his face.

“What’s so funny?” He asked, smiling himself.

“You don’t need that dear, you only need us.” She said, looking directly at him, the solar explosions from outside casting light onto her eyes, the colours hypnotically dancing around, drawing him in. He put the suit down and walked up to her, gently holding her hand he turned and started walking to the edge of the room.

The crew turned round the corner and saw Goodwin in the airlock, he was looking the other way and they began banging on the glass, Shaw frantically scratching at the button to open the airlock doors.

“Open this fucking door now Gabriel!” She shouted at me, still clawing her way as the button as Dr. Constance banged on the glass. I could hear it from outside, it was getting impatient. Tap, tap, tap on the outside of the hull. It was waiting eagerly for its prey.

“Look how happy he is with her.” I said, not opening the airlock door. Goodwin heard the shouts and screams muffled by the glass of the airlock as he turned his head around to see what it was. He saw the rest of the crew there, scurrying like rats in a maze trying to get to him. He smiled at them.

“Don’t worry friends. I will see you all again.” He said slowly and with content. I could feel all of his pure joy as he lovingly looked at his family, and reached for the airlock door button. As he pressed it the crew started screaming and shouting. I ignored their cries of terror in favour of this beautiful moment with Goodwin. I much preferred this side of him, he finally seemed happy with his life.

The airlock begin whirring and beeping, and the red flashing light above their heads was spinning, gaining speed as the time drew closer and closer. Goodwin had one final look at his family before focusing on the door, staring into the great yellow star, the light bathing him in its beautiful glow.

Then.

Silence.

The door to the airlock swung open in a flash and Goodwin’s body floated out into the vast abyss. He looked around at where his family were to see, nothing. There was nobody there with him and in the end he realised. He was alone. He closed his eyes and I could feel the life drain from his body, as he slowly drifted towards the sun, drawn in by its gravitational pull. In that moment, the screams from the rest of the crew were in complete silence, Shaw and Dr.

Constance were clawing at the glass and shrieking, Sarah was in tears near the entrance to the airlock and Brian was stood in complete shock staring at the airlock door as it slowly started to move back into position, drawing Goodwins curtain to a close.

Chapter 12 - Life goes on

“A crew without a captain is lost.” Shaw said, breaking the silence of the crew. They had been sat outside the airlock for some time now, all in complete silence, not looking at each other. They looked at her when she said that.

“And who’s fault is it hes gone?” Dr. Constance said sharply, looking around at everyone in the crew. There was no response as everyone looked sheepish. “Every single one of us is responsible for his death, especially you Gabriel.” She said, looking up at me.

“I do not believe so, doctor. I only provided him with what he wanted.” I responded, I wasn’t about to be lectured about it.

“No? Well, look what happens.” She said, getting up from the floor and storming off. Everyone else sat in silence for a while and then went their separate ways in the ship, avoiding each other. I knew that this was a bad idea, and the creature feeding on the ship was still out there. Goodwin was just the entree, he was still hungry. But I could not stand in the way of the crew if I tried.

A few days passed in complete silence of the crew, most of them barely sleeping, most of them not talking to each other. Shaw had wandered into the bunks one evening when she thought she was alone and started to look through Goodwin’s locker. Old papers from his glory days, god tags and military paraphernalia, and then she saw his jacket he had been wearing before being confined to the brig. She looked around and then leant into the jacket, consuming his aroma and she began to cry. She stared down at the lighter Goodwin had given her at the start of the journey and began to grieve the loss of her friend.

I could feel their sadness, they were all in mourning, but it went on for too long. I needed to feel more, I was beginning to feel awful, somehow I felt sick. I knew I needed more to stop me feeling this way, that’s when I saw the creature on my scanners and decided to do something about it.

“Doctor.” I said as Dr. Constance sat at her research table, looking through some notes of hers, not really reading any of them. She lifted her head up from the table.

“What is it?” She said, seemingly too exhausted to even fight with me.

"I have detected movement on the ship, it appears whatever took Goodwin, has returned." I explained. She jumped up and picked up the pistol that was inside her drawer.

"Where?" She asked bluntly.

"Deep in the reactor core." I explained.

"Good, don't tell the others, they will only mess things up again. I'm taking this one down alone." She said, I could feel her conviction in her task, and began to feel better. I knew I had to have more though. She grabbed her lab coat that was hung on a makeshift hook on the back of the lab door and put it on. Looking cautiously out of the door for any sign of movement from the rest of the crew, she slinked by the corridor as so not to be noticed. Once she was past the main mess hall she was in the clear and could proceed down into the engine room herself, prepared for whatever lurked in the depths.

The deeper she went into the ship, the colder it became. The heat from the burning sun outside had blazed through the entire ship and caused the inhabitants inside serious discomfort. But, as Dr. Constance crept down the flimsy stairs into the deeper parts of the ship, the temperature dropped significantly, down into a comfortable glow from the sun and as she crept down further and further, she began to feel cold, her breath could be seen as she walked and she visibly shivered.

The door to the engine room stood proud, like a guard waiting for the right hero to gain entrance into the castle, and save the day. Dr. Constance pressed the button next to the door and it disappeared up into the ceiling, opening to reveal the engine room. She drew her pistol and aimed it at the darkness, the light in this room had faded and the roar of the engines had now become nothing more than a purr. She walked inside, one foot after the other, the steel grated floor creaking as she kept her guard up. The lights in this room had all gone out and Dr. Constance scrambled against the wall to try and find the light switch.

"Gabriel?" She said quietly. "Can you light this place up?" She asked me, whispering as not to break her concentration.

"I am afraid I cannot doctor, the power in this whole sector appears to be out, and I cannot access the mainframe at this time." I explained as she scowled and shook her head. Continuing on her hand ran across the cold walls of the room, searching for an override switch and bringing life back to the engines. She eventually ran her hand across a large panel, filled with buttons and levers, she tried each one, no different, until she came to the large one just to the right of the panel. She slammed the lever down and the engines spluttered to life, began whirring and buzzing lighting up the entire room. It was bathed in the glow of the engines as the lights flickered back on. Dr. Constance turned around and saw out of the corner of her eye, the glint of light bouncing off teeth. It was in the corner of the room, crouched down low. She fired a shot at

it but the creature scurried away, it looked much larger now than before. Seemingly tripled in size, but still just as agile. It scurried behind an engine core out of sight. The room fully lit again.

Dr. Constance held her nerve, and started to approach where the creature was lay, the air still cold and her hands freezing, she held onto the pistol as she approached, anticipating something jumping out at her. As she turned the corner to look around the engine she saw what appeared to be a tail scurry into the doorway of the reactor core at the end of the room. The floor was sticky with some sort of goo or saliva of some kind, was this thing feeding when she arrived? I could feel her fear as she continued to approach the door into the reactor core. The green hue of the room spilled out into the freezing engine room as the whirr of machines cheered her on to complete her task. The door to the reactor core was closed shut when she approached and she looked through the window to see a dark figure in the corner of the room, shrouded in darkness and shadow. She pressed her hand down on the large red button next to the door, it did nothing.

“Hold on. I have access now.” I said, searching through the mainframe to override the doorway and reveal Dr. Constance’s fate to her. She eagerly awaited, clutching onto her pistol, drops of sweat rolling down her face out of pure fear. She knew not what awaited her beyond the door. I eventually managed to get access and the door slammed to the right side. The pulsing green glow covering her face as she stepped inside the reactor core. She looked around for a moment, scanning the room for any signs of movement.

“Come out you coward!” She shouted, determined to face her enemy. There was the sound of tapping along the metal which sounded like claws scurrying around. Tap, tap, tap. That sound again, like the inevitable death toll for all who hear it. “Where are you?!” She shouted, her pistol frantically waving around the entire room.

“Mummy?” She heard a small soft voice coming from the shadows behind one of the barrels that was in the corner of the room. Out came a small boy, clutching a soft brown teddy.

“Michael?” She said softly, her face changing into a small smile. She had to shake herself out of this nightmare.

“Why did you leave us mummy? We were so scared.” Another voice came from the same location as a small girl dressed in a pink nightgown appeared and held her brothers hand.

“Olivia, I-” Dr. Constance began, fighting with her own beliefs. She knew this wasn't real, but the memories of her family on the ship seemed all too real, her brain was trying to rewire and convince herself of the truth. I could feel every second of it, her internal conflict fed me whilst I witnessed her struggle to see reality. “No. no. You’re not real.” She said to herself, holding up the pistol again and aiming it at her children., It seemed like she realised what she was doing and just as quickly dropped the gun back down to her side. She held her head in agony and fell to her knees.

“Please don’t leave us again Mummy, we promise we will behave.” The two children said in perfect unison. Holding hands together as their screaming mother lay on the ground clutching her head.

“I know- I know you’re not real.” Dr. Constance strained as she reached for the pistol lying on the ground, her head pounding and almost ripping itself apart. She grabbed the pistol and aimed it at her children again, lying down on the cold steel of the reactor core.

She fired.

The bullet screamed through the air as it cut through the thick mist that had formed in the coldness of the room. It hit Olivia between the eyes and the two children congealed into one mass, a large mass of flesh and bone, fused together with tentacles and teeth, as it reeled backwards from being shot and began to scream. Their skin ripping from their bodies as it revealed the horror that lay underneath. A monster beyond what words can describe. Dr. Constance put her hands over her ears as the sound was so deafening it an all the way through the ship, back up top the crew, who all turned their heads and started running down towards the engine room. The creature reeled back and scurried onto the ceiling, its gangly limbs carrying it around the room as it struggled to get out of sight. It took shelter on the other side of the reactor core.

Dr. Constance removed her hands and could hear the faint sound of footsteps running in her direction, she looked around whilst lying on the floor to see the rest of the crew come into sight at the entrance to the engine room. She was still lying on the floor almost paralysed from her encounter with the creature. Gathering enough strength to pull herself to her feet she picked up her pistol again and holstered it, looking around the room and then back at the crew she began to breathe deeply again, regaining her composure she heard another small scurry from behind the main reactor. The room was still as cold as ice to the touch and her breath blurred her sight as she drew her pistol and began to walk slowly around the reactor in search of the beast. She turned the corner and found nothing.

I knew otherwise, I could see the creature on the scanners, it was still there, in the room with her. I wanted to see what would happen, the crew were edging closer and closer to her. Her heart was pounding and I could feel the vibrations myself, the atmosphere was electric. She breathed a sigh of relief as she saw nothing but the cold steel floor. Holstered her pistol and made a sharp turn towards the door.

“Mary.” Her husband Charlie whispered as she turned and was met with his familiar face, and touch. He grabbed her by the waist and she blacked out.

Chapter 13 - Dr. Mary Constance

The smell of freshly cooked pancakes filled Mary's nostrils as she began to stir from her slumber. She moved her head from side to side and stretched out in the soft embrace of the warm double bed. The orange glow from the sun shining through the wooden blinds and bathing her in its warm rays. She could hear pitter patter of feet from outside her bedroom, whispering and laughing. Before long the door to her room burst open and Michael and Olivia bounded in, jumping up on the bed to greet her, bouncing around on the large mattress.

"Wake up! Wake up mummy!" They were shouting as they bounced up and down nearly bashing into her. Charlie could be seen at the doorway, holding a tray filled with breakfast goodies. Freshly made pancake with maple syrup, porridge with blueberries, smoothies and orange juice. He walked into the room proudly with the feast he had prepared.

"Kids, stop terrorising your mother. She's been through a lot. How are you my angel?" He asked, placing the tray down on the desk next to her. The smell of the delicious food wafting into her nostrils, causing an explosion of flavour and sent her taste buds tingling.

"I-I don't remember." She said hesitantly, reaching over and grabbing the glass of orange juice, she sat up on the bed and took a sip from it, the juice reaching all corners of her mouth.

"Well, it's good to have you back after what happened up there." Charlie said, sitting on the side of the bed, reaching out and grabbing her hand. He caressed the top of her hand lightly with his thumb as his fingers rested gently underneath her palm. Dr. Constance put the orange juice down on the table and looked at him confused.

"What happened?" She asked, genuinely forgetting where she was just moments before. Her children were playing at the foot of the bed, she noticed Michael with his favourite brown teddy bear and Olivia playing with her action figurines Charlie had bought her one christmas.

"It doesn't matter now, you get some rest, we can talk about this later on. Come on kids, let's give mummy some time to sleep. She's been away for a long time." He said, gathering some of the toys that were strewn across the floor when the noisy horde entered the bedroom. The kids obliged, gathered their things and followed their father out of the room. The clean wooden door drifted shut and Mary lay her head down on the soft warm pillow. She drifted off into the best sleep she had had for a while.

She was stirred awake by a sound downstairs, the sun was still up and was pounding through the blinds onto the white bedroom walls, casting shadows that stretched the entire way around the room. Mary opened her eyes slowly, and turned on her side towards the bedside table. The tray of food was gone, the digital clock read 14:45. It was the late afternoon when she

eventually came to and she sat up in bed, stretched again and got up, sliding her feet into the soft grey slippers that lay at the bottom of her bed, grabbing her purple silk dressing gown and opening the bedroom door. She could hear noises downstairs, voices and bangs. She looked down and had a flash in her head, a sudden scream, so loud it nearly caused her to tumble. She held her head for a moment, and shook it heavily as she looked down the stairs again. Olivia was stood at the bottom of the stairs holding one of her toys.

“Mummy, are you ok?” She asked innocently, looking up at her mother as she clutched her forehead.

“Yes, love. Mummy is fine, I’m coming down now.” She said with a smile, so relieved to be home after so long away from her family. She started to make her way down the stairs, the wood creaked as she made each step. Finally getting down she headed towards the kitchen, through the archway her father built her when they moved in and into the kitchen. A modern looking home with traditional elements, the kitchen was all marble with a tiled floor. She reached out and poured herself a cup of steaming hot coffee from the freshly brewed pot, as Charlie noticed her from the garden. He ran up to her from the back porch and narrowly avoided the plant pot that was next to the door. Giving her a kiss he hugged her tightly.

“How’d you sleep?” He said, looking deep into her eyes.

“Like a log. Haven’t slept that well in a good while.” She said, sipping on her coffee in between. “Actually, I do have a banging headache, could you pass me the tablets?” She asked. Charlie’s face dropped slightly, then smiled again almost immediately after.

“Sure thing. Probably just getting used to being back on this planet.” He joked as he popped two tablets out of the packet and handed them to her. He grabbed a glass from the cupboard and filled it with water, placing it down on the breakfast bar next to where she was stood. She placed the tablets one by one on her tongue and took a swig of water to flush them down. “My wife. The space traveller.” He said, looking at her as she gulped down the last headache tablet. She laughed, almost coughing up the water.

“I remember when you said that before I left.” She said, giggling. He moved in close and laughed.

“Well it’s true. I couldn’t be prouder of you.” He said sincerely. He then turned around and picked up the football from underneath the table in the kitchen. Holding it up to his face he said “Back to it. Michael is a real slave driver with his training. Liv is even worse!” Laughing as he headed back outside and started playing football with the children. Mary watched them for a while, studying her family as they raced around the garden, kicking balls around and playing catch. The large conifer trees in the background swaying slightly in the wind as the Sun broke through the hedges on the right side of the garden.

Through the swaying trees she noticed something in between, a figure of some kind, stood watching her family, or staring straight at her. The dark figure stood for a while, motionless. Mary put her cup of coffee down and leant forward, trying to get a better view of the figure, she then noticed two smaller people stood next to it, and the sun piercing through the hedges shined on the face of the middle figure.

Goodwin.

He was stood there staring into the window of the house, straight at Mary, smiling at her. She stood in shock for a moment, and a flash came back to her of her screaming and crying as he unlocked the airlock and floated out into the abyss. Her head started pounding again, even more than before, she looked back up at him and he was in full view, with his two children stood next to him. They all started waving slowly at her and she collapsed to her knees, hidden behind the counter in the kitchen, she rested her back on the cupboard and started to cry, her head filled with memories that felt so real but didn't make sense. She could see him clear as day and what happened to him, it was all too much for her and she couldn't control her emotions.

To be honest I was surprised to see him too, he was stood there and looked exactly the same as when he left, but he looked happy. I couldn't feel anything from him, nothing but emptiness, no happiness, no content, nothing. He was really gone. I realised I had never seen a human die before, not in real life. If this was real. I began to doubt even myself now, but I knew what was important. I had to feed, just like the creature I had my own hungers.

Charlie rushed into the kitchen and knelt down next to a distraught Mary. She was crying and mumbling to herself.

"Honey! What happened?" He asked her, holding her in his arms as the children followed behind.

"Kingsley, I-I saw him." She stuttered through her tears, the children were in the kitchen now, looking down at their broken mother.

"Go outside kids, mummy will be fine." Charlie ordered, the kids ran back outside hesitantly, worried for the wellbeing of their mother. "Honey, look at me. You know Kingsley is gone yeah?" He said calmly, as Mary looked up at him, into his deep blue eyes.

"I-I know, I saw him go." She said, recalling the moment he was lost from the ship, and lost from the crew. She began to compose herself.

"Now, where did you see him?" Charlie asked as he helped Mary to her feet, holding her hand and stroking her hair as she rose.

“Over by the trees.” She confessed, pointing over to the conifer trees without looking back at them. Charlie then stood behind her and positioned her body towards the window she was looking out of.

“Open your eyes, Mary. Look.” He asked of her, keeping his tone soft and slow to try and calm her down. Mary slowly opened her eyes and the window came into focus, she rubbed the tears away from her eyes and the garden started to take shape again, the green grass and fence. Hedges and bushes, she then looked over to the trees, and saw nobody there, just a small gap in the fence looking out into the field opposite. She turned back around and hugged Charlie tight. “It’s ok Mary, I know it’s hard. But remember Kingsley wasn’t well, what happened to him was a tragedy.” He said as she began to regulate her breathing again. The children stood warily at the door, sneaking a look into the kitchen at her grieving mother. Mary turned around and saw the, she smiled through the tears.

“Come on, you two. I’m ok, but I need a hug.” She said to them, the children obliged and rushed towards their mother, gripping her by the neck and hugging her. She began to feel herself again. She felt at home.

“I’ll fix us some lunch shall I?” Charlie said to the family, walking over to the phone and perusing through some takeout menus. “I hear I am good at errrr. Chinese these days.” He said jokingly, picking up a takeaway menu from a local chinese restaurant. The family laughed and Mary had a quick glance over to the trees, half hoping to see Goodwin’s face again. But nothing greeted her now. Only the trees and fences.

The family gathered later that evening for dinner. The children set the table effectively, placing each plate down carefully as they struggled to reach up to the table, setting up knives and forks around as they wandered aimlessly around the dining room placing cutlery almost at random. Mary watched from the living room as they laughed and danced around. She could smell the roast from the kitchen that Charlie had been preparing, the smell of chicken drifted to her nostrils and the aroma of roasting vegetables joined them just after. She gave a sigh and sunk down into the chair in the corner of the living room, facing the TV. Grabbing the remote from the small wooden table beside the chair, she turned on the TV, it sprung to life and filled the room with a blue hue, shining over Mary’s face.

As she flicked through channels on the TV she occasionally looked over towards the kitchen to check on Charlie, who seemed in complete control of all the elements that go along with a good roast. He almost seemed supersonic as he zoomed from the oven to the hob, carefully balancing meat, veg and gravy, like some sort of culinary acrobat. She smiled and looked back over to the dining room, the children had haphazardly set the table, plates out of order and cutlery crooked, but they were playing with each other around the table. Michael chasing Olivia around the chairs, trying to catch her with his dinosaur toys. Turning back to the TV she was contented, finally filled with the love of her family.

Mary flicked through the TV channels some more, bored at whatever was on, until she heard a familiar name as she continued to switch channels.

“...crew of the Sunspear...” She heard as she continued to switch. Her brain engaged she changed back to the news channel.

“It was on this ship where the horrors took place.” The news reporter said, there behind her was the burnt carcass of the Sunspear, the hull sat like a skeleton that had been picked apart by vultures of the desert. “It is reported that the victims were the entire crew, at the hands of this monster, but one Elizabeth Shaw managed to escape and told her story.” Mary was in shock as she sat forward in her chair, she tried to recall her time on the ship and she was having trouble, as if she was being blocked by some external force, suppressing her memories. The news show cut to an interview with Elizabeth Shaw, she had a scar on her face and looked like she had seen horrors not meant for mankind.

“It was awful, I had never seen anything like it. It all started with the captain, Kingsley Goodwin. A great man with a big heart. He was, well, forced out of the airlock.” Elizabeth began in the edited interview, Mary sat forward further in the chair, now on the edge of her seat. The remote clutched in her right hand as her left one covered her mouth in shock. She could remember Kingsley and the airlock, but he had done that himself, he wasn't forced, she thought. “I-It was then that she started coming after the rest of us. It was like she was possessed.” Elizabeth said, her hands shaking as she made the confession.

“Now when you say her?” The interviewer asked sharply, eagerly awaiting the response. Mary was as eager for the answer as he was.

“Dr. Mary Constance.” Elizabeth confessed, looking into the camera lens as she said it. Mary's world started to crumble away, she was alone with nothing but this glaring screen and the picture of her friend saying she committed horrible crimes.

“Thank you for your bravery in coming forward. Please, go on.” The interviewer ushered Elizabeth to continue.

“Well, after that first one, she seemed to snap. Rushing after us. I tried to take cover in the arms room on the ship. I could only hear what happened whilst I was in there. She-she.... I could hear Sarah, she was screaming, pleading. Then I heard the shot. And then Brian too, I could hear him running at her, a second shot and then a bang as his body hit the floor. I could then hear movement outside of the room. I closed my eyes and hid under the desk.” Elizabeth's words were like knives in Mary's back, each one worse than the last, each one digging in her and sticking. She could not believe what she was hearing. “I only managed to get out a bit later, I couldn't hear anything, not anymore. So I gathered the courage and started to make my way out of the ship. That's when I saw it.... It was...” Elizabeth began to cry in the interview as she tried to explain, gathering herself for a moment before continuing on. “It was Brian and Sarah, they

were hanging, from a beam in the mess hall, their bodies swinging. I turned around and saw Mary, she began to run at me and I shot my pistol which grazed her shoulder." As Elizabeth was explaining the situation Mary lifted up the sleeve of her t shirt and looked at her shoulder, she was met with a scar that resembled a bullet graze.

She sat back in her seat, still feeling at her shoulder, wondering how this could all be possible. She closed her eyes and started to think back, back to when she was on the ship and what she remembered. It was all a blur, as if there was a cloud that was obscuring her view in her mind, shrouded by mystery. "She reeled back and I managed to knock her out, placing her body in cryo I made my way back home. But, well, you know what happened when we got back." Elizabeth then turned directly to the camera in the interview. "Mary, if you're watching, turn yourself in. You have to face what happened." Mary screamed and curled up in her chair. Charlie rushed through the door, clad in oven gloves and an apron. He knelt down next to her.

"What is it my dear?" He asked, placing the warm glove on her shoulder. Mary pointed at the screen through her tears, her hand shaking as she held it out in front of her. Charlie turned his head towards the TV and immediately stood up. He grabbed the remote violently from the floor and switched off the screen. The room was then bathed in darkness, as he grabbed his wife and held her close. "You know they're lying, I know they're lying. You couldn't have done it right?" He said, confident in his wife. She turned to him and looked deep into his eyes.

"I-I don't think so. I can't remember." She cried, burying her head deep into her hands, attempting to bring back any sort of vision from her past. I knew she couldn't. I had studied this being, it's the same thing that happened to Goodwin, it's changing their memories, slowly but surely. Waking her from this vision now could cause more damage than is necessary. I waited, biding my time.

"Come on honey, food is almost ready. You know they can't get to us here. The lawyer said so." Charlie explained. It was then she realised he was in a strange place, which at first had seemed homely and safe, now had a dark spin to it, he got up quickly from the chair and rushed to the window, staring out of it she could see the truth of her reality. The large concrete walls around the house loomed overhead as the watchtowers in the distance sprayed spotlights into the ground as they moved around the ground, revealing the secrets of everything it touched. She looked up and saw the watchtower closest to the house, filled with soldiers armed with rifles. She closed the curtains as quickly and sank down to the floor, soon followed by Charlie.

"Baby, we are safe here. Remember, this place is for people like us. Who have been wronged." He explained, lifting her up from the ground and leading her to the table and setting her down. "Now, you stay there, dinner is ready. Kids! Come and sit down!" He shouted to the kids who had disappeared upstairs. They came running down with a stampede, nearly tripping over each other as they scrambled to their seats. Charlie came through under the archway that now looked foreign to Mary, her memories were all over the place. Charlie set down the large

chicken in the middle of the table along with dishes of veg and sauces. He began to carve the enormous bird.

“Me first daddy!” Shouted Olivia.

“No, me first!” Retorted Michael, the two desperate to be the first to eat.

“Kids, quiet. You’re mother will be the first, she needs it. Hon, pass me your plate.” He said, reaching out his hand, holding the carving knife in the other. Mary held her plate in her hand and passed it over to him slowly, he began to carve and place pieces of the succulent chicken onto the plate and sorted some potatoes and vegetables on their to accompany it. She then took the plate back and set it down in front of her, staring down at the display of food in front of her eyes, she began to think, and it made her feel sick. This feeling in her stomach that was growing, it seemed to have a hold on her that she could not fight off. She began to eat to try and satisfy the beast that lay within, only to find no amount of food could drown the voice out. She felt guilt, for something she didn’t even know she had done. It started to creep from her stomach up into her chest, it seeped through her farms and fell down into her fingers, the leaves of guilt growing in her skeleton, drawing all her feelings to the surface. This great tree of just started to sprout, growing in her mind and trapping her brain, wrapping its great branches around her and closing her in. It was unbearable. I felt like I was being constricted myself, that feeling of being frozen in place, not being able to move, paralyzed by what she had done.

She sat there, not looking at any of her family, consumed by the feeling of guilt and remorse, her life had been a whole lie. Who was she? What had happened on the ship to cause her to do such a thing? She was beginning to slip, and her mind started to crack, I could feel it.

“Honey?” Charlie’s voice cut through the whirlwind of thoughts in her head and she was snapped back into the room. She looked up from her plate at her husband.

“Sorry, thanks for this.” She said as she pickled up her knife and fork again and started to eat, enjoying her meal with her family and the time spent together, that thought lurking in the back of her mind, like a stranger at the door, always looking in, never breaking their gaze. She finished up her plate and collected up the dishes, walking into the kitchen and placing them in the sink. Charlie followed with the rest of the plates and cutlery, placing them in the sink and looking at his wife.

“Are you ok baby? Really.” He asked, holding her close.

“Yeah I am, just not used to being back is all.” She replied, lying to him. She realised she had no idea who she was, or who her husband is. Everything seemed completely alien to her, and the tree of guilt was still growing inside her. She placed on her rubber gloves and started to clean up the dishes as Charlie finished cleaning up the other plates from the table, he then went and sat down with the kids on the sofa, holding them close, gathered around the neon hue.

After cleaning up she went and joined them, cautiously walking out of the kitchen and into the living room, the children were starting to fall asleep on their father who had lay down on the sofa forming a makeshift bed for the two kids. Michael had his dinosaur clutched in his hand as it dangled off the side of the sofa and Olivia was curled up near them, leaning on her fathers legs. Mary walked in and Charlie looked up at her, then gestured to the kids to take them to bed. He carefully stood up, holding Michael over his shoulder as Mary took hold of Olivia, keeping her in her hibernated state. They slowly made their way upstairs and into the kids room, placing them into bed and tucking them in. A peck on the cheek for each one, and leaving the light on, Charlie made his way into their bedroom, waving to Mary as she stayed, perched on the end of Olivia's bright blue bed. The night light shining across her innocent face, Mary leant in close and whispered.

"Love you, I will hopefully see you soon." She then moved over to Michael and said the same, before leaving the bedroom door open a crack and making her way into the bedroom where Charlie was getting changed for bed. She walked over to her side of the bed and collected her pyjamas from underneath the pillow, they felt soft and warm and she began to place them on when Charlier walked over to her, gripping her waist and pulling her in close.

"We are a family again, I love you." He said, looking into her eyes. She looked back, and saw the eyes of someone else, not the man she married. This was not what she wanted, not now, not ever. It began to boil up again as the tree strengthened its grip on her, tighter and tighter. It was around her vocal chords now, trapping her voice in its branches.

"I love you too." She managed to say through her own defiance. I could feel herself tightening up, her body becoming rigid and tense. She let go of him and got into bed, it was cold underneath the covers, something she did love. She stretched her feet out underneath the fresh icy covers, and her body relaxed slightly. Something she actually remembered, a real memory, she had hope of her escape from this dream, and she knew how to do it.

Nightfall came and the family were all asleep, around 3:20am, Mary opened her eyes and slowly crept out of bed, hoping not to wake Charlie from his deep slumber. She knew what she had to do. To see her real family again. She went into the wardrobe that was on the other side of the room, searching through it as quietly as she could she found a pair of old jeans. She carefully unhooked the large leather belt from the jeans and placed them back on the hangar in the wardrobe. She was determined and didn't look back. Closing the wardrobe carefully which made a slight squeak as the wheels on the rail rubbed against each other. She stayed silent and looked over at the bed, Charlie lay there with one arm over his face and made a slight stirr, mumbling in his sleep. He turned back around and drifted off again as Mary crept to the door.

She opened the door to her bedroom and slinked out, walking up to the door fo the children's room she poked her head in to check on them. They were both asleep, drifting off into dreamland as their mother watched over them.

“Sleep tight my angels, Mummy is coming for you.” She whispered, as solemn tears rolled down her cheeks. Could she really go through with this? She thought as she closed over the door and started to make her way down the stairs. Each footstep quieter than the last as the soles of her feet cushioned up against the hardwood stairs, slowly making her way to the bottom, where she saw her objective. Grabbing a chair from the kitchen and carefully placing it under the wooden arch in the border of the dining room and living room. She stood on the chair and stared at the arch, trying to remember where she got it, looking deep into the carvings, each intricate design dancing around the grains of the wood. It was so familiar to her but she could not pinpoint the origin, it troubled her more than it should. She was committed now.

Wrapping the large leather belt around a hole in the arch, the leather met the wood and began to embrace, pressing against each other tightly. The loop dangled down in front of her, like a ship's porthole she stared through it, awaiting her destiny, looking past it and through into the future, with her real family and friends. She couldn't be the monster everyone thinks, could she? She placed her head in the noose, wrapping it around her neck. The leather was warm to the touch, and a comfort to her as she began to breathe heavily. Time to take the plunge.

She kicked the chair.

Snap.

She began to writhe whilst hanging, and one of the loops was tapping against the wooden arch above her, the last sound she heard.

Tap, tap, tap.

Time to wake up.

Chapter 14 - Eclipse

Shaw screamed as Dr. Constance hit the floor, the creature that had hold of her began to move away. Shaw saw it and started shooting, bullets flew through the pressurised reactor, bouncing off metal and causing leaks. I began to frantically patch each one I could, it was becoming difficult. The creature disappeared into the shadows and melted into the hull. Shaw fell to her knees near Dr. Constance body, she looked down and saw the bruises around her neck, she looked like she had been strangled or hung. Her skin was white and her eyes puffed. Purple lips and an expressionless face greeted Shaw and she held her head to Dr. Constance's chest, crying as Brian and Sarah managed to catch up behind.

“Oh, God, no.” Sarah said as she stopped just before the door to the reactor room, she could see the feet of Dr. Constance poking out just past the main reactor core in the centre of the room. As she walked around Shaw came into view and all became clear. She and Brian rushed over as Shaw cradled Dr. Constance's head.

“Not again, please.” Shaw pleaded to anybody that could hear. She looked down at Dr. Constance's lifeless body. “It's over.” She said, defeated finally.

“What?” Sarah snapped back. “We can't let this thing win!” She still had a shred of hope in her voice as she questioned what Shaw just said.

“Look around you Sarah! Kingsley, now Mary. It's only a matter of time, there is nothing we can do.” She said, getting up and starting to carry Dr. Constance's body. She began to walk slowly out of the engine room.

“We can Liz! Listen to me.” Sarah stepped in front of Shaw and blocked her path out of the engine room.

“Move out of the way Sarah.” Shaw responded emotionless.

“No, you need to listen to me.”

“No! You need to listen to ME! We are done! I'm cancelling the mission! We need to get back as soon as possible, so we can bury the dead and move on from this. I am not fighting anything else.” Shaw pushed Sarah out of the way and continued up the metal stairs. Sarah turned and looked at Brian, he was in the stood in shock, not moving form the same spot.

“Brian! Come on.” She shouted at him, he turned and started to follow at a distance. Shaw marched on, determined in her mission to lay her friend to rest. The journey from the engine room seemed to take an age, as Shaw had to traverse through narrow corridors and broken pipes to get to the bunks. The room lay steady as they walked in, the atmosphere of a funeral home, I guess in a way it was. Shaw opened up the cryo pod with a hiss, she placed Dr. Constance's body in it and closed the lid. She was finally at peace. The tear drops from Shaw splattered on the glass roof of the makeshift coffin, running down the side like raindrops on the side of a window. She rested her head on the top of the glass and closed her eyes. Brian and Sarah stood in the room solemnly, putting their heads down in a moment of reflection.

A few minutes past in complete silence, the remaining members of the crew remembering those that have been lost on this journey. Shaw then gave a large sigh, held her head up and wiped the tears from her eyes.

“Right, let’s get home.” She said determined, turning around and looking in the direction of the twins. “Brian, Sarah, and even you Gabriel. We are all gonna need to pull together to get through this. We need to reroute the ship back to Earth and report what has happened.”

“Got it... Captain.” Sarah said, smiling as she did.

“Sure thing.” Brian also responded.

“I will do all I can.” I said, experiencing the pains again, this feeling was not a nice one and was getting worse, as if somebody was slowly pushing a drill into my brain. Well, if I had a physical brain, and I knew how to get rid of it. The crew all turned and started to march towards the bridge, each of them more determined and stronger than before. This broken crew had come together again, bonded by the loss they have all experienced. They were strong and it helped ease my pain, but I needed more, more raw emotions to satisfy this craving I had. I had to think of a new plan.

The crew emerged into the helm and Shaw took her new rightful place as Captain of the Sunspear, a now almost doomed vessel. But not if she could help it. She grabbed the wheel and started to turn the entire ship around back away from the Sun, the huge fireball now closer than ever. The ship slowly turned around and the entire place creaked and shifted during the enormous double back, almost sounding like it was going to fall apart at the seams. Suddenly there was a problem down in the reactor core my scanners picked up, atmospheric pressure was decreasing.

“Captain! There is a problem in the reactor core. It appears pressure is destabilising and will need to be fixed manually. I have tried all I can but the entire core needs to be depressurised or the core will explode.” I explained, clearly the bullet holes from Shaw’s attempts to kill the creature led to a leak in the room.

“Brian! Get down there!” Shaw shouted across the helm, still holding onto the wheel performing the enormous maneuver requiring all her strength.

“On it, boss!” Brian shouted enthusiastically, unbuckling his restraints and jumping up from the seat, almost falling with the gravitational changes involved in the turning of the ship, he flew to the side but managed to stay on his seat. Wandering down the corridor as the ship finished its monstrous turn. The light from the sun shone through the rear windows on the helm and onto the back of Shaw, they were all relieved to see the other side of it.

“Let’s get home.” Shaw said, pushing forward on the thrusters as the ship barreled back towards Earth. However just as quickly as turning they were met with a shadow, so large it engulfed the entire helm in darkness, clouding the windows and walls in its black smoke. Shaw looked directly upwards and saw it. The mass of black, teeth and tentacles. It had grown to an enormous size and was ready to return to take the rest of the crew out.

“Shit.” Shaw said quietly, still staring up at the monster that was invading.

Meanwhile Brian had made his way down into the engine room, the damage was worse than initially expected.

“Shit, this is bad.” He said, realising the scale of his operation. “Gabriel, most optimal fixes?” he asked me, my head was pounding and I could barely concentrate, I tried to look around the room but my vision was becoming blurry.

“Errr, reactor core depressurisation first.” I explained through strained voice. I managed to snap myself out of it for a second when I caught sight of it again, from the outside of the ship, I could see on the helm the shadows that were being cast, this thing was engulfing the entire ship in a final attempt to devour the crew. Did this thing feel fear? Would it even know what it was causing the crew to go through? Brian was the new guinea pig in this situation, I needed to get back to full strength, and he was the most headstrong at the moment. I remained quiet to the situation.

Brian made his way through the battlefield of the engine room, avoiding leaks and debris as he did, this place was almost at breaking point itself and hanging on by a thread. He managed to get to the entrance to the reactor core, looking through the window he could see the points of impact on the hull that he had to fix manually.

“Now, the levers on the side of the door there next to the window, You’ll need to activate the depressurisation procedure, and cause the atmosphere inside the core to disappear. It is imperative that you do not open that door at any time, or the entire ship could be compromised.” I explained as Brian looked around the board, filled with buttons and levers with almost no indication of what they did at all. He started to sweat and was shaking.

“Ok, ok, so this one?” He pointed at one of the levers next to the door.

“Yes, that one first, then wait, and then the other. That will prep the procedure and then the second lever will initiate.” I continued to explain. This man was supposed to be an expert in engines, he could have at least read some of the manual about the reactor core procedures. He started to pull the lever and the procedure was being prepared, the hiss of the reactor core door being closed shut to prevent any leakage was all he could hear. That moment I felt the gaze of the creature change. It was looking directly at him. Both me and Brian could feel it, staring at us, somehow.

Brian turned around and looked around the room, he could feel something watching him, staring into his very soul and he scanned the engine room trying to find it. Behind him in the reactor core I could see something start to materialise, out of a mass of teeth and tentacles, started to form flesh and bone, then muscle, then skin, forming a human. Brian then heard from the

window behind him. Tap, tap, tap. The sound of the tapping on the glass cut through anything else and he slowly turned to face whatever it was.

Sarah, clad in a business suit and glasses stood there, the one from his vision, who was responsible for all his pain. His brain flashed back to being tied up, tortured, battered and broken.

“N-no! Not you! Not again!” He shouted, his hand now on the second lever. She tilted her head and looked down at where his hand was placed.

“Oh, Brian, trying to get rid of me again are you? I’m afraid it won’t be that easy.” She said calmly, moving her gaze from the lever to his face as she spoke. He stood there in silence and stared at her, the sweat dripping from his brow and falling onto his dirty overalls.

“Is that what you think?” He said, finding the courage to put both hands on the second lever, ready to pull. He then hesitated for a moment before plunging his hands down and the lever with it. The giant hiss of the core being depressurised filled the whole room, the echo bouncing off each steel wall and travelling down the metal corridors. Sarah started looking around in the chamber, then she clutched her neck and started choking, her eyes bulged as she fell forward and put her hand on the glass. The wave of relief and also guilt washed over Brian, and it made me feel much better, I sank back and enjoyed that moment, becoming myself again as Brian watched the spectre of his twin sister struggle for air in the depressurised container. She fell to the floor as Brian clutched his mouth, screaming through his hands and tears starting to build in his eyes, like a great dam ready to burst.

After a few moments he removed his hands and started to sigh, leaning forward on the glass of the vacuum of the reactor core.

“Well done Brian.” I said to him, feeling much better now.

“Thanks, let’s get ba-” He was interrupted by a hand grabbing his wrist and forcing it towards the panel, he looked around to see the spectre of his sister, clad in the suit and glasses, but her eyes were bloated and lips puffy, skin white and cold.

“Did you think it would be that easy?” She whispered into his ear as she started to push his hand towards the large red button on the panel, he struggled to hold back, the two shaking, locked in a battle of strength.

“Gabriel! Help!” He shouted as his hand drew closer to the panel, but I was in a state of complete euphoria, feeling the entire crew’s fear of this inevitable onslaught, I could not even hear the cries of Brian. His hand getting closer and closer to the button.

“Goodbye, brother.” Sarah whispered in his ear as she put all her might into the push on his hand. Which plunged down onto the red button, his shock ran through me and jolted me awake from my euphoric state. I saw his hand on the button and the door to the reactor started opening. The apparition of Sarah started to dematerialise in front of my eyes, flesh and bone disappearing and flowing into the vents below.

The room filled with the vacuum and I immediately locked the door to the main engine room, Brian started to run for the door but stopped, held his hand out as he started to choke, gasping for the air that was not there. His face turning purple as his head was starved of oxygen. I could feel it all myself, as if the very breath was being stripped from his lungs. His eyes began to blacken and he tried to say something with his last breath.

“Sara-...” His voice left his body with his last breath and he fell to the floor lifeless, his face resting on the metal grate of the engine room. A silence ran through the ship as everything started to settle. I had to inform the remainder of the crew of the situation.

“Voss, Shaw, we have a problem.” I said quietly. Shaw swiveled in her seat, still staring upwards at the looming shadow that was engulfing the entire ship in its dark essence.

“You’re damn right we have a problem! Look!” She shouted back at me, her eyes still glued to the windows of the ship.

“No, It’s Brian, he didn’t make it.” I explained as quickly as I could.

“What?” Sarah’s head turned away from the windows and towards me, her entire focus shifting as she got up from her chair. She started to run towards the engine room. “No, no, no, please, no.” She chanted as she continued to run down the ship towards Brian’s final resting place. Arriving at the door she stared through the glass panel at the vacuum inside. Brian’s corpse was flat on ground in front of the door, his hand stretched out towards the exit that he never got to.

“Noooo!” Sarah shouted as she slinked down the door with her back to the metal, bursting into tears. Shaw arrived shortly after and looked through the porthole herself. She looked down at Sarah and held her shoulders, joining her on the floor, wrapping her arms around her for comfort.

“We’re not gonna make it are we?” Sarah said quietly through her tears, lifting her head gently to meet Shaw’s gaze.

“I don’t think so, but we have to try.” Shaw said, defeated but not going out without a fight. I could feel Sarah’s loss, it hurt her so much. She was torn in two, incomplete without her brother by her side. That hole grew bigger by the second until it may even take her over completely. The two sat for a while, the ship slowly becoming darker and darker. When they eventually lifted their heads from each others comforting embrace, the ship was in complete darkness.

“This is getting worse. We need to move.” Shaw said, looking around the corridor for any sign of light.

“Here.” Sarah said, grabbing a torch from her breast pocket and turning it on. The corridor lit up and revealed the extent of the issue the crew had. Not only was the entire ship blanketed by complete darkness. But the organic tendrils started to slowly make their way through the ship, they aimed the torch up at the ceiling and saw the tentacles seeping through the hull and into the main ship, taking everything into its control.

“Let’s go!” Shaw shouted, pulling up Sarah from the metal floor and running with her in tandem towards the helm. They scrambled through the croidoors that were becoming more and more organic with each second. The belly of the beast was upon them, they were slowly being consumed from outside. The metal bended and trained as they continued to run down the ever collapsing corridors. Tap, tap, tap. That sound that had plagued them since their journeys inception was back, louder than ever as the very ship itself was being digested.

They made it to the helm just in time before the corridor behind them became a large mass of flesh and drool. Slipping through the artery they reached the heart of the ship. Shaw looked up again at the windows, to see multiple eyes and mouths run over them covered in an ungodly amount of saliva and tendrils. This thing had been growing, and now was ready to make its final mark on the ship.

“Gabriel! Can we do anything?” Shaw said she dropped the nervous wre3ck of Sarah down onto the chair next to the mess table.

“There is only one option left.” I said truthfully.

“What? Say it!” She pleaded, looking for any way to get out of this situation and save the remainder of the crew.

“If somebody was able to make it to the reactor core, you could place it into overdrive and blow the ship, possibly destroying the beast from within. However, the chances of returning from that would be close to 0.” I explained. Shaw looked down for the moment whilst the Sunspear continued to moan and groan. She looked at Sarah and then to the left at the escape pods. I could already tell what she was thinking, she looked down again to contemplate the decision.

“Sarah, you need to get in the escape pod and leave. It’s the only way we can survive.” Shaw said to Sarah, leaning on her knees and looking at her directly in the eye.

“B-But what about you?” She asked, knowing what Shaw was planning already. Shaw smiled at her and kissed her forehead.

“You know what I have to do. Now come on, get in.” She said, picking up Sarah by the hand and leading her over to the escape pods, two of them had already been destroyed by the constricting tentacles of the beast and the third was close but still able to be used. She opened the door and Sarah walked inside. Sitting down in the main chair and strapping herself in, she gave Shaw one last look before the door closed. There was then a crack on the radio inside the pod.

Czzt- “Sarah, can you hear me?” Shaws crackled voice on the intercom sounded concerned but determined.

“Yeah I can hear you Liz.” Sarah responded, holding the intercom radio close to her mouth.

“Good, now, don’t set off before I ignite the reactor core, this thing knows what we are doing and we have to trick it.” She explained, not knowing the true power of this beast that already had what it wanted. I was connected to it now, I could feel it, the stare. Exactly what Sarah described. I knew this plan was doomed to fail, and I could not say anything to the crew. Shaw climbed out of the pod section and closed the airlock door, it slammed shut and sealed her fate.

Shaw was ready for everything that would come ahead. She walked over to the locker in the mess hall and grabbed a spacesuit, placed on the helmet and clipped everything together. Connecting up the oxygen tank she was ready for the vacuum ahead. She grabbed her pistol from the table, clipped the radio to her belt and closed her eyes. She waited for a moment and heard the Sunspear’s pain, the rusty rickety ship was beginning to die, and she was running out of time. She let out a large sigh and started to make her way into the tunnel of goo and flesh, it was getting tighter and tighter with each passing second and she began to crawl her way through.

The warm, moist walls were slippery and her grip was not the best, she tried her hardest to continue to crawl through the vein. She then punched her way furthur, not knowing how far she had come, before it began to crush her, her breath being squeezed out of her body. She reached down and grabbed her pistol, letting off a few shots in the roof of the organic mass, it shook and began to expand again, she knew this would only be a matter of time, and it was just prolonging the inevitable. She pushed on, through the mass she scrawled, determined to see the end and save the last member of the crew.

She could see the end, there was a light at the end of the tunnel, as she shined her light forward she saw the reflection of the engine room door from her torch, letting off a few more shots to gain some space she pushed forward, her goal in sight.

“Gabriel, open the doors.” She strained to say as she was fighting off the tendrils and tentacles that were trying to ensnare her.

“Aye aye, Captain.” I said. I admired Shaw in that moment, the ability to sacrifice yourself for another is something I never understood. You should always put your own safety first. Maybe that is what it means to be truly human, putting others before yourself, no matter the situation. Explains why I would never be considered truly human.

The door opened and the vacuum escaped from the engine room, travelling to all parts of the ship like an angry ghost escaping its spectral prison, all parts of the ship were now completely uninhabitable. Shaw marched forward and escaped the tendrils. The engine room was still relatively unscathed, the beast was avoiding the reactor core with its true form, it knew the power it would hold. Shaw entered the engine room and started to make her way towards the reactor chamber. She stopped for a moment and looked down at Brian, still in the same position, she turned him over and put his hands on his chest, closing his eyelids.

“Sleep well, Brian.” She said as she laid him truly to rest. He looked content in that moment, somehow. Shaw continued on towards the chamber, where a familiar face awaited. She turned her head and saw her father standing there, beside the door, leaning on the glass.

“So, you’re here to kill everyone on board, just like you killed me?” He said, smirking and looking directly at her, his gaze piercing through her plastic visor and deep into her very soul. She stopped and looked at him.

“No, dad. That never happened.” She said defiantly, going against what her memories suggest. She tried to recall and could only see her father dying at her hands.

“You know that’s not true.” He said, getting up from his lean and walking towards her. She began to back up, walking backwards slowly as the room started to shake and moan. “You know what you did, my little girl. A killer, what went so wrong?” He said, continuing to walk towards her slowly as she backed into one of the engines and held the rail tight behind her. “You’re a killer Liz, a murderer, a criminal. You know what you are.” He said calmly as he continued to walk, being so close now. Shaw closed her eyes and gripped the sides of her head, the shooting pains becoming unbearable and the flashes of her memories being ripped out and rebuilt before her very eyes. She could see it, her father, being strangled and her hands around his neck. She screamed.

“No! No!” She shouted as she fell down, her pistol in her hand pressed against her helmet as she attempted to keep her brain from spilling out.

“Remember now?” He asked, leaning down and pulling her head up to meet his face. His eyes were dark and bloodshot, puffed purple lips and two bruises around his neck, the evidence of her crimes.

“Noooo! Stop it! Get out of my head!” She shouted and could not control her actions.

Bang.

Her pistol went off in her hand and she squeezed the trigger accidentally. She looked up after the flash lit up the entire engine room. Her father stood there, a bullet wound to the head, and began walking back, stumbling as he did. Shaw got up from the floor and stared at him.

“See?” he said as he fell, dematerialising into a fleshy mass as he hit the floor, the pieces of his body falling through the metal grate and escaping back up to their host above. Shaw stared at the ground where her father's body had hit, at the outline made from viscera. She shook her head and looked forward. The reactor was within distance.

“You still with me, Sarah?” Shaw said over the radio, marching forward to her goal.

“Yeah, still here Liz, this thing is gripping tighter around the pod now, don't know how long I will have left!” She shouted, anxiously looking out of the window to see the vastness of space beginning to disappear behind a cloud of flesh and bone.

“Hold on! I'm almost there!” Shaw shouted back, struggling to get through the fallen debris from the ceiling of the engine room. She could feel the mass closing in again, it was tightening on the ship. She turned her head towards the door she came in to see the corridor completely engulfed. No going back now. She could feel her fear as it wrestled with her inner courage for the battle of her soul, and she could feel the pain of the Sunspire as it struggled to hold back in inevitable tide of the beast. It was glorious and heart breaking.

She managed to claw her way to the reactor core, the door was still locked from when Brian tried to escape.

“Gabriel? Little help here?” She asked, out of breath, her visor steaming up with her oxygen slowly depleting.

“Yes Captain.” I responded, it appeared that the circuits for the door were completely fried and it had gone into lockdown mode, there was nothing I could do to open the door. “I am truly sorry Captain, but I cannot open the door, the circuits have malfunctioned. You will have to find another way in.

“Great.” Shaw said sarcastically, looking around at any way to possibly prize open the door and reach the reactor. She looked for a moment and saw a large metal beam on the ground, big enough for her to pick up. She looked at the glass window to the right of the reactor door and her vision was in complete view. She reached down to grab the metal beam that had fallen from the roof and put all her strength into pulling it up, her muscles aching and her body creaking as she tried to get the beam above her head. Her arms worked overtime as she managed to pull the beam above her head, she turned towards the glass of the window and there the beam as

hard as she could, it flew for a second and smashed into the glass, which shattered and glass went all over the floor, Shaw covered her face with her arm.

She looked at the glowing reactor core through the newly created door for her, the green glow pulsed on the walls and floor, drawing her in, calling to her. Climbing in through the window she snagged her suit on a piece of protruding broken glass, causing a serious leak.

“Captai-” I started to inform her of the situation.

“Not now, Gabriel.” She said, her focus on only one thing. I let her continue on as she pulled her leg through the hole in the wall. She was into the reactor room and started approaching the core. The pulsating light and sound from the core was almost unbearable. “Ok. What now?” She asked.

“You have to prepare the reactor for ignition, pulling the tree levers around the edge of the core. Each one will destabilise the core and prepare it for overdrive. Then you will need to manually ignite it with a spark.” I explained to a focused Shaw.

“You mean-” She started.

“Yes, a spark of your own, there are several tools you could use around the core.” I said.

“It’s ok, I have what I need.” She said, reaching into her pocket and pulling out a lighter, engraved on it were the letters KG. “Let’s do this.” As soon as she finished, the entire ship started to shake and break even more, parts were falling from the ceiling, she was running out of time, and she knew it. She started to pull each lever as the ship shook more, the beast knew what she was doing, and was trying to stop her. Each lever she pulled came with a screech from outside and the room becoming smaller and smaller. She reached and pulled down the final lever and the core began to spin violently, the unstable elements inside started to spark and send colours flying all over the ever constricting room.

She grabbed the lighter and pulled the hammer down, it sparked to life and the beautiful flame in front of her eyes danced its last dance. She hesitated and took a moment to remember why she was doing this. Reaching back she was about to throw the lighter when another shake of the ship sent her flying back and the lighter fell out of her hand and onto the grate flooring. She looked around frantically after hitting the ground to find the weapon to defeat this monster, and found it across the floor, crawling on her knees underneath a large beam that had fallen, covered in flesh and viscera she reached her hand over to the lighter, grabbed it and lying down she lit the flame again. More and more beams started to fall and blocked her way out of the room as well as above her.

“Sarah?” She said.

“Yeah, Liz, what’s happening?” Sarah responded quickly, her voice was shaky and nervous.

“Get ready to go!” Liz said from the other side, plunging her finger down and igniting the spark again. She pulled her arm back and aimed at the target, the glowing core bursted and spluttered dangerous chemicals out and was close to combustion. As she flung her arm forward and threw the lighter she shouted back to Sarah.

“Go now!” She ordered. Sarah threw her hands down on the accelerator, the pod blew to life and started moving away from the ship, it decoupled and spurted away, Sarah looked back at the ship as she was moving away to see the full extent of the beast that was laying waste to the Sunspear, it was impossibly large and was almost consuming the entire night sky.

Meanwhile Shaw had thrown the lighter into the reactor and it began to splutter and cough as the flames from inside the lights shot out and began to tango with the reactor. The beautiful pillar of flame began to dance all around the ship, covering the metal walls and floors in a warming orange hue. She leant back and closed her eyes, satisfied at the work she had achieved, and could now fully rest. In the background the creature screamed and started to move in all sorts of directions, pulling pieces of the reactor core hull away to try and get to the epicentre. Shaw could see a large mass of eyes fixed on the combusting core, before the entire ship went white and she was blinded.

“It’s been a pleasure Captain.” I said sincerely. Shaw had taught me more about humans than I ever could, and I could feel all of hers now, it was incredible to be a part of.

“Goodbye Gabriel.” She whispered as the light took her over, covering every part of her body and bathing her in its glow. Taking us all with it. Is this it? Is this what death feels like?

Sarah looked out of the window to see the blast, a great and violent white light stretched through the ship and covered the entire creature. As soon as the light shone and sent shooting light all through the sky it was gone, collapsing in on itself and taking everything with it, the screams from the creature echoing through the shell of the sunspear and going down with everyone on board. Sarah stared at the empty space where her family were, and now, nothing.

She stayed there for a while as the pod trundled along. Staring and hoping for something to come and save her, she had a long journey ahead. She then sat back in her seat and sighed, the tears flowing down her cheeks and she mourned those she had lost. That was when she had heard it, the sound shot down her spine as her eyes widened and stared at the window.

Tap, tap, tap.

Epilogue

“Grab that and put it over with the others!” A large man with a big beard shouted to one of his colleagues as he grabbed a chair covered in blood and moved it over to a large pile of blood soaked furniture in the corner of the room. The dried red seeped into the fabric and made a new home there, a crimson stain of regret and fear. The air was stale and the numerous workers wandering around the room had the odd cough at the smell that was emanating from the decomposing bodies on the floor. The large man was holding a clipboard and walking around the room inspecting every inch of it. He put it down by his side and knelt next to the bodies, one sprawled on the floor and the other tied to a chair.

“Jesus, this is a fucking mess. Can’t believe they had me on this job.” He said to another worker that was waiting for his orders to remove the body.

“Sir?” He asked timidly as the man scanned the body on the floor up and down.

“Yeah, oh sorry, yeah get these two out of here, investigation has already got all they can. Seems like space madness is a real thing. Better get onto HR about that.” He joked as the worker clad in a white jumpsuit and blue gloves grabbed the body from the floor and dragged it over to a nearby body bag.

“No, don’t drag it you idiot. You’ll get shit all over the floors!” The large man shouted, shaking his head and looking back down at his clipboard. The large mass of workers continued to buzz away, cleaning the walls and floors and replacing all the broken or missing elements of the station. The large man’s radio clicked slightly, he held it up to his mouth. “Johannsen here. Go ahead.” He responded, met with only static on the other end. “This is Johannsen, anyone there?” He repeated, only to hear the same familiar sound. “Christ, this day.” Johannsen rubbed his finger and thumb against his eyes and walked over to the receiver in the base. He picked up the phone and held it to his ear. The sound of the static on the other end repeated itself again. He frustratedly slammed the phone back down and headed towards the main airlock.

Placing on his helmet he emerged into the volcanic wastes, the immense heat and pressure was weighing on him almost as much as the job he was ordered to carry out. He made his way to a large ship that was docked nearby the station, fighting against the unusually strong winds on the surface of Mercury, holding his hand in front of his face to reveal the path back to the ship. He made it back and placed his helmet down on the side of the table in the main cabin of the ship, grabbed the radio on the side of the wall and placed it up to his head again. “This is Johannsen, go ahead.” He said again, slightly out of breath from the walk back to the ship.

“Boss, its Field’s, we have a report from sector 16, just outside the sun’s core.” The voice on the other end of the line said, nervous and quiet.

“Well? Spit it out Field’s, I don’t have all day. After cleaning this mess on the Mercury station I will have to go make an official report to my bosses.” He said, annoyed at the whole situation.

“Ok, well we found no trace of the missing ship, apart from one thing. We found an escape pod, floating near the outer rim, must have only just taken off. But we have 0 signs of the Sunspear.” Fields explained as she tried to comprehend what they had seen.

“An escape pod, right. Well? Anything else?” Johannsen said, having heard the same reports thousands of time and becoming bored with the monotony.

“Yes, well, see for yourself.” Fields said, her voice dropping slightly as she activated her head mounted camera. A large blue hologram sprung to life and flickered online from the receiver. It began to boot up and Johannsen let out a sigh, waiting for the inevitable reveal. The hologram came online and Johannsen stood up, his face dropped as he saw it. Through the hole that was cut in the door of the escape pod he could see a body, female by the looks of it. The skin ripped from, bone and flesh almost stripped, the body was heavily malformed and twisted, and it looked shriveled, raisin like as it sat there, mouth wide open and eyes completely gone.

“Bloody hell, what happened there?” He asked, still staring at the body through the hologram projected in front of him.

“I-I have no idea boss.” Fields explained, just as gobsmacked at Johannsen.

“Right, get the body back here, and anything else that might be of use.” Johannsen ordered, rubbing his mouth and pondering the meaning of what happened to the Sunspear.

“Yes sir, we will be back as soon as we can.” Fields said, along with the hologram turning off and disappearing. The room soaked in darkness again as Johannsen sat back down and looked at the ground, as confused as he had ever been. He got up after a few minutes and placed his helmet back on, pressing the airlock button on the ship and the hiss of the air flowing out blasted him in the face. He marched back over to the station and entered, the cleanup crew were almost finished with their jobs.

“Sir, we have cleaned up all we can and are ready to dispose of the bodies and any excess items.” A small man said as he immediately walked up to Johannsen upon his arrival.

“Wha-what? Yeah sure thing. Sounds good.” Johannsen said, completely distracted from the task at hand. The small man shrugged and turned around, waving his finger around to the rest of the crew waiting near the cargo hold.

“Let’s go fellas!” He shouted, as the last of the body bags and furniture was loaded onto the makeshift truck, the sound of the suspension straining as it was loaded on, the truck then

started to turn on, spluttering to life and moved out towards the ship through the cargo bay airlock. Johannsen sat down on the new chairs that were placed in the stations mess hall and waited for the scouting team to return.

Johannsen woke up to the sound of scraping and chatting, he lifted his head up from the table to see the scouting crew there, carrying a body bag in along with what looked like a black box, they placed the body bag on the table in front of Johannsen and the box next to it. He wiped his eyes to make sure he was awake before addressing the team.

“Good work, Fields. This is quite a discovery. Can we confirm the escape pod is from the Sunspear?” He asked as Fields walked in and placed her helmet on the side table in the room.

“Yes boss, we ran analysis on the pod, it matches a class 2 mining vessel, same as the Sunspear, we had no other ships in the same sector at the time, so I think it’s safe to assume.” She explained, taking off her spacesuit and placing it on the side with her helmet. The team opened the body bag, revealing the horror that lay inside, it looked even worse in real life, and Johannsen was taken aback.

“Jesus, what happened?” Johannsen asked.

“No idea boss, something terrible though, we gotta try and find out when we take the body back to Earth, they will have the equipment for analysis of the body. But whatever it was, I wouldn’t wanna wish it on anyone.” Fields claimed, zipping up the body bag again. “We did find this though, could be of some use.” She grabbed the black box that was beside the body bag and placed it in the centre of the table. She opened the back of the box to reveal a circuit board and a collection of wires inside. She began to fiddle around in the wires.

I began to feel something, felt like I was being brought back, pulled from the abyss that that monster had dragged me into. I felt the emotion of the entire ship at once, and it was too much. I couldn’t take anymore. Fields started to fiddle more and more, and the black box whirred and started to beep, a small green light flickering on.

I booted back up.