

A Stroll through the Unwashed
By Shawn Carter

3

Veronica counted her blessing as she stepped out of her quarters. She had contacted the bridge, which informed her that the captain had just left and was headed to the food court. Thanking them for the information, Veronica made her way to the elevator. Walking down the metal halls Veronica took note of how barren and cold it was. She had not seen a single soul as she made her way down. Most of the refugees weren't allowed on this deck, only the rich and affluent were permitted. Even during a time of crisis humans always stuck to their petty hierarchies. It sickened Veronica to her core. Her kind often looked down upon normals and their arrogance knew no bounds. At least they treated everyone more or less equally. Regardless, it wasn't her place to change the status quo. She was just here to be a doctor and help people. Veronica thought this as she stepped onto the elevator and pressed the button to her desired level. Generic elevator music played all around her. It was just annoying enough for her mind to focus on it. She would be lying to herself if she didn't welcome the distraction.

Just as Veronica began to catch the rhythm of the song, the doors of the elevator swished open. Veronica was welcomed to a cacophony of noises that had her step back in shock. People were everywhere. Most were standing and few were sitting. There was limited space to maneuver and it took all of Veronica ingenuity and finesse to make her way through. She didn't remember seeing anywhere near this number of people when boarding the ship. *How and where did they hide this many people!?* Veronica thought as she weaved her way through and brushed a dangling arm away.

In the middle of the crowd sat a little girl. Her clothes were more or less well kept. There were wrinkles here and a stain there. She held a teddy bear that was missing an eye and had a tear on its arm that she held close to her. Her eyes wandered around looking for something or someone. Veronica could see tears forming as droplets formed under her eyelids. This caused the shadow to pause. A man behind her, who wasn't paying much attention, bumped into her.

"Hey lady! What's your problem?!" He barked. Veronica paid him little attention as she made her to the now crying little girl. The foolish man grabbed her shoulder and forced Veronica to face him. "Hey lady I'm tal-" he paused mid-sentence after he got a good look at her. His hand was still on her shoulder, though his grip had lightened a bit.

"Care to remove your hand?" Veronica answered as she looked at the man dead in the eyes. The fool looked like he hadn't showered in days and his clothes looked like he had tumbled through grease and dust. His hair was not well kept at all and his dentistry was less than stellar. Veronica placed her hand on his wrist. A part of her

quivered as her smooth skin touched his rough and dirty skin. Without giving much thought she twisted the fool's arm. Several cracks were heard as he knelt down and cried out. He attempted to keep a strong face but like his arm, it also began to crack.

"Please," he begged as tears streamed down his face. The hall at this point had grown silent as all attention and focus turned to Veronica and her idiot victim. She didn't wish to have this kind of attention. Her goal had been to meet the captain and go unnoticed. Now every soul on this ship would know of her presence. She would deal with the ramifications later. Right now, Veronica had to contend with this prick. His whimpered pleas offered her nothing. She took no joy in this violent act. This man was fortunate it was her he accosted. Any other he'd be lucky to escape with his arm attached, much less still breathing. A part of her wished to break his arm to a point where it wouldn't heal right. A cruel reminder for the rest of his miserable life. Veronica settled on only causing a minor fracture that would leave an ugly bruise. She wasn't a monster after all.

"Let that be a reminder for you," Veronica told the man as she let his arm go. It fell, wobbling, to his side. It would heal in time, but the mental anguish would be a permanent scar. With another whimper, the man nodded and crawled away in shame. With that done, Veronica turned her attention back to the little girl. Thankfully she was still sitting in there. Unlike the adults who were looking at Veronica in shock, the little girl was looking at them in awe. It was clear she had little idea as to what was going on. Though she was smiling and no longer crying, so Veronica chalked that up as an improvement.

This time the crowd parted away as she made her way to the little girl. Everyone evaded looking at Veronica as she passed them. She saw a mother place her hand over her daughter's eyes and an older brother turn his brother away. Veronica had long ago gotten over being seen as a freak of nature. She had hoped at least the normals had gotten over it by now. Alas, that still wasn't the case. "Where are your parents?" Veronica asked as she knelt down to eye level of the little girl. The girl hid behind her teddy bear in an adorable fashion. "Oh, I see. You're not supposed to talk to strangers," it was a cliché question, but it was the only sentence she could think of at the moment. The little girl nodded and held the bear tighter.

"Our parents didn't make it off-world," a feminine voice replied behind Veronica. It was the "our" that caught her attention. Veronica stood up and turned to see a young woman in her twenties. Her clothes were just as unkempt as her sisters. She did a good job of keeping up bodily appearances since it looked like she had found the ship's showers. Her brunette hair was tied up in a messy knot with strands of it dangling over her forehead. Her hand rested on her side and had a frown that would have impressed Teresa.

“Sorry, my name is Veronica,” Veronica extended her hand. The young woman just looked down at her hand. Her mannerism would have impressed Syriana too. With great hesitation, she took Veronica’s hand and shook it. Her grip was firm and authoritative. Her green eyes locked onto Veronica’s red eyes. The rage and anger behind them caused Veronica’s blood to grow cold. She had seen those same emotions before. Her entire race ran on those two emotions. It guided them in every endeavor and focused their minds to accomplish countless destructive tasks.

“Rebecca. And she’s my little sister, Kerry,” Rebecca replied as she looked past Veronica and at Kerry whose attention was at the other adults once more. “What you did to that man was impressive. Personally I think you should have ripped off his arm,” this woman missed her calling as a shadow Veronica thought.

“It would have made a mess. Cleaning blood is the last thing, anyone needs at the moment. Trust me, it gets everywhere,” both women chuckle at the joke.

“So what brings someone like yourself to the lower decks?” Rebecca asked as she stepped away from Veronica and went to her sister. The young woman bent down and patted her younger sister’s head. Joy tugged across Kerry’s face like two cats playing tug of war. It was adorable and Veronica felt her jaded heart soften a little.

“Shit. This is the lower deck. I meant to stop by the food court. I have an appointment with the ship’s captain,” to say it was an appointment was a bit of an overstatement. The man didn’t know they had a meeting. If Veronica has to guess the poor soul was enjoying a nice burger and beer in apparent solitude. A part of her relished the opportunity to ruin the moment.

“Makes sense. Why would a Shadow want to mingle with our kind? The rejects of multiple dead worlds,” Veronica’s smile evaporated at that statement. It was perhaps harsher than Rebecca intended. It didn’t however make the statement any less true. People like Rebecca saw the Shadows for what they wished to be seen as. Disconnected gods who only dabbled in mortal affairs when it suited them. The galaxy was aflame because of their actions. No doubt friends and family were now being processed in the Siren Terraforming factories. Most would become carriers and shuffled across their corrupt world without purperous.

“Your kind are always the most fun to talk to. Trust me the people society has ‘accepted’ are boring and unimaginative,” Rebecca chuckled as she picked up Kerry. Kerry’s bear dangled in the air and could fall at any moment due to her loose grip. Veronica lifted her own hand and with a subtle flick raised the bear and tightened Kerry’s grip.

“It was a pleasure talking with you, but my sister and I are tired. Besides don’t you have a meeting to go to?”

"The pleasure was all mine. It's best you get your rest, it's going to be a long journey," Veronica waved at Kerry and the little girl laughed as she waved back. With a quick nod, Rebecca and Kerry melted into the crowd and joined their fellow rejects.

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"That bitch broke my arm," Steve mumbled as he slumped against the wall. A massive discolored bruise had formed and the pain had started to get to him. His tough-guy facade had melted away and now he was close to tears. Steve hated this. He hated being weak. What right did that Shadow bitch have to break his arm? Just thinking about her touch made his skin crawl. When his arm healed, he'd give that Shadow bitch a piece of his mind.

"The Shadows are pricks aren't they?" a lustful feminine voice asked. Steve looked around to see where it came from. He saw a woman standing in front of him. She wore a white tank top and ripped blue jeans. She wore them well and Steve couldn't take his eyes away from her.

"All of them are pricks. They think they're better than us. Well, they aren't!" Steve spat. The woman smiled and walked up to him and placed her hand on his unbroken arm.

"They aren't better than us. I'd wager to say they are far worse than us. And together we'll show the galaxy how awful they truly are," the woman whispered. Her touch was ice cold, but it left a warm patch that didn't go away. Instead, it felt like it was spreading across his entire body. The pain in his arm had dissipated away and was replaced with another feeling. An emotion he hadn't felt in years.

Steve was in love.