

Tri's Shadow

A Space Muts Short Story

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Tri' Shadow

Tri grabbed the emergency hatch to the deserted ship and twisted it open. It moved stiffly, a good sign that the interior was still sound.

"I don't like the look of this," Hazel grumbled in Tri's ear over the coms. "This is a cursed ship."

Tri climbed through the hatch and shut it behind her. She bounded down the long shaft that led into the heart of the ship, surprised at the low level of artificial gravity. The junk ship still had atmosphere and heat as well. Unusual, and gave credence to her theory.

"There's no such thing as curses," Tri said. She turned on a torch and shone it down the corridor, orientating herself by checking the position on the map display on her helmet. "Some gang marked the ship cursed so that other muts would stay away. There has to be a good stash of supplies here to make it worth their while to go to so much bother."

"If it's gang territory, makes it worse than any curse," Ebony said.

Ebony's silky voice on the coms calmed Tri.

"I'll be in and out quicker than a space flea can bite," Tri said. She leaped along the corridor towards the bridge. "They'll never trace it back to us."

“Better not, no amount of supplies is worth a gang war,” Ebony said.

“No gangs left these marks,” Hazel said. Her sharp voice shouted in Tri’s ear. Tri turned down the volume on her coms. “Curses are real, this is bad news.”

Tri laughed. She’d never met such a superstitious mut as Hazel. It surprised her. Living in the junk belt didn’t give her the luxury of flights of fancy when every day was a struggle for survival.

The map on Tri’s display flickered and changed. She’d got turned around somehow. She pressed controls on the finger pads in her gloves, but the display flickered again. She didn’t know where she was.

“The strongest heat signatures are on level three,” Ebony said from the *Valerian*. “There might be muts on board. Proceed with caution. It’s not worth losing you.”

“Understood,” Tri said. Despite the danger, she was confident she could move through the ship like a shadow and take whatever she wanted right under the noses of the other muts.

She couldn’t make head nor tail of the map anymore. Stupid recycled helmets. She couldn’t rely on them. All the corridors looked the same. Low ceilinged square boxes with plenty of holds along the walls, floor and ceiling to help her move along in low or zero gravity, no matter what way she was orientated. Perfect for muts, who thrived in the harsh conditions of space – had been bred for them in fact. Tri hadn’t come across a ship built for mut specifications before.

“Can you see this?” she asked.

“Yup,” Ebony said through the coms. “What about it?”

“What do you think this vessel was before they junked it?” Tri said.

“It’s big. Cruise liner maybe,” Ebony said.

“Not with these corridors,” Tri said. She bounced towards a set of large double doors. “Norms wouldn’t fit in here.”

"Could be the service corridors," Ebony said.

Tri shook her head. She wouldn't vocally disagree with Ebony. Ebony had been a servant on a private yacht for a sadistic norm, a slave really, and Tri had to bow to her superior knowledge of such things. Luckily, Tri never had to work for norms. Born free, raised free, she owed everything to Ebony. However, she could disagree with Ebony when the older mut couldn't see her. The ship didn't look like anything commercial to her. It was too utilitarian, too big, and unattractive.

"Could be a carrier," Tri said.

Carriers were big ships, interplanetary giants that carried goods, sometimes even norms in status, between the settled planets. She knew they rarely ended up in the junk yard. Carriers didn't die, they got recycled into new ships.

"Unlikely," Ebony said. Tri thought she sounded curt, as if angry at Tri's disobedience.

It took Tri a minute to trick the ship into unlocking the double doors and letting her in. Inside she found a huge room, easily taking up most of the ship in length, filled with a network of empty tanks with lots of cables and terminals evenly spaced along the walls.

"Woah, what's this for?" Tri said.

Hazel shrieked in Tri's ear. "Get out of there, Tri. I know what that ship is. It's a monster ship. Get back to *Valarian* now."

Tri wandered over to the nearest console and pressed buttons on it. She needed a map of the ship.

"It's a whelping ship," Hazel said. "I know because I used to work on one. This one is unlicensed, they're not legal anymore. It must be still functioning. Get out now, before they capture you and use your genetic material."

Tri found a console at the far end of the room and connected it to her finger pads. No one had used it in a long time.

“Maybe a gang is running it to make their own muts,” Ebony sounded concerned. “Hazel’s right. You better get back, Tri. Let’s get out of here.”

Tri turned down the volume in her helmet so that Ebony and Hazel’s voices became static. The console revealed its secrets to her slowly. Image files showed the chamber she stood in as it once was. She saw tiny, bean sized objects floating in the tanks. Muts dressed in sterile suits checked the vitals on each unit.

She didn’t find the image too interesting. The contents of the tanks didn’t look important. She cycled through the files. The penultimate report ordered the destruction of the ship’s cargo. A video showed the muts in their white suits jettisoning the contents of the tanks. Some of the muts fought with each other and Tri saw them turn violent before the image disappeared and the console went dark.

Tri attempted to restart the console, even using a boost from her suit’s energy source, but the unit had been deactivated from a remote location. She sprang back to the door she had entered through, and found it locked. No amount of careful nudging could get it open again.

Another door led out of the room, on the far side of the console. It opened stiffly first try. Tri cautiously glided through, holding onto the side of the door with one hand, her weapon ready in the other.

A long corridor stretched before her, with several hatches leading off it, all welded shut. Tri saw evidence of weapon fire on the walls. Someone had tried to break through one of the hatches with a pickaxe.

Tri shivered. She tried to visualise the schematics of the ship, but she hadn’t paid enough attention to them when she could. She’d been too excited on being the one to provide for Ebony and Hazel for a change.

The corridor ended in a tube. Tri pulled herself up it to the upper decks. The master controls should be on the bridge, but all the hatches to the upper decks were either welded shut or locked beyond her technical skill to open.

She reached the bridge and saw blast marks around the door. Dark splatters marred the walls, but there was no evidence of any bodies.

She couldn't get into the bridge. It was a dead end.

She jumped down the access tube, lightly holding onto the ladder to control her rate of descent and moved deeper into the ship. Engineering lay down below, with the main power grid and controls. So too did the treasure she sought.

Sweat made her fingers slick inside her gloves and it took three attempts on her finger pads before she found the right button.

The hatch to the lower deck unlocked. She pulled herself down the corridor and into the first room she found. She went to the console and tried to access it. It was slow but working. Files lay open on the display. Files that she had been looking at when the power had gone out in the large chamber with the tanks. The hair raised along the back of her neck. She turned around, but there was no one watching her.

"They're coming."

The voice from the console made Tri jump. She held onto the edge of the desk and laughed softly.

"Get a grip on yourself, Tri," she said.

A mut's face to face recording played on the display. She reminded Tri of Hazel, although this woman was younger than her friend. She'd shaved her chestnut hair short, and had soft white hair on her face, unlike Hazel's brown.

"They're shutting us down. They're going to incinerate us all. We have to stop them," the woman said.

"I'll prepare the shuttle." A woman that Tri couldn't see spoke.

“We can’t leave them,” the woman said. Her large brown eyes glistened.

“They aren’t viable. There’s nothing we can do.”

“We have to do something. It will be a massacre,” the woman said.

The image changed. The audio filled with screams and shots from blasters. Tri closed the file, but the image stayed up, the file not responding.

A full body picture of the woman appeared on the screen. She stood in the tank chamber, wearing her white suit. Red and yellow streaks marred her clothes, but Tri couldn’t see any sign of injury. The woman held something tiny in her hand, something white and wet and small that looked like a little bean, but Tri couldn’t make it out.

The console went dark and the lights blinked out in the chamber. Tri heard the hiss of the hatch and jumped through it before it closed to trap her once again. She rolled in the corridor, bumping against the far wall hard enough to wind her.

She was being herded.

She sat up. She climbed back up the shaft to access the corridor she had entered by, but the hatches were sealed, and she couldn’t open them. Something was driving her downwards.

“There were no significant life forms in the scan of the ship,” Tri said. She went down the tube to the lower decks once more. “There can’t be anything dangerous on board. I can handle myself.”

Ebony’s advice on the gang signs on the exterior of the ship came back into her head. She was sure the markings weren’t gang related, but what if she was wrong? Could the ship be accessed remotely from another ship? Had she set off some alarms that caused the ship to lock down and hold any trespassers captive until an enforcer arrived?

She shook her head. Worrying wasn’t going to get her back on the *Valerian*.

She moved towards main engineering. She would be able to find the override for the ships systems there.

Screaming and the sounds of blasters rang out from the corridor leading to main engineering. Tri hung onto the handholds in the tube above the corridor. Her breath misted up her visor.

Reluctantly she turned up the volume on her coms.

"Tri, Tri respond."

Ebony sounded calm, but in the background, Hazel shouted.

"We have to get her out of there. It's coming for her. She's going to get killed."

Tri took several deep breaths before she whispered into her mic. "Ebony, I'm trying to get to engineering but there seems to be some sort of fight going on. How many will I have to deal with?"

"Tri." Ebony sighed with relief. "I'm reading one other life sign than yours, but it isn't in engineering, it's on the deck above. I can't see any heat residue from blasters. Are you sure the fight is with you?"

"It appears not." Tri pulled back her lip, exposing her sharp canines.

"Best to call the mission off, just in case. Come back to the *Valarian* asap," Ebony said.

"I'm trying. I'm locked out, have to get to engineering to access masters," Tri said.

"Locked out? What locked her out? It's a monster, Ebony, I'm telling you, and it's driving her into a trap," Hazel ranted. "It's the ghosts. They're vengeful. They won't let you leave."

Tri tuned out the coms once again. She swung into the corridor, ready to meet the ghosts. There were no spirits, but there were ghosts all right. Audio replay being broadcast through the ship intercom. Someone was trying to keep her from engineering.

The cracked hatch into the engine bay couldn't be sealed shut. A piece of cloth had been stapled over it. Tri broke the staples on one side and peered into the chamber before she slipped through. The large, cluttered room appeared empty, but she couldn't be certain it was clear with one glance.

She slipped into the room, keeping her back to the wall. Only one engine block still functioned, and even it struggled. The other three stood dead, their housing blackened and split open, the coils spilling out. Someone had done a good job on disabling the ship.

Personal effects littered the spaces in between the engines and the pipes that protruded from the walls. Refuse, bundles of clothes – some bloody – boxes of medicines and food.

The supplies! Tri ran to the boxes and opened them, her thick gloves making her actions clumsy. They were empty.

She threw them aside. She growled. Food and water rations stood neatly stacked next to the medical supplies. Nothing exciting, and only enough to last the three of them a few days. Hardly worth salvaging.

In the middle of the maze-like engines Tri found the appearance of order. Her limbs grew heavy as she entered a bubble of heavier gravity. A privacy tent concealed a neatly made bed. Parts ripped from the dead engines had been carefully piled into a specific order in another section. Tri bent to pick one up, but she could only raise it a couple of centimetres off the deck.

A water filtration unit and some powdered rations sat next to the weights. Tri picked up the remote command console from beside the food packets. It looked in good condition and still worked. It hadn't even been password locked, and she could access the information easily. It showed the schematics for the ship, the locked down hatches pulsing red. Tri deactivated the corridors she needed to use to get back to the *Valarian* and then searched through the rest of the open

files. Most consisted of instructional manuals, and when she looked at them, she saw they had been made by the same woman who reminded her of Hazel.

“Dearg, you can access the entire ship from this control panel,” the woman said. “This is how we will maintain the ship. When we bring up this function, we can see that there has been damage to the inner hull on the bridge and in these areas here, here and here. We have already sealed these rooms, but we have to monitor the hull integrity for further stress fractures.”

Tri shut down the file as the woman walked through the stages to check, repair and seal off different sections of the ship.

Tri sorted through the files labelled *Dearg*. More images of the woman along with records of weight, food, gravity, and heat. Pictures of the little white bean, except now Tri could see that it wasn't a bean. It had tiny hands and feet and was covered in fluffy white hair with brown spots over its body.

What was it? Tri felt queasy looking at it.

‘*Dearg's weight program*’ showed the woman repeatedly picking up and setting down the heavy ship parts while diagrams of movements and equations for the right gravity setting for optimum bone density and muscle growth scrolled through the associated information. Something fluffy launched itself at the woman, knocking her out of view. Tri heard screaming and caught a glimpse of a face with a bare patch of pink skin stretched in a butterfly shape over its nose.

Tri shut down the files and tucked the console into her hip pocket. She'd seen enough. Time to get back to *Valarian*. She'd wasted enough time on this ghost ship.

She walked out of the gravity bubble and moved towards the door out of engineering. The screaming started again, and the sound of blasters made her crouch behind one of the dead engines, her weapon

at the ready. Muts materialised in front of her. All women, most of them wearing the white suits she had seen before, but some were dressed in blue. Half of the women crouched by the door, their backs to her, watching as the hatch glowed white hot with blaster fire from the corridor on the other side. The rest of the women fussed over small, hairy muts who screamed.

Tri squinted at the tiny muts. Why were they so small? What was wrong with them?

Hadn't Hazel said this was a whelping ship? Were they pups? She'd never seen one before.

She ducked lower behind the engine, afraid that the women would see her. Where had they been hiding?

"They're through!" someone shouted.

"Hold your ground," one of the women in blue said.

The hatch shattered and fell into the chamber with a loud bang. The women started shooting into the corridor.

"We have to get the pups out of here," one of the women in white said.

"There's nowhere left to go," another said.

More powerful fire cut through the first line of women at the door. The others fell back, closer to the pups, and held up their weapons. Tri saw their hands shaking. Bodies stepped through the still glowing circle of the hatch. Tall bodies. Strangely shaped bodies with short torsos and long limbs. Bodies wearing space suits and carrying weapons Tri could only dream about.

Were they norms? Their proportions were all wrong for muts. Were they some sort of alien?

The women shot at the creatures in the space suits, but their weapons didn't seem to do any damage. The aliens raised their weapons and cut through the women. Their blasters tore them limb

from limb, exploded their heads, sent their blood splattering on the walls.

Some of the fire clipped two of the engines and they spluttered and went dark.

More of the bodies stepped through the hatch, crouching to clear the opening. The women in the white suits threw themselves in front of the pups. Tri could hear some pleading. Others screamed curses. One woman picked up a weapon from the severed hand of her comrade and started firing.

The space suits raised their blasters and destroyed the women. They chopped them into little pieces and their blood pooled on the dismembered bodies of the pups they had tried to protect.

Tri's heartbeat pounded in her ears. Her own weapon shook within her grasp.

The space suits walked towards her. She could smell the tang of blood in the air, the acrid burn of molten metal, even though her suit still had full integrity and she breathed recycled air.

She looked around for a way to escape. She caught sight of the woman who reminded her of Hazel hiding behind the next engine. She cradled something to her chest. Tri was sure that their eyes met, and the woman turned to slip away.

"Hazel was right, this ship is haunted," Tri thought. "Can ghosts kill me? What will happen to Hazel and Ebony if I don't return and they try to find me? Will the curse get them too?"

The image of the woman shimmered and grew soft at the edges. Something stepped out from it. Small, at least half the size of Tri, and naked, it was covered in white fluff apart from the tangle of brown sprouting from its head and the butterfly shaped patch of pink skin spread across its nose.

"Run," Tri shouted.

The fluffy thing raised its tiny hands. It held one of the blasters from the space suits. Tri wondered how it could lift the weapon, even in the low gravity. The image of the woman and the carnage faded away and Tri realised that they hadn't been ghosts at all, but hologram video playback.

The fluffy thing and its giant weapon remained.

"Murderer," the fluffy thing said. Tri heard the hum of the weapon arming. She dropped her weapon and held up her hands.

"I haven't killed anyone. I mean you no harm."

"You killed them all," the thing said. "Now you've come back for me."

Tri realised that this pup must think she was one of the space suits who had killed the others. Quickly she unhitched her helmet and took it off. She shook out her long plait of black hair. The soft down on her face was plastered with sweat.

"I'm not one of those things," Tri said. "I don't know who or what they were. I'm a space mut, just like you."

The fluffy thing lowered her weapon and, to Tri's surprise, ran to her and threw her arms around her.



Tri used the remote console to make video contact with the *Valerian*. Neither Ebony nor Hazel looked pleased to see the mut.

"What's that little bean?" Ebony said. She sneezed.

"My name is Dearg," the pup said, climbing into Tri's lap and taking hold of the console.

"You're not a pup. You're a bean. And what's wrong with your nose?" Ebony said.

"This is bad, very bad," Hazel said.

Tri lifted the pup off her knee and set her down on the ground, regaining control of the console.

"There's nothing else on board. Whatever valuables that were have been consumed by..."

"Dearg," the pup said.

"Beans here," Tri said. The pup scowled.

"A lone pup managed to survive all this time on her own in a whelping ship?" Ebony said. Tri heard respect in her voice.

"There are supplies here to keep her going for another couple of years if she continues to use them wisely," Tri said.

"We can't leave her there," Ebony said. "Look at her. She's already malnourished."

"She's cursed," Hazel said. Her lips twitched, showing her displeasure.

"We don't have any room on the *Valerian* for another," Tri said. "We're over crowded as it is."

Hazel growled and stormed out of view.

"We don't have to keep her," Ebony said. "Just bring her with us until we find a port or settlement where she can stay. Give her a chance. I'm not any happier about this than you are, Tri."

Tri sighed. "All right. I'll get something for her to wear and we'll be back shortly."

"Good, I want to get out of this area as soon as," Ebony said.

The console went dark in Tri's hands. She tucked it back into her hip pocket and looked at the pup who sat staring at her intently.

"All right, Beans, looks like you're coming with us," she said.

The pup jumped to her feet. “Great. Let me pack my weapons and then I’m ready to go.”

About the Author



Iseult Murphy is an award-winning speculative fiction author. Her short stories have appeared in numerous publications, and some of her horror short stories have been published in the collection ***Zoo of the Dead and Other Horrific Tales***, while a wider variety of her speculative fiction has been published in the collection ***Return to Hades and Other Adventures***. Her debut horror novel, ***7 Days in Hell***, was an Independent Author Network Book of the Year finalist, and a Speak Up Talk Radio Firebird Award winner, both in 2020. Most recently, her body horror fairytale, ***All of Me***, won a Speak Up Talk Radio Firebird Book Award.

Iseult is drawn to horror, fantasy and science fiction, as she feels that the most difficult aspects of life can be best explored through the lens of speculative fiction.

She currently resides on the east coast of Ireland. When she isn't writing, she enjoys reading, art and spending time with her animals.