

“Alright, looks like I found my next pit stop,” Justin leaned back in his cockpit seat and stretched. His rocket ship was in need of some small repairs, and the nearest planet he could check for supplies was a small, purple-hued mass decorated with swirling black clouds. “Doesn’t look safe, but I guess beggars can’t be choosers.” He sighed, hoping that the planet only *looked* dangerous.

Justin, a light purple, avian-like Tharx standing at 8’ tall, ran a claw through his galaxy-styled blue hair, sighing to himself as his ship slowly descended to the unknown planet. Hopefully whatever was down there wouldn’t cause any issues. After a bit, his ship finally landed.

“Never a dull moment out here, that’s for sure,” Justin muttered to himself as he walked down the entrance ramp to his ship. The planet wasn’t anything vastly different from others he’d seen before. There were trees, a dark sky that matched how the planet looked from orbit, a nearby body of dark-colored water, and dirt as far as he could see.

Before the avian could take in any more of the scenario, a guttural voice sent a shiver up his spine, “I thought I heard something out here.”

Justin whipped around to face the source of the voice, and the sound definitely matched the owner. The beast was a large, dark gray toad-like creature standing on two meaty haunches with massive clawed feet. It had a bulbous stomach that nearly touched the ground between his hefty legs, and a wide stout head with two yellow eyes that looked like they were peering through the darkness of his smooth skin.

“Well, well... Looks like a new... *friend* has decided to visit me.” Those yellow eyes looked up and down Justin, who was a couple feet shorter than the amphibian. “Good timing, if I do say so myself.”

Justin found himself unable to move, still in awe at the beast before him. “What are you talking about? Who are you?”

“You can call me Mefudoka, but that’s about to be *Captain* Mefudoka to you in a few moments. You see, I’m the Shadow Captain of an army, and I’m in need of new recruits. As an outsider, you already have promise.” Mefudoka snapped his fat, clawed fingers. From the dirt beneath the two, shadows began to actually rise up like water in a circle around them. Stringy, hunched black figures without any defining features beyond scrawny limbs tipped with claws, their yellow eyes seemingly looking at nothing from the black skin of their heads. They began chirping and chittering with excitement as Mefudoka took a wide step towards the Tharx, whose heart was nearly beating out of his chest. Justin wanted to run, but the action wasn’t becoming a reality before it was too late.

Mefudoka wrapped his meaty, dark purple hands around Justin, pinning the avian’s arms to his sides. The toad’s thick tongue brushed over the amphibian’s lips, clearly anticipating the next step as drool dripped down his chin and fat neck. Justin grimaced, squeezing his eyes shut as he watched Mefudoka open his gaping maw wide, the pulsing pink and purple insides waiting for him. What was supposed to be a simple resource mission turned very dark very quickly.

It just got a lot darker for Justin. With a simple wet slap, the dark captain’s mouth shut over Justin’s head and shoulders. The smaller one squirmed, his legs kicking wildly. He could feel the wet surroundings claim him, so he didn’t need to open his eyes to know what was happening. Mefudoka gave a shove with his large hands before letting go, pushing his meal up to his waist into that hungry maw.

“Mmm...,” Mefudoka simply moaned out in pleasure over the taste. This one was quite the delicious morsel, and was going to make a good new comrade. Mefudoka could feel it. The

large toad-like creature had had birds before, but they always gave him something unique in their flavor to indulge himself. Justin, being bird-like and alien together, was indeed a unique meal, but there was something a little different for this one. Mefudoka was in need of a bigger shadow army before his next invasion, and Justin was going to fulfill that need alongside his desire to expand his tastes.

Normally, Mefudoka had several different means of recruitment. However, this was definitely one of his favorite ways, even if it was a bit slower and less efficient. The Shadow Captain deserved it, though. There was always a different connection with the minions that came out of this process. They tended to be more obedient and even a little more powerful than the other lackeys.

Feeling Justin squirm around, Mefudoka swallowed again. More of the bird-like alien's body slipped further in, lips squeezing down onto his knees. Inside, Justin squirmed and struggled. He could feel the soft walls squeeze against him, pressing firmly against his lilac-colored skin. The thick globs of saliva drenched him, hot streams of it rolling down his encased body. Mefudoka used one of his meaty hands to rub at the squirming bulge in his neck. His thick skin made it hard to see any details of the meal inside, but the lump was undeniable. Giving another toss of his head, Mefudoka felt Justin's bare legs slide over his lips and into his mouth.

Mefudoka laughed, feeling his meal jostle inside his throat. All it took was another gulp to pull in the last of Justin, his feet becoming enveloped in the squishy tongue that sought to claim him. The large toad-like creature sealed his lips, the final swallow sending Justin deep into the waiting stomach. Mefudoka let his hand feel the lump of his meal travel down inside him, feeling his stomach jiggle as Justin deposited inside. The shadow lord gave his gut a good

bounce, feeling his meal toss and turn inside against the hot, wet stomach walls. Sucking his own fingers clean, Mefudoka ran his thick tongue over his lips one last time. Inside, he could feel his body working its magic on his soon-to-be shadow minion.

Justin tossed and turned in the wet prison, unable to tell what direction was what. The Tharx coughed and sputtered, feeling those walls squeeze tightly against his bare purple body. Not that he could see a lot to begin with, but everything was getting darker and darker by the second.

*What... What's happening...?*

Justin felt his body tingling, getting warmer and warmer as if he were getting a second coating of skin. The purple hues slowly turned black as shadows began to surround him more and more, forming to the very shape of his body. Every curve and crevice was accounted for by the invading shadowy substance, leaving no part of the avian uncovered. Justin was no expert, but he was certain this was not how stomachs normally worked. Before he could question, struggle, or even begin to comprehend what was happening anymore, Justin passed out.

Everything was cloudy. Justin coughed, sitting up slowly as his vision slowly came into focus. He was in some kind of dank cave, the stoney walls only yielding to a faint light from an opening in the wall nearby. As glad as the Tharx was to be free of whatever happened, confusion was the winning emotion right now.

“Well, it looks like everything went just fine. You may be one of my best creations yet,” Mefudoka’s booming voice gave his presence away before he stepped in front of the dazed alien. “You definitely added something new to the process.”

Justin wanted to respond, but the amount of questions running around in his brain overpowered any other impulse.

“At a loss for words? Don’t worry, I think once you look at yourself, it’ll make plenty of sense, my featherless bird friend.” Mefudoka’s deep chuckle was almost as loud as his voice.

Rather than try to speak, Justin looked down at himself for the first time since waking up. The Tharx’s multicolored eyes widened. His entire body was covered in black shadows not unlike that of the scrawny minions that had surrounded him earlier on. The layer had no beginning or end in sight; it was like Justin had the shadow as a second skin. The bird still looked just like his usual self, but covered in solid black, his eyes being the only thing retaining their original color.

“What did you do to me!?” he shouted, finally finding his voice amidst the chaos, though his voice had turned into some odd mix of his own voice and that of the high-pitched garbled chatter that the other shadow minions had.

Mefudoka laughed, shaking the ground beneath himself and echoing off the cavern walls. “I *improved* you. You work for me as part of my army, just as I said you would. You made a fine quick meal, and after letting you sit while the process inside me did its work, I simply let you back out as my new croney.”

“I... I can’t believe it...! I want nothing to do with this!” Justin scowled, his new mixed voice making all of this feel like some kind of dream. Finally, the Tharx took his eyes off his new form to lock eyes with the Shadow Captain. How was something like this possible?

“Oh, that form will speak and think for itself. You don’t have a say in the matter, my little soldier,” Mefudoka crossed his plump arms, a grin spreading across his face. “Don’t you worry. It’ll go into hiding when you’re not under my immediate orders, so you’ll be able to go

about your normal life as you please. When it comes time for action, it will take over and bring you right to me for your orders. See? It's simple."

Justin balled his hands up into tight fists, his beak clenched as he tried to find some way out of this whole ordeal. As if being eaten wasn't bad enough, now he was just some puppet.

"Now, now. Don't act like this doesn't come with perks," Mefudoka paused. There was a tense silence in the air between the two before he simply turned his head to the opening that led to the outside, "My first command: go out there and see how you like the view."

The Tharx took a deep breath, closing his eyes. Focusing on himself, Justin felt that he was able to actually slowly match control of him. Maybe the new shadow wasn't in full control, after all. He leapt up and out the opening in the cavern back to the outside. This new form was incredibly agile, which was a welcome change to the avian.

What was Justin thinking? Despite everything happening, the avian found himself more curious than mad now. What had Mefudoka meant with the order? He was outside just like he was told. Then, as if an answer to his unspoken question, he came to a sudden stop. Everything in his vision began to stretch out and warp. Trees, the land, the distant mountains, and even the clouds bent into unnatural shapes, shifting in and out of their normal focus and slowly got smaller and smaller.

*Am I... getting bigger?*

That was it: he was getting proportionally bigger, and the growth kept accelerating until he was as tall as a skyscraper. The shadow moved Justin's head to look around, feeling the ground sink slightly beneath his massive two-toed feet with the tremor causing birds to fly out of distant trees. Justin watched in awe through the shadow's vision as he gazed over the landscape. Justin glanced over his shoulder to the cave he came from, seeing that a countless number of

Mefudoka's minions had gathered to watch him with glee, cheering on their new friend and comrade's abilities.

The shadow skin wasn't going to wait for an answer to come to the avian alien. One booming step followed by another, trees breaking with ease under his feet and wildlife scattering for safety. Tepid water sources rippled as the new giant made his way wherever the shadow took him. Somehow Justin already knew that Mefudoka would call him back, but he found himself more intrigued at this newfound ability rather than concern himself with being a new recruit to the amphibian's army. Perhaps there would be some fun to come out of this whole ordeal after all, and Justin had plenty on this planet and those beyond to test out the new skills. Maybe this little trip paid off after all.