

### ***Four Months After the Shipwreck***

*Whatever it was that had grabbed Crusoe from beneath the decaying hatch, it was fleshy and muscular, covered with circles on the underside but smooth on top. It was alive, but it curled bonelessly to encircle his forearm, and its grip was tight enough that it hurt. He tried to pull away, but it was strong, stronger than any man. Crusoe felt his heart suddenly hammering within his chest. His head was pounding in the same rhythm, and he could hardly think. Instinctively he tried to prize whatever it was from his skin, but it was fixed tight.*

*He turned over in the water, digging his feet into the rough ocean floor and pushing himself away from the hatch. Whatever was holding on to him was taken by surprise. It was partially pulled out of the shadows, and when Crusoe saw it he felt his stomach heave with nausea.*

*The creature looked like a bag of flesh about the same size and shape as a half-bag of coal. He couldn't tell if it was green or grey; either the light shining through the rippling waves above were making it hard to tell or its color kept shifting, altering to disguise it. The boneless limb that it had wrapped around his arm was one of several surrounding its body - he couldn't tell how many, because some of them were still holding on to the underneath of the hatch, but there were certainly more than any living creature ought to have. Their undersides were covered in circular protrusions that seemed designed to stick onto its prey somehow. A beak, like a parrot's, was half-pushed out of a slit between two of the curling limbs, but the worst thing was the two eyes above that beak that watched Crusoe with a wary, hungry intelligence.*

*Involuntarily, Crusoe, opened his mouth in shock. The improvised breathing tube pulled away from him and started to float towards the surface, trailing bubbles behind it.*

*Desperately, Crusoe tried to tear himself free of the creature, but two more of its limbs curled towards him.*

*He felt the air burning within his chest. He needed to take a breath, but if he did his lungs would fill with water and he would drown. His brain flashed through possible options, but his vision was becoming blurry and he couldn't think properly.*

*A pain in the sole of his foot made him pull away. He looked downwards, and saw a shell half-buried in the sand. It was long and thin, like a straight-razor. He lunged for it, closing his fingers around it but feeling it slip away. He fumbled for it and caught it again. Twisting, he used the sharp edge of the shell to cut at the limbs of the strange sea creature that had caught him. The shell slashed through its flesh. Curls of dark blood emerged from the cut.*

*The creature let go, withdrawing beneath the hatch like a snail into its shell. The last thing Crusoe saw of it was its hate-filled eyes staring at him.*

*He pushed away from the sea floor, trying to resist the urge to take a breath despite the raging need in his lungs. As he shot towards the surface, towards where the inflated deer stomach floated, he saw that the circular things on the creature's limb had left red circles on his skin.*

*He looked down, to make sure that the creature wasn't following him, or reaching up for him, but it had hidden itself away again.*

*His father's ring glittered coldly, like the creature's eyes, until a flurry of water churned up by his flailing feet covered it up with sand.*

*He didn't think he would be coming back to find it. Like some mythical dragon, he would leave the creature to guard its hoard...*