

Flesh

by Paul L. Mathews

Part One

Intruder

Like all Theocracy ships, the *Tower's* bridge was big enough to be considered a hall. Once, the vaulted ceiling would have been decorated with bright flags, the brass columns that dominated the walls would have gleamed, and the array of monitor stations and computer banks circling the captain's chair would have chattered and flashed.

Now, however, the bridge bore dull, disintegrating witness to the ship's slow death. Now its ornate ceiling was lost in the darkness, the flags tattered and torn. Now the columns were dull and dirty. Now the outdated computers were largely silent, the few that worked offering the only illumination in the dim bridge. The air was stale, the atmosphere silent and oppressive. Once it would have been alive with officers, guards and nobles resplendent in purple uniforms and suits of brass *Stak Ta* armour. Now only a handful of emaciated crew, their faces lost in the darkness, watched as a naked prisoner was dragged onto the bridge by four guards dressed in shabby fatigues, and a stooped old man in a cook's chequered regalia. The prisoner and his escorts were Moreaus—bipedal human/animal splices created by humans to fight interstellar wars. The prisoner had the head of a rabbit; the guards mongrel dogs.

The prisoner was forced to his knees before their leader. Sat upon the captain's chair like a satanic apparition, Stanztrigger was seven foot of Moreau with a rams head, goat legs and long, clawed fingers. A faded set of black fatigues hanging from his limbs, he was tall and thin to the point of being skeletal. His long face was framed by a pair of curved horns, and scars—camouflaged by his black fur—criss-crossed his nose and forehead. His eyes were alert and bright, and they bore into the Moreaus before him.

“What is this, Cook?” he said, staring at the trembling prisoner. Despite his physique, Stanztrigger's voice was still strong and gruff.

“I caught him in the Pantry, sir,” Cook said. The only human on the ship, he was a haggard man with no chin, big ears, a pointed nose dominated by flared nostrils, and an overbite. He had the kind of furtive eyes reserved for rats and killers. “He was stealing food.”

Stanztrigger stood. Reaching to the flak-vest behind him, he produced a tiny pair of golden pince-nez from one of the vest's pockets. Fixing them across his elongated nose, he moved to stand beside the prisoner, metal shoes nailed into the base of his hooves ringing as he walked. The Prisoner flinched, his trembling intensifying. Stanztrigger knelt and grabbed the prisoner firmly by the furry chin, lifting his head to look him in the face. “Is this true, Seb?”

Seb tried to look away, but Stanztrigger's grip was too strong. Cook and the four guard-dogs surrounding him exchanged glances. Cook licked his cracked lips with a long, dirty tongue, and continued to watch with narrowed eyes.

“Is this true?” Stanztrigger said again, his tone increasing in gravitas. He was peering hard into the prisoner's eyes.

Seb began to cry and whimper. “Yes, yes, it’s true. I’m sorry! Please! I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!”

“And you ate what, exactly?”

Seb began to answer, but choked on the words, managing only an inarticulate gargle.

“Seb, please, don’t be afraid.” Stanztrigger’s voice had lowered to a soft murmur. “I only wish to ensure our survival on this planet, you know that.”

“I...I ate a leg from one of the humans in the Pantry.”

Stanztrigger nodded. The nod had a weary quality. He cupped Seb’s face in his hands.

“Why?”

Seb looked at his leader with wide eyes, as if searching for some sign, some mercy. The tension in his body drained visibly, lost to the intimacy of Stanztrigger’s gentle questioning. About them, the assembled Moreaus were transfixed, watching the unfolding drama with sunken eyes that drowned in black sockets

“Why did you do it?” Stanztrigger said. “Say it.”

“I’m just so hungry, sir. I didn’t want much. Just a mouth fu—”

“We’re all hungry!” Stanztrigger roared, standing to glare at the cowering Moreau. “Look! Look at us!” The expansive sweep of his arms took in the entire bridge and its malnourished crew. “All of us, starving. Desperate. Every last one of us. We have been for years. Ever since the *Tower* crashed here on this damned planet. But you?” He grabbed Seb by his long, trembling ears and hauled him to his feet. The prisoner cried out, and what little waste lay in his shrunken bowel slid down his inner thigh like rolling glue. “But you think you’ve got some right to steal what little food we have?”

“I’m sorry. Please, I promise. I won’t do it again—”

“Take him to the Pantry, and prepare him for our next meal.” Stanztrigger said, turning away.

“But forego the bolt-gun. I want him alive when you skin him. Such is the fate of thieves on my ship.”

“Yes sir,” Cook said, bowing and wringing his grubby hands. He then turned and snapped his fingers at the four guard-dogs. By now the prisoner had collapsed to the deck, sobbing. As the guards dragged him away, they gave Stanztrigger hunted, fearful glances.

“Excuse me, sir?” It was a tiny, hollow voice, and Stanztrigger turned to look down on its owner. A diminutive girl with the head of a sparrow and whose hands shook violently, she was looking up at Stanztrigger and presenting him with a small comms unit. “I have an incoming signal from Chaff. He says something’s crashed on the eastern beach. He says he watched it fall from the sky.”

“What? What’s ‘crashed’?”

“A ship.”

#

A pair of weak, distant suns hovered over a filthy sea, peering through drizzling rain. As the squalid sea—choked with dust and chemical foam—lapped against a stony shore, a six-wheeled armoured vehicle emerged from the glut of dead trees that haunted the island’s beach. A worn Dogfish class amphibious vehicle, its camouflaged armour was rusty and scarred. The grumble from its petrol driven engine was lumpy and uneven, and acrid smoke belched out of its exhausts, gathering around the rear of the vehicle in a grimy haze. The front

of the vehicle was enclosed, but the back was open with an old mounted machine gun. Like the vehicle, its Moreau passengers were protected by light and dirty Theocracy armour, worn over old Theocracy fatigues and heavy parkas. Hoods concealed the crew's heads.

The vehicle came to stop just beyond the tree line, and a hatch on top of the cabin was thrown open. One of the Moreaus in the cabin stood, thrusting his head and shoulders into the open air. His scarred head was that of an old wolf, the grey fur so thin and sparse the skin beneath was plainly visible. A badge stencilled on his chest identified him as Chaff.

"We've found it," Chaff said into a tiny head-held communicator. "We've found the ship."

Partially submerged in the approaching tide, the ship sat with its nose tipped into the sea and its backside in the air. The waters about it were undulant and frothy. Red and grey, the ship's battered, scorched hide revealed a violent past. Its hull was holed, and it was taking in water.

"Do you see anything else?" Stanztrigger asked over the communicator.

Chaff paused to assess the surroundings, sniffing the air. The air was damp and tasted of brine, and the accompanying breeze made the dead trees behind sway and whisper like the restless dead. "No. Nothing. Just the ship."

"How big?"

"It's small. A corvette."

"Repairable?"

Chaff hesitated. "I'm... not sure."

The reply was curt and impatient: "Then find out."

With a swift trio of thumps on the vehicle's roof, Chaff bade his driver forward. The vehicle set off, gears grinding as it approached the downed spaceship. As the Dogfish approached, Chaff could see the vessel in greater detail. "Wait!" he said into his communicator, his voice dropping an octave. "I see a name! There's a name on the hull! The... *Troika*?"

"*Troika*? Never heard of it. Now get on board and see if we can use it to get off this damned planet."

"What about the survivors?"

"You bring them to me. Dead or alive. I don't really care. As long as they're edible..."

#

The six scouts squeezed into the darkness of the *Troika* through a breach in the corvette's hull. The squall of spray outside was getting worse, and—forced to drive their amphibious vehicle through the rain and into the shallows to reach the ship—they were wet through.

As the six Moreaus clung to whatever they could to avoid sliding down the skewed vessel's titled corridor, Chaff looked around. The ship was a mess, with live cables, access panels and ruptured conduits strewn everywhere. The light was limited to baleful emergency strips that barely impacted upon the gloom. The heady smell of the salt water outside was fighting against the smell of burning. With the deck at an awkward camber and the ship's guts strewn about the deck, it was going to be difficult to move freely. He eyed a nearby power-cable warily as it hissed and lunged in the darkness, spitting sparks. The sooner they could get to engineering and shut down the reactors the better.

Reaching into the depths of his parka Chaff produced a hand-held scanner and activated it. Old and wet, the small machine spluttered and faltered before it finally surrendered its information to Chaff.

“Five life signs,” he told his men, “in three areas: flight-deck, med-bay and engineering.” He turned to his men and gestured at the nearest two. “You take engineering and shut the ship down. You two take the med-bay, and you come with me to the flight-deck. Now, move out.”

The nearest scout’s stomach growled loudly. “What do we do with the survivors?” A dog, his eyes twinkled as the fur about his mouth twitched.

It was a loaded question, and Chaff could feel the eyes of the five Moreaus burning him. “We take them back to the ship for Cook.”

“All of them?”

They were every bit as hungry as he was, and the brief fantasy of fresh meat rotating over a fire made him salivate. “Well,” Chaff said with a dark smile, “Maybe not all of them.”

“We can have one to ourselves?”

“Call it a ‘finder’s fee’,” Chaff said, nodding.

“Aye, sir,” they said in unison, their voices invigorated, before making their first ginger steps into the vessel.

#

Boyd groaned as he came around, hand going to his forehead.

He hurt. Everywhere. He ached in muscles he’d forgotten he had. He was also hungry. Very, very hungry, with his stomach in painful knots.

He took a moment to try and assess his situation. He was still in his vac-suit. His *torn* vac-suit. The fractured recollection of the fight against the Calci flirted with his memory. But, where was he now? He sat up. The *Troika*. Engineering. The emergency lights had failed, but there was a small nest of split cables near the door, and their sparks illuminated the ruination about him. The generator in the centre of the room was in pieces cast about the deck, the hydrogen conduits were smashed, and none of the engineering read-outs were active. There was no sound other than the insistent hiss of the power cables and the dripping of water.

At least the *Troika* was in one piece, relatively. And at least he was still alive. Thank Christ...

You don’t need Christ, Boyd. You’ve got me.

He froze, eyes switching from side to side. A voice. A voice in his head. Plain and devoid of accent or inflection, yet definitely feminine. Who the hell was it?

That’s not important right now, Boyd. There are intruders on the ship. You need to see them off.

“Intruders?” His voice was thick and slow. He sat up. “Where?”

Near. You need to get ready.

He put his hands to his head, trying to remember how he got here. The last thing he remembered was trying to get the graviton drives back online so Tatiana could make the jump to lightspeed...

Lightspeed. Tatiana. The black hole.

“Jesus, she must have tried to activate the graviton drives too close to the black hole. No wonder the *Troika*’s a mess. I surprised it’s even in one piece...”

Not now, Boyd—

“Shut up!” he said, bloody teeth gritted. “I’m trying to think.”

He’d been down here trying to get the drives back online. He’d been down here with...

“Dolly!” he said, trying to stand suddenly, but faltering as he became light-headed and short of breath. “Where’s Dolly?”

#

The two scouts—the dog and a muscular bull—approached Engineering. They each held old pistols in one hand whilst the other clung to a procession of holes, monkey bars and conduits as they made their way along the precariously angled deck. Reaching engineering’s threshold, they stopped, and turned to each other. The dog nodded, taking a small torch from one of his pockets and, turning it on, put it between his teeth and ventured forward.

He stood in the doorway, taking in the wreckage with a sweep of his torch. The first sweep revealed nothing but wreckage and a damaged generator in the centre of the room. The second promised to be just as fruitless until, after a small pause, the scout tracked back, the beam of light scything through the engineering bay until it fell back on a small cranny.

Wedged between a tool cabinet and a spares locker lay a figure. Lost in darkness, the scout could see very little other than the damaged vac-suit. From the Moreaus’ vantage point it was impossible to tell if the wearer was alive.

The dog turned to his comrade, who nodded as he too put a torch between his teeth. With that they began to pick their way toward the figure. Hunched low so as to be able to reach beneath them and cling to the deck, they advanced across the room. Their movements were hurried and sloppy, desperate to know if they’d be eating well tonight.

Making a wary berth around a nest of hissing cables that hung from the ceiling, they ignored the sparks that showered their dirty parkas. Focused squarely on the figure in the torchlight, their attention was a million miles away from the dark recesses in the ceiling. Moving on, they were oblivious as Boyd lowered himself from one of those recesses. By the time the Moreaus realised he even there, it was too late. With a swift, fluid motion, Boyd grabbed one of the twisting cables by its insulated casing and thrust its sheered end squarely into the dog’s back. Simultaneously Boyd seized the dog’s hand and aimed the pistol therein at the other scout. As the material of the parka ignited and the cable bit through into the flesh beneath, the dog convulsed, firing his pistol involuntarily whilst screaming in abject agony.

As the staccato of the gun tore across the bay, the bull twisted and danced a haphazard, ungainly jig as the bullets thudded into him, his death illuminated in the strobe of the pistol’s muzzle-flash.

#

Chaff cursed under his breath. He couldn’t raise them, try as he might.

He paused, hunkered into a door. Beside him a further scout—a rat-headed youngster known as Moz—clung to a hole in the wall. The two of them were staring at bodies slumped across the narrow corridor. Rotten and bent, they stank, and their lifeless, bloodshot eyes stared into a baleful eternity.

Chaff activated his comm, this time paging his leader.

“What do you want?” Stanztrigger asked over the comm. “Have you taken the ship?”

“We’re... um...” Chaff faltered. “There’s something wrong here.”

“Wrong? What do you mean ‘wrong’? Explain.”

“The ship. It’s full of bodies.”

“It just crashed. What did you expect?”

“No. It’s full of rotten bodies. They’ve been dead for years, at least.”

“And?”

He paused before continuing. Something in darkened recesses of his mind groped at stories he’d heard as a child. Of a man in the sky who commanded an army of the dead. “They all have the same faces. They’re all the same person. Just different versions. Different deaths.”

“Enough. I don’t care. You secure that ship and bring back what edible crew you can. Understood?”

“Understood.”

“And Chaff?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t get lost on the way back.”

The signal dropped out, and Chaff stared a little longer. One of the cadavers’ heads flopped to one side suddenly, startling him.

“Let’s go,” he said, skin crawling.

#

The ploy had worked, and the discarded vac-suit had distracted the intruders. Now, however, Boyd had other concerns: Tatiana and the rest of the crew.

With one of the scout’s torches in his hand, he had managed to locate Doll Two—or bits of it. Its limbs and torso had been thrown about the bay, but he had managed to find its head. Sat with his back to a wall, leaking water pissing down over his head and shoulders, he held the android’s head in both hands. He fiddled under its jaw-line until he found a switch and pressed it.

What are you doing? the voice in Boyd’s head said.

“You’ll see...”

“This unit is booting up,” Doll Two’s head said. “Please state user name and password.” Boyd could feel the head vibrate gently.

“Boyd. Password: Urizen.”

“User recognised. This unit is now online. How may I be of service, Master Boyd?”

“Tatiana and the others. Where are they?”

“Scanning now, Master Boyd.”

#

The air in the med-bay smelt of brine mixed with cleaning fluids. Such was the angle of the ship that one end of the darkened bay was partially submerged and lost in water, dressings, plastic trays and syringes floated on the surface. Presently two of the Moreaus, pistols drawn, eyed the stygian depths warily, but it was too dark to allow the scouts to see what lay

beneath. One Moreau— an aging chimp with grey hair—hung back while the other— a brutish boar with a misshapen head —waded further in to the waist-deep water.

The Chimp produced a small comm from his parka, and held it to his lips. “We’re in the ship’s medical bay, Chaff,” he said. “We can’t see anybody here. Over.”

“My scan showed one contact in there. Alive. Find it.”

With a splash but no warning, the boar was dragged under, vanishing so quickly his cry of surprise was subsumed and deadened as water flooded his open mouth. A dwindling patch of bubbles were his only epitaph. The chimp—eyes wide and limbs shaking—began to fire into the water where his comrade had once stood. The reflected flash of his muzzle danced on the surface of the water. The report of the gunshots echoed about the place

“What? What’s happening? Who’s firing?” Chaff demanded over the comm.

The chimp didn’t have time to answer. A red, muscled arm burst from the water, thrusting a surgical scalpel into the scout’s groin and piercing the femoral artery. Crying out, the chimp clutched at the wound, both hands closing about the protruding scalpel. Unable to stem the flow of blood, he stumbled, fell, and was lost beneath the reddening water.

#

“Vast is currently in med-bay,” Doll Two said. “She appears to have killed two intruders.”

Boyd grunted. That made sense. If there was anybody he could trust on the *Troika* to make short work of these Moreaus, it was Vast. “What about Tatiana? And Ivan and Katarina?”

“They are still on the flight-deck, Master Boyd.”

#

Chaff and Moz now stood at the threshold of the flight-deck. As Moz squeezed into a doorway, Chaff pressed the button on his comm even harder, as if the increased pressure would illicit some reply. “What’s happening?” His voice was now every bit as frayed as his clothing. “What’s that gunfire? Have you encountered resistance? Is there anybody there? Why won’t you answer?”

Finally giving up, he lowered the comm and his head, eyes closed.

His lowered head twitched slightly, hearing something. His eyes snapped open and he looked up, glaring at Moz. “What are you doing? What are you eating?”

Moz froze in mid-chew, an almost comedic look of guilt on his face before he quickly moved his hand behind his back and swallowed. “Nothing.”

“Show me.” Chaff’s voice had regained its authority, and he held out his hand to receive whatever Moz was hiding. The rat shook his head vehemently. “Show. Me!”

With the truculence of a chastened child, Moz—head lowered so as to avoid Chaff’s glare—placed the object in the Chaff’s hand.

“What the..?” Chaff stared at the chunk of rotten flesh that now festered in his hand. “Where did you...? Tell me you didn’t...”

“I’m so hungry,” Moz cried out. “I cut it from one of those corpses.”

“Cut it...?” Chaff gasped in exasperation before flinging the piece of rotten meat down the corridor. “Have you any idea how diseased that meat could be? We don’t even know what those damn corpses are.”

#

Boyd, still barefoot, made swift progress through the *Troika*. Turning a corner, he paused, confronted by a clutch of dead Calci. Limbs bent at odd angles, they littered the corridor. Boyd's eyes narrowed as his body tensed still further, tightening his grip on the old pistol he'd taken from his victims in engineering. Skin crawling, he saw they were the all too familiar doppelgangers of the *Troika*'s crew, ghastly extrapolations on their fates. Frozen, he saw Tatianas. He saw Ivans. He saw Katarinas. Some even looked like him. All were immobile, but were they really dead?

"Master Boyd?" Doll Two—voice relayed over the comm set in Boyd's ear—interrupted his wary appraisal. "You must hurry, sir. The flight-deck has been accessed by these intruders. I believe Master Ivan and the Princesses are now in danger."

#

With the nose of the *Troika* partially submerged, so too was the flight-deck. The canopy had been smashed on impact, and the rain was pouring in, tainting the air with the taste of salt. As Chaff and his comrade waded into the water, pistols drawn, they looked about them warily. Little of the expansive instrumentation on display was functional, and even they stuttered intermittently, giving brief tactical displays, diagnostic read-outs and engineering reports. A klaxon tried to wail, but managed little more than a protracted gargle. A speaker set into the ceiling spat static which, for the briefest moments, seemed to recede and allow and brief snatches of spoken word—harsh, snide syllables that hinted at vitriol and obsession. The biggest TAC display on the flight-deck alternated between streams of green binary code that cascaded down the screen, and a brief readout that illustrated this small, remote planet on which the *Troika* had crashed, and—beyond the planet's small system—a large vessel limping toward it.

None of that mattered to Chaff. Bringing Moz to a halt with a swift gesture, he stopped, up to his waist in water. Three crew, all strapped into their seats, could be seen, submerged to the chest. Heads slumped forward, they were immobile. A man and two blue girls. The man was old and tough looking, but the girls were young and tender. Succulent. Chaff's mouth began to water.

"I've found three survivors," he said, lifting the comm to his lips, "but the ship is not secure. Some of its crew are still alive. I've lost four men."

"Four? For God's sake, Chaff..." Stanztrigger's voice tailed off briefly before continuing, "Okay, get back here."

"Shall I bring one of these survivors with me now?"

"Bring what you can carry—no more. Just get back here. Do you think you can do that?"

"Yes, sir."

#

Boyd paused by the door to the flight-deck, pistol raised against his shoulder. He wasn't even out of breath, and the wound he'd suffered to his shoulder back on the Jaroth Pha dreadnought didn't even throb. His feet had been cut to ribbons by the debris as he'd sprinted across the ship, but he didn't feel any pain. It just didn't make any sense.

He pushed his confusion to one side. "Dolly?"

"What little information I can elicit from the flight-deck's surveillance system would suggest the intruders have fled, Master Boyd. You may be too late."

“We’ll see about that.”

Stabbing at the door’s pressure pad with his elbow, he stepped into the doorway as the door slid aside. Pistol at the ready, eyes narrowed and jaw set, he took the briefest moment to assess the situation. He could see Ivan. He could see Katarina...

... But he couldn’t see Tatiana.

His focus shifted, looking beyond the smashed canopy. Out in the shallows, out in the rain, he could see an amphibious vehicle pulling away and heading for the shoreline, the garrulous rattle of its engine uneven and strained as the driver bullied the throttle. Even from here he could make out Tatiana, her still body curled around the stand of a machine gun that brooded in the rear of the vehicle.

“Shit!” He sprinted forward, plunging into the water that flooded the flight-deck as he pushed onward. Strong strides made short work of the distance, and he soon burst out of the water as he clambered onto the flight console with every intention of jumping straight through the damaged canopy and pursuing the vehicle. He stopped in his tracks, however, as the machine gun opened up. Only then, as heavy calibre rounds pounded against the hull, did he see a Moreau standing at the machine gun. Obscured behind the weapon’s big metal shield, all Boyd could make out was the Moreau’s legs.

Dropping to one knee, Boyd took a firm hold of his pistol with both hands and began to aim. Still the machine gun roared. Sparks and smashed glass showered Boyd as the rounds bounced off the canopy and ripped passed him. Still he aimed, one eye shut. Still the vehicle pushed on, chugging out of the water as its tyres threw up a trail of wet stones. Still he aimed, gauging wind speed, direction and the assumed velocity of his weapon. Still the machine gun fired, tracers scratching bright lines through the wet gloom. Still Tatiana lay there, motionless.

Boyd fired, and the Moreau behind the machine gun went down, a miasma of blood bursting from his thigh. The vehicle pushed on, however, and Boyd could see he had mere seconds until it reached the trees that lined the beach. He began to take aim again.

“Shit!” It was no use. He couldn’t even see the driver.

She’s gone. Leave her. You need to get this ship repaired. Crepitus could still be out there.

“Fuck off.” From his crouching position he moved like a sprinter in the blocks. Through the canopy and down the scared nose of the *Troika* he ran. Within seconds he was in the water, pushing through the swell as he ignored the cold, the wind, and the rain.

What are you doing?

“Dolly? Can you hear me?”

“Yes, Master Boyd.”

“Tell Vast to keep the *Troika* safe until I get back.”

“Get back? From where, sir?”

“They’ve got Tatiana.” Blood swelled about his legs as rocks on the seabed cut his feet, and salt stung his wounds. He didn’t care. “They’ve got Tatiana... and I want her back.”

Part Two
The Tower That Ate People

Hurling into the trees, Boyd was barely aware of the baleful moan of the wind as it swept through the dead forest beyond the beach. All about him the rotten, faeces-brown trees waved and undulated like a crowd in an auditorium, urging him on as he ran through thick mud that choked the ground.

“I am tracking Princess Tatiana through a transponder in her vacuum suit, Master Boyd,” Doll Two said, its voice conveyed to Boyd via the comms set in his ear.

“Which way, Dolly?” Boyd’s limbs pumped with an almost metronomic rhythm, and his breathing was steady and even.

“The amphibious vehicle containing the Princess is following a convoluted trail through the forest. If you maintain your present course and speed, you should be able to intercept it in approximately ninety seconds.”

Why bother. We don’t need her. You should be trying to repair the Troika. Crepitus is still out there, y’know?

There it was again, the voice in his head. Boyd gritted his teeth. He didn’t know who it was, or how it had got there, but it was becoming annoying. “Shut up,” he said tersely as he dodged sideways to avoid colliding with a tree.

“As you wish, Master Boyd.”

“Not you, Dolly.”

“Oh, I am sorry, Master Boyd. Are you conducting another conversation of which I am unaware?”

“Apparently, yes.”

“Very good, sir.”

#

Chaff gunned the amphibious vehicle down the twisting track. It wasn’t easy, with the Dogfish’s deranged tracking constantly pulling to the right. The garrulous, strained lamentation of the vehicle’s aging engine and the rattling of loose panels and faulty suspension almost drowned out Moz’s cries. Chaff risked a quick glance over his shoulder. Clutching his wounded thigh in the back of the vehicle, Moz rolled to and fro as he tried to stem the bleeding. His camouflaged trousers, once grey, were now crimson, and his face was ashen.

“Just hang on, Moz!” Chaff shouted over the noise of vehicle. “We won’t be long.”

He turned back, and—through instinct and surprise—his foot went for the brakes.

Suddenly the track was blocked by a human. Stood tall and defiant, his bare feet and body-stocking were ripped and blood-stained. Head lowered, he glared through black lashes as he raised a pistol and aimed for Chaff.

Chaff wrenched his foot from the brake and slammed it back onto the accelerator. “Don’t call my bluff, boy,” he said through snarling teeth as he gripped the steering wheel hard.

Whoever this man was, however, he wasn't calling anybody's bluff. First one shot rang out, then another. The first bullet shattered the windshield, showering Chaff in glass, the second tore into the Moreau's shoulder. He barked in pain, hand going to his wound, eyes shutting. Losing his grip on the wheel, the vehicle's faulty tracking took over, and it veered violently to the right, plunging off the track and spearing between the trees. Chaff opened his eyes just in time to see the drop beyond leering at him, but it was too late. Momentarily airborne, the Dogfish was almost serene in its flight before—maintaining its horizontal attitude through momentum alone—it splashed down into an estuary that lay some thirty feet below.

Chaff was thrown against the big steering wheel, and he felt something break in his chest. His head snapped forward then back, and his vision immediately became blurred and darkened. His ears rang, and his faculties were confused. Pain besieged his every fibre.

His first instinct was to just curl up and hide. It'd be easy. Just let go, and sleep. Moz cried out once more, however, and Chaff forced himself to sit upright. Moz. The prisoner. He had to get them back to the *Tower*.

He dipped the clutch, wrenching at the Dogfish's stick-shift to engage the propshaft. As the water behind the vehicle began to churn and swell, and the Dogfish began to move forward, Chaff then threw a further lever on the steering column, locking the wheel in position. A brief pause for a ragged breath, and he craned himself out of the driver's seat and headed for the rear of the vehicle.

#

“The Princess appears to have changed direction and slowed somewhat, Master Boyd.”

Boyd swore, throwing the pistol to one side. It had jammed after the second shot. Now he'd have to finish things off with his bare hands.

Sprinting, he followed the impromptu track made by the amphibious vehicle. He had to get to the Dogfish before its crew had chance to recover. The markings on that thing—and their equipment—said Theocracy, and they fought to the bitter end.

In minutes he was leant against the brittle husk of a decaying tree. Smashed and bent, it bore testimony to the passage of the vehicle. Beyond it was a thick, congested collection of trees with a Dogfish sized hole punched in it. Beyond that he could see the estuary, and the vehicle moving away as it flayed at the water, moving inland.

He squinted. He could see Tatiana. She was still unconscious, thrown against the rear of the cabin. Suddenly the Dogfish's lupine driver, with a bloody shoulder and loping gait, was craning himself out of that cabin, and heading for the machine gun.

Boyd! Look out!

He had the merest opportunity to duck back before the firing started. The chatter of the gun stabbed through the forest just as the bullets sliced through the trees about Boyd, and the Scot was showered in sharp, hot splinters of bark and masticated wood. He had a brief moment to realise his cover was being chewed up by the machine gun's fire before, with a crack and a groan, the tree he was hiding behind began to buckle.

Move, Boyd, move!

He made for another tree, crouching low, but to no avail. A bullet grazed his shoulder, the impact throwing him backward as he shouted in searing pain. Falling onto his back, he only had time to put his arms across his face as—with a petulant groan—another tree behind him fell, trapping him with its dead weight, smothering him with its damaged bark.

#

Chaff kept on firing until the barrel of the machine gun glowed white hot, and the ammunition ran out. Even then he stood with the trigger depressed as it clicked incessantly, the barrel trained on the smoking copse of trees.

The smoke began to clear, and he could finally see the devastation he had wrought. He had levelled the trees, and all that remained was a shredded mass of decimated pulp and mulch. There was no movement. Surely nobody could have survived that barrage?

He took the mic from his pocket, movements slow and mechanical, and spoke into it. "I'm returning to the *Tower* now. I was pursued briefly, but it's taken care of."

"Any further casualties?"

"Moz has been hurt. Shot in the thigh. He's bleeding badly. He may not make it."

"Bring him back anyway. If we can't stitch him back together, he can be eaten."

Chaff gulped, head lolling to the side as he closed his eyes and breathed in the sea air in an attempt to clear his senses. "Yes, sir," he said, the words almost an amorphous mumble.

Putting the mic away, Chaff looked at Moz and the girl. She seemed okay. She was still unconscious, but Moz appeared to have deteriorated. His rat head twitched fitfully on his slender shoulders. The skin about his eyes had darkened, and—as the light failed, storm clouds gathering above—his chops and mouth almost looked green. He'd fallen silent and still now, breath shallow and skin sweaty.

"Come on, Moz," Chaff said as he moved toward the youngster. "I've already lost four good men. I don't want to lose you too..."

#

Boyd could hear rain falling on wood, and the slur of wind over an uneven surface above him. Water was soaking his body, and his face was wet. He tried to take a deep breath, only to find his mouth and nose were blocked with brittle, hot bark. His eyes snapped open. He could see nothing.

He was buried! He couldn't breathe! He had to get out! Every inch of his body focused on gaining his freedom. His arms and legs thrashed against the oppressive weight above him. Arching his back, pushing against the darkness, he bucked. In minutes he was upright, forcing his way through the blanket of ruined trees, coughing up bark, ash and dirt.

Welcome back.

He couldn't be bothered to answer. He pawed at his eyes before looking about him. The light had deteriorated, and now rain was lashing from the brooding sky as wind whipped about him, the frenetic air thick with the smell of burnt wood.

He moved a finger to the earpiece of his comms set. "Dolly?"

"Welcome back, Master Boyd. I was beginning to worry."

"How long have I been out?"

"Not long, sir. Five minutes. You really do seem to be recuperating rapidly."

"You're telling me..." His hand went to his shoulder. It was soaked in blood, but the wound wasn't all that deep. A flesh wound. He stuck a dirty finger in it. It seemed to be knitting with surprising speed. "Do you still have a fix on Tatiana?"

“Yes, Master Boyd. She has moved inland along a river, and is now approaching some form of lagoon in the centre of the island.”

#

The rain lashed harder as the Dogfish turned the corner and nosed its way into the lagoon. Slumped against the wheel, weary, bleeding and fighting to stay awake, Chaff allowed himself the smallest of smiles.

“Almost there, Moz,” he shouted over his shoulder, knowing full well the kid may have been dead by now.

The lagoon was big, its turgid waters surrounded by faces of sheer rock broken up with the odd shoreline of stony beach. Fetid trees flanked the tops of the cliffs like sentinels, and, even from here, Chaff could see the camouflaged guard towers they concealed were unmanned, such was the paucity of men available these days.

At the centre of this lagoon, contrasting with the drab grey of its surroundings sat Stanztrigger’s ship, the *Tower*. A hulking Theocracy vessel built—as with all Theocracy capital ships—along a vertical axis, it sat at the centre of the lagoon with three quarters of its height lost beneath fetid water. Once it would have gleamed, the brass-like glory of its hide reflecting the light of stars, savaged worlds and burning ships, but now its battered hull was covered with rust and moss. It never ceased to amaze Chaff how easily Mother Nature could consume one of the Theocracy’s finest, given fifty years or so.

Slumping in his seat, he steered the Dogfish toward a makeshift dock fitted to the side of the *Tower*, and gunned the engine still further. Every second counted if Moz were to survive. That, and his belly was painful and empty, his thoughts drifting to his blue, fleshy prize...

#

Boyd’s pursuit, guided by Doll Two, had taken him from the edge of the estuary to the centre of the island. Hurtling through the trees, he’d barely been cognisant of not only his mounting cuts and bruises, but also the old, stone ruins he passed. Once they’d been temples, halls and houses, but now they were reduced to rubble, the scorched, broken remains subsumed by ash and fallen trees. He didn’t know how, and he didn’t care. All he wanted was Tatiana, and now he crouched in a badly constructed guard tower that overlooked the lagoon, watching the Dogfish as it sidled up to a makeshift dock on the side of the ship. Two Moreaus stationed there—one with a lion’s head and the other with that of an otter—were already clambering aboard the amphibious vehicle, one tethering it to the dock as the other helped the wounded wolf from the cabin.

“Brilliant. A Theocracy ship.” It was a few years now since he’d fought the Theocracy, and he’d been hoping it’d stay that way. “This just gets better and better.”

Look at that ship. It’s got to be sixty years old.

“From what information I can elicit from the scanners,” Dolly said to Boyd over the ‘net, “I would suggest the vessel is a Conviction class battleship. They were commonly employed by the Theocracy in their third war with the D’Kothren....”

... But judging by that damage just above the waterline, it was probably attacked en route to the frontline and marooned he—

“Okay, that’s enough, both of you,” Boyd said.

“Both?” Dolly paused before continuing. “Master Boyd, have you been drinking?”

He ignored the question, staring at the vessel. A faded minotaur was painted on the ship's hull. "That may have been built by the Theocracy," Boyd said, "but it's not a Theocracy ship."

So, whose is it?

"Stanztrigger."

Whotrigger?

"He was the leader of a company of man-eating Moreau mercenaries called the Eaters. Used to do a lot of work for the Theocracy. They took payment in flesh and human slaves. They disappeared years ago, before I was born. Nobody knows what happened to them. They must have been marooned here all that time."

"Do you think this is his ship, Master Boyd?"

"I know it is," Boyd said, looking toward the stylised minotaur. "I'd recognise that painting anywhere. Stanztrigger was a legend. Ivan and Gregor used to talk about him all the time. They always said the Theocracy would have won even more wars if the Eaters hadn't vanished."

His head sank and his shoulders sagged. Stanztrigger. Great. He'd have preferred the Theocracy. Or, even better, a drink and a good meal. His hunger so acute now as to be painful. Wrestling also with a raging thirst, he'd have given anything for a stiff dram.

He looked up. The rain was getting harder, and he'd swear his skin was starting to burn. The sky was murky now, and clouds swirled above the Theocracy ship like black milk in grey coffee. It did not, Boyd concluded, look natural.

I told you. Crepitus. He's coming. He's coming, and he's going to kill us all.

"Us? You're suddenly very familiar."

"Familiar? I'm sorry, Master Boyd, but I really am most confused."

"Don't worry about it, Dolly." He stood, and began to strip what was left of his cut and bloody body-stocking. "I'm going to have to swim over to that ship, okay? I'm gonna have to go offline."

"Very good, Master Boyd. We shall remain here and await your return. Vast has established some ad-hoc defences, and I believe Master Ivan and Mistress Katarina may awaken soon. I look forward to seeing both yourself and Mistress Tatiana as soon as possible."

"Count on it, Dolly."

#

The lion and the otter carried the unconscious Moz from the Dogfish whilst Chaff dragged his blue prize behind him. Holding her by her wrists, he hauled her across the ramshackle dock, pulling her along on her backside as her head lolled about her shoulders.

He paused to look up and peered at the black, swirling clouds. There was no doubt about it: The rain stung.

Finally he was inside the ship, the blue girl in tow. As soon as he was inside, he turned to close the old, scarred door. It groaned and cranked as it slid down, sealing them in.

"You two! Get off!" Turning back, Chaff saw Cook shooing the lion and the otter away, the pair moving in on the captive girl, grabbing at her as they licked their lips. As they backed off, their disappointment was written all over their faces.

“You,” Cook said to the lion whilst pointing at Moz, who’d been dumped on the dirty, rusty deck. “Get him to sick-bay. Tell the doctor to do what he can, but not to waste too many drugs. If he dies, save what you can in the Pantry and recycle the rest.”

The lion nodded. Young, barely more than a cub, his skin was pale and his mane dirty and plastered in dirt. He bent his lanky, malnourished frame and took Moz by the collar before beginning to drag him away.

“You,” Cook said, turning to Chaff, “report to Stanztrigger. He would speak to you about this girl’s ship, this *Troika*. Once you have debriefed him, report to sick-bay and have that shoulder looked at.”

“But, Cook, I’m worried. What about the weather?”

“What about it?”

“The rain. The clouds. There’s something wrong out there...”

“Let the weather do as it pleases.” He began to shuffle after the otter as it picked up the girl and carried her off toward the galley. He put his hands behind his humped back and squinted at Chaff over his shoulder. “We are quite safe here.”

#

The rain was lashing down now, a Moreau guard with a kestrel’s head and skinny, taloned fingers hunched against it as he brought the hood up on his rain cape.

“Lev, report,” his comm said, distorted and disjointed.

Stationed on top of the *Tower*, hands resting on a railing along the edge of the ship’s hull, the Moreau squinted into the rain and out across the lagoon, its waters a blanket of circles under the rain. “All clear... I think.”

“You think?”

He didn’t answer immediately. Startled, he looked over his shoulder as a fleeting intrusion on his peripheral vision disturbed him. He peered into the gloom. “It’s very dark all of a sudden. It’s almost like night out here.” Seeing nothing, he turned back.

The voice in the comm. laughed. “What’s wrong, Lev? Scared of monsters?”

“Because you should be.” Naked and wet through, Boyd emerged from the darkness behind the guard, grabbing him by the beak and shoulder before snapping his head around.

“Lev? *Lev*? Report! Lev!”

Boyd took the comm and threw it into the lagoon. Minutes later, having stripped the Moreau and donned his ill-fitting uniform, he threw the body after it, watching it fall before plunging into the water below.

The waters of the lagoon were encrusted with scum, and the hull of the *Tower* wasn’t much better. Yet Boyd had found it remarkably easy to swim one and scale the other. Even now, skin burning from the rain, he felt fresh and strong.

Turning, he headed for a hatch in the hull that lead into the *Tower*. “Right, y’bastards,” he said as he crouched, seizing the hatch’s handle, “bring out your dead.”

#

The *Tower*’s galley was a contrast of black and orange, the darkness assuaged by brazen fires from lines of ovens and hobs. It was filled with steam, the sound of bubbling and boiling, and

the incessant *drip drip drip* of leaking water. It was stifling hot, and the air was thickened by the haze of burning oils and fat.

In the centre, the girl was suspended from the ceiling, her bound hands over a meat hook. The cord bit into her skin, and it was soaked in her blood. Still in her vac-suit, the name “Tatiana” stencilled on its chest, her head lolled back and forth as she dangled there, but there were signs of animation in her face. A twitching of eyebrows. A crease of the forehead. A flex of the lips. She would be awake soon.

Cook was stood by a nearby table as he watched, smiling as he picked up a carving knife and began to attack its gleaming edge with a knife sharpener. His excitement was betrayed by the twitching of his cracked lips, by the shaking of his hands, by the greedy, almost salacious twinkling in his tiny black eyes.

“Wake up, Tatiana,” he said. “It’s time for supper.”

Part Three Supper’s Ready

Hand on his wounded shoulder, Chaff shuffled into the *Tower’s* musty chapel. Only a selection of brave candles served to exorcise the darkness, and Stanztrigger’s black mass was almost concealed in the gloom as he knelt before the chapel’s tiny altar and golden crucifix. His eyes were closed, lips moving in silent prayer, and Chaff—moving to stand beside him—dared not interrupt his leader’s supplications.

“Speak,” Stanztrigger said after a moment, crossing himself as his eyes opened.

“Sir,” Chaff said, lupine head bowed, “I came as soon as I got back to the *Tower*.”

Stanztrigger stood, looking down on the wolfen Moreau. “Did you get that girl back in one piece?”

“Yes, sir. Cook has her now.”

“Excellent. We will toast you when we eat her.”

“Thank you, sir.” Chaff bowed.

“Will that be all, Chaff?”

The Moreau didn’t answer. He looked at Stanztrigger, but couldn’t hold his gaze. He looked away, hands twitching

“Something troubles you, Chaff.” Stanztrigger placed a hand on his shoulder, squeezing gently.

“Sir... I’m worried. About Moz. He ate something back on the *Troika*. A bit off a corpse. I’ve got a funny feeling about it...”

“‘Funny feelings’ are for the pubescent,” Stanztrigger said. “Do not worry about Moz. He is in good hands. Now, you should get to sick-bay also, and have that shoulder looked at. I am going out to this ‘*Troika*’ as soon as the men are ready. You’re going with me.”

“Go out to the *Troika*? Me? Again?”

Stanztrigger leant forward, peering at Chaff through the gloom. “I will need your experience. The other men are boys. You know that.”

“We... we should wait. The storm outside—”

“Never mind the damned weather, Chaff.” Stanztrigger's tone changed, sharpening like a spear. “I’ve been waiting for a vessel to land here for decades. A vessel to take us *home*. I’m not waiting any longer. Now go, and meet me at the hangar when you’re ready.” He reached into a pocket in his fatigues, producing a small comm. Before activating it he said, “We shall take this *Troika*, and, once we’re off this planet, we eat this Tatiana.”

#

“This is Stanztrigger. All officers and ancillary crew are to report to their stations immediately. All marines are to proceed to armoury and then hangar bay. Sick-bay to full readiness. This is not a drill.”

A brief burst of static heralded the end of the transmission, and the speaker above Boyd’s head fell silent. Crouched in the darkness of the dilapidated, sparsely lit corridor, pressed into a doorway, he watched two Moreaus walking passed. They were like everything else here—rotten and dying. One—an aging, grey-muzzled dog—coughed violently, and was forced to stop whilst his female compatriot—a feline—stopped to hit him on the back.

Boyd, the voice in his head said, if you insist on finding Tatiana, you’d better hurry. This place is going to be crawling with soldiers soon, and I’m guessing they’re going after the Troika.

“Be quiet,” Boyd said, his voice a harsh whisper. With that he slid from the shadows, stolen knife in hand. Falling upon the two guards from behind, he put the dog out of his misery with a swift cut across the throat. It was so dim in this corridor that Boyd could barely see the blood splatter the deck as the old dog collapsed, gargling, but the look of surprise on the cat’s face was obvious.

“I surrender! I surrender!” she said, hands reaching for the ceiling.

Boyd studied her. Grizzled and worn, this Moreau’s scars suggested she’d seen plenty of action. Now, however, she just looked tired and empty. “What’s your name?”

“Lorelei.”

“Okay, Lorelei,” he said, the point of his knife now resting at the Moreau’s throat. “Your friends have been on my ship and taken something from me. A girl. A blue girl. Where is she?”

#

“Wake up, girl,” Cook said, knife resting on Tatiana’s chest. “It’s time for supper.”

Cook moved the tip of the blade over Tatiana’s vac-suit, its point biting into the thick material. “Why don’t you wake up and talk to me?” he said, his eyes shining in the reflected fire of his ovens and hobs. “I get so lonely here. I’ve been down here so long, in this galley. Alone.”

Moving the knife to the vac-suit’s collar, he made an incision. It was just deep enough to cut the suit, but not Tatiana’s skin. He sliced across the neck, separating the suit’s circular metal collar. “Stanztrigger and I are only two left, you know? All the rest of the original crew, the ones who crashed here, they’re all dead. Now there’s only us.”

Placing the knife below Tatiana’s throat, he cut downwards, slicing the suit open. Still he drew no blood. “But nobody comes here, to my galley. Not even Stanztrigger. They’re all scared of me, I can tell. They think I’m some murderous old bastard who likes cutting people open, who likes hurting them. You don’t think that, do you, Tatiana?”

There was still no response from Tatiana, whose head continued to move back and forth in a random fashion as she began to approach consciousness.

“You’re very quiet, Tatiana,” Cook said as he took a step back, appraising the girl. “But it doesn’t matter.” He raised the knife, the reflected firelight dancing on its blade. “You’ll be singing like a newborn soon enough.”

#

Stomach knotted and empty, Chaff staggered into sick-bay, one hand on his wound, the other on his belly. “Doctor?” he said. “How is... Moz ...?”

His voice tailed off as he looked about, confused. Like all the *Tower*, the spacious sick-bay was dark and damp, but Doctor did what he could to keep the place clean. Now, however, it was liberally splattered with blood. Of Doctor and Moz, there was no sign.

Chaff looked about, eyes narrowing and a growl building in his throat as he let go of his belly and drew his pistol. It didn’t make sense. There were at least three Moreaus in here before Moz reported to sick-bay. Chaff stood still and silent as he peered at the blood-spattered walls, the beds and their idle Doctorpus units, and the floor. Translating the splatter pattern, he flexed his fingers on the butt of his gun as he stepped cautiously toward a gap between two of the beds that lined the opposing wall.

Reaching the gap, his fears were confirmed. Lying on the floor, uniform torn and stomach ripped open, was the doctor. Half man, half pig, a look of pained astonishment was frozen on his porcine features. His face was a pallid white, the skin about his mouth and eyes a curious green. It must have been a trick of the dim light, but Chaff was certain his face was twitching, despite the abject lack of viscera in his exposed, rent midriff.

Chaff looked about him, looking for Moz. It had to have been him. Chaff had known there was something odd about his comrade when he was lying wounded on the *Dogfish*. His skin had looked weird. No doubt something to do with that cadaverous meat he’d eaten on the *Troika*. Shoving his pistol in his belt, Chaff took his comm from his pocket, activating it as he put it to his lips. “Bridge? This is Chaff in sick-bay. We have a problem. Doct—”

His report was cut off as Moz emerged from the shadows behind. What little of his skin could be seen through Doctor’s blood was sickly and green, his rat eyes were bloodshot and wide, and his movements were jerky but swift. In a panic, Chaff dropped his comm and reached for his pistol, but it was too late. In two strides Moz bridged the distance between them, seizing Chaff by the shoulders as he lunged, sinking his bloodied teeth into the old wolf’s neck.

#

“This is Stanztrigger. Security detail to sick-bay immediately. I repeat: Security detail to sick-bay immediately.”

Washing his hands in preparation, Cook looked up toward the speaker. Even once the announcement was over, it leaked a residual buzz. “He really is remarkable, you know—Stanztrigger?” he said, turning back to the motionless Tatiana. With her heavy boots and vac-suit cut away, the Oridian was dressed in only her body-stocking. Picking up a further knife and licking his lips as he looked at Tatiana, Cook’s intentions for this body-stocking—and the soft, blue flesh beneath—were clear. “Without him in charge, I doubt we’d still be alive. Wasn’t easy. We’ve all had to make sacrifices.” He looked toward the bubbling cooking pots and hot ovens. “Some, of course, had to make bigger sacrifices than others.

“In all these years we’ve been stuck here, since we crashed, he’s never slept. He says he refuses to until we’re off this planet. I asked him once, how he did it. He said it was ‘Faith’.”

He stopped a foot or so short of Tatiana, and his eyes narrowed as he took a firmer grip on her knife. “Come on, Tatiana. Why don’t you talk to me? I can see you’re awake.”

“I was waiting... for you... to shut up,” Tatiana said quietly as her eyes opened. Her voice was slightly slurred, and her eyes unfocused. “I couldn’t get a word in edgeways.”

Cook smiled a false, brief smile. It quickly transformed into a sneer, and he lunged for Tatiana with his knife. Tatiana’s response was equally as swift, her foot kicking out and striking him on the chin. Halted in his tracks, Cook took a step back, and, a moment later, Tatiana’s leg swept out once more, this time striking the knife from his hand with the side of her foot. The next blow hit him square between the eyes, and the old man reeled backward, falling to the deck beside a row of worktops cluttered with chopping boards and knives.

“Oooo... a struggle.” Cook’s smile was as dark as his narrowed eyes. He stood and reached to the worktop beside him, taking up another knife. “Excellent. Been a while since I’ve had to fight for my dinner.”

He turned back toward Tatiana, only to see the young woman pulling herself up until her chest was level with the meat-hook between her bound wrists. Face flushed and jaw clenched with the strain, Tatiana raised her legs above her head, wrapping them about the chain suspending her from the ceiling. Cook started forward, forcing his old, crooked limbs forward as best he could. By the time he’d reached his supple young quarry, however, Tatiana had used her purchase on the chain to gain some slack on her bound wrists, freeing them from the meat-hook. Unfurling her body, she dangled up-side-down as she grabbed Cook by the collar with bound hands and drove her forehead into the bridge of his nose.

Cook squealed, falling to the floor once more as his long nose broke and blood filled his eyes, mouth and sinuses. “Bitch!” he shouted as he began to stand, wiping the blood from his eyes with the back of one hand, the other waving his knife about him to ward off any unseen attack. “I’ll gut you! You hear? I’ll gut you!”

The next thing he saw of Tatiana was an azure blur as the Oridian dropped to the deck, twisting in the air like a cat to land on her feet, before rushing him, reaching for his neck. Old and frail as he was, however, Cook was not an easy target. A well-judged thrust of his knife, and he stopped Tatiana in her tracks, stabbing her in the ribs. The knife sliced through the body-stocking with ease. The familiar give of flesh, the resistance of bone, followed.

Tatiana screamed, and she screamed loud, falling to the deck, landing beside a row of hobs covered with bubbling pots and pans. A flower of blood flourished on her ribs, and the Oridian clamped both hands over the wound as she began to roll to and fro. Her face was contorted with pain, eyes shut and teeth clenched as she bit down, spittle flecking her lips.

“That’ll do for starters, young lady,” Cook said with a smile, blood filling the gap between his big front teeth. Knife raised above his head, he began to move toward Tatiana. “Now, let’s get to the main course, shall we?”

#

Stanztrigger listened to his men dying. Having left the captain’s chair to stand beside the sparrow’s station, he listened as the security detail dispatched to sick-bay—six Moreaus in all—screamed in fear and agony. Finally their cries were truncated by bubbling, bloody gargles.

“That’s coming from Chaff’s comm,” the sparrow said. Trembling, she didn’t look at Stanztrigger. “It’s still open.”

“Do we have functional surveillance equipment near sick-bay?”

“None,” the sparrow replied. “But we’ve just received a report from Lorelei. She was on her way to the hangar when a man attacked her and killed Stat. He wanted to know where the girl was...”

“What ‘girl’? The prisoner from the *Troika*?”

“Aye, sir.”

“And this man killed Stat?”

“Aye. Also, he was wearing Lev’s uniform.”

Stanztrigger’s eyes darkened as drew a pistol strapped to his thigh. “Lock these doors behind me, girl,” he said as he turned and strode to his chair with such purpose sparks flew as his cloven hooves struck the metal deck, “and don’t let *anybody* in, understand?”

“Where are you going, sir?” Now she looked at Stanztrigger, eyes wide and a tremor in her voice.

“Something’s killing my crew,” he said as he took the flak-vest from the back of his chair, “and whoever this man in Lev’s gear is, he has answers.” He donned the flak-vest, zipping it up to his chin. “I’m going to find him.”

#

Moving cautiously, pistol held in both hands, Boyd continued down the murky corridor. The sound of his boots sloshing through inch-deep water competed with the *drip drip drip* of incessant leaks. The corridor’s weak light was reflected by the dirty water, dancing along the walls and ceiling like Saint Vitus.

You should have killed her.

“Are you joking? Did you see her?” Boyd said under his breath as he recalled the sight of the cat Moreau—knocked unconscious with the lightest of blows to the chin—slumped in the doorway. “She was hardly worth the effort. None of these guys are. I’m not even sure why I’ve gone at ‘em so hard. Bad language’d be enough to beat most of ‘em.”

Don’t be so sure. They’re starving and desperate. Every one of them you leave alive could make you pay for it later. In blood.

“Whatever. Just shut up for a minute, okay?” He’d stopped now. Having reached the end of the corridor, he paused by a rusty door and peered at a faded, mouldy map laid into the wall at the end of the corridor. They were near the *Tower*’s sick-bay. He looked harder, looking for the galley. “There!” he said, pointing to the map. “The cat said Tatiana’d been taken there, to the gall—”

The door beside him hissed open, revealing one of the ship’s crew. Stock still, shoulders slumped and head down, its face was lost in shadow.

Boyd raised his pistol immediately, stepping away from the door and the figure beyond. “Don’t move...” His eyes flicked to the name stencilled on the figure’s parka “Moz. I don’t want to kill you. Just move aside.”

His first instinct was to shoot on sight, but the image of that cat Moreau, so thin and empty... These people didn’t deserve to be slaughtered. They should be pitied, if anything.

The figure offered no reply, nor did it move.

Boyd...

“Not now.”

Boyd, really. I've got a bad feeling about this.

Then the figure raised its head, revealing a rat's head. Sickly green skin surrounded eyes red with burst blood-vessels. Its skin was ashen skin and its slack mouth was choked with blood, the teeth caked in loose, torn flesh. Then, in a burst of speed, it rushed at Boyd, grabbing for the Scot even as Boyd fired again and again until his pistol was exhausted. Oblivious to the bullets that thudded into its torso, oblivious to its wounds, it seized Boyd by the neck, squeezing hard as its gaping mouth bore down on the Scot's face.

#

Through a blaze of pain, Tatiana heard the old cook's irregular steps on the metal deck. Forcing herself to open her eyes, forcing herself to fight the pain, to focus, she saw him looming toward her, knife above his head.

Tatiana had to move. Pain or no pain, she'd not come this far, she'd not fought the Witch and Portia and the Calci, just to be killed by some old man with a knife.

He was almost upon her now, poised to strike down with the knife. There was a sinister smile on his face, eyes wide and delirious. Tatiana kicked out with her foot, buying herself some time as she struck him hard in the knee. The old man swore as he collapsed onto his hands and knees, still gripping the blade. He and Tatiana looked at each other, sight locked. Tatiana reached up, hoping to grab the edge of the stove beside her and pull herself up. Instead her fingers fell upon the handle of a cooking pot that projected from the edge of the stove. Grabbing it, acting on instinct alone, she heaved, planning to strike the cook on the head. Only when she felt how heavy the pan was did she realise it was full. As she swung it toward the old man it decanted its contents, hot oil cascading onto the cook.

He howled as the hot oil seared his head, face and shoulders. Hands going over his burnt face, he collapsed onto his back, and the smell of burning fur and flesh assaulted Tatiana. Writhing, he kicked at the air, revolving on his humped back like an inverted cockroach. Sickened by the sound of his suffering, Tatiana crawled onto her hands and knees, lurched forward, and struck him hard on the head with the empty pan.

The unconscious cook fell silent, and now it was Tatiana's turn to fall onto her back, hands going once again to her wound. She could barely see, her blurred vision crowded by swathes of darkness. Skin clammy, she was suddenly very cold. A horrid sucking noise came from her wound whenever she managed to breathe. There was blood in her throat. She groaned, eyes closing, as the grip on her wound slackened.

She was dying, she could feel it. She was dying, and her life was flooding through her fingers.

Part Four

The Knife

Dropping the gun, Boyd seized Moz by the jaw with both hands and held the slavering mouth at bay as its fetid breath washed over him.

Look at him! He's a Calci! The voice in his head shrieked. *I told you! This has got to be Crepitus's work!*

Moz seized Boyd's wrists with an alarming strength, and the two became locked in a test of strength. Boyd redoubled his efforts, a groan escaping his lips as his arms began to shake, the muscles burning. Still he squeezed Moz's jaw, and a crack of bone sounded through the corridor. Moz's face compressed, the jaw broken and his chin forced under his tiny nose. With muffled cry, he wrenched Boyd's arms aside and, letting go, staggered back as though dazed.

Boyd stumbled backward, almost losing his footing in the water that hid the deck. He was sweating, and, for the first time since he'd woken up on the *Troika*, his pulse was up as his heart-rate quickened. This wasn't going to be as easy as he'd thought....

Take his head off! Take his head off! Don't let him bite you!

"I know," Boyd said through gritted teeth as he crouched, circling his foe, "what I'm doing."

Moz, standing still and erect as he ripped off his ruined jaw and cast it aside, watched Boyd as though waiting for a chance, waiting for an opening. There was still an intelligence in those eyes, a cunning. This wasn't one of the mindless Calci the crew of the *Troika* had faced in the Elephant's Graveyard, or the lurching Wardread of Protos Alpha he'd fought beside his old unit. This was sharper. Keener. Qui—

It sprang at Boyd, clawing at the Scots face with a vicious rapidity. It tried to shout, but all that emerged from its exposed pharynx and flopping tongue was a bizarre farting of expelled air. Its blunt, broken fingernails made no impact on Boyd's skin, but the way Moz was trying to dig those fingernails into his eyes told the Scot he had to end this quickly before he was blinded.

Ducking under Moz's flailing arms, Boyd stepped past and behind his opponent. Turning, he trapped Moz in a full nelson grapple. Fingers locked, his teeth gritted as he closed his eyes and pushed hard at the back of Moz's head. Boyd let out a primal cry, body stiffening as he lifted the struggling Moz from the deck. Still kicking, Moz fought to the last, but his fate was sealed. With a deep crack, blood and mucus burst from his pharynx as his neck snapped and the back of his skull fractured under Boyd's pressure. Seconds later the skin of his neck tore, and seconds after that, his head came off, the larynx, sinews and sternomastoid muscles in pursuit as it flew through the air and vanished into the dirty water.

Letting the lifeless body fall, Boyd staggered back, eyes wide as he stared at the spot where the head had gone under. Bile rose in his throat. He looked down at his bare hands, covered in thick blood. How? How could he do that? How did he have the strength? Where did this fitness, recuperation and speed come from? What was he becoming?

The voice in his head laughed gently.

#

Tatiana dragged herself across the deck to Cook's unconscious body and seized his knife. She wasn't going to die like this. She refused. She was Gregor Valentine's daughter.

Heaving herself to the galley's glowing hobs, she forced herself off the deck into a crouch, then stood, legs quivering violently. The wound in her ribs continued to suck air and seep blood as she breathed, and the hand she clutched over the wound was thick with congealing blood. With her eyesight failing, she squinted and blinked to focus on the knife. Her breath was coming fast now, in deep, ragged gasps, but she had to concentrate, to stay conscious. She placed the knife on the hot hob then, wavering, she clutched the edge of the cooker in an attempt to remain upright.

It didn't work. Shock and the loss of blood and oxygen overcame her, and she collapsed once more, striking her head hard against the metal deck.

#

Making his way through the *Tower*, Stanztrigger strode into a dingy corridor, pistol in hand. He stopped to glare at two Moreaus crouching at the other end of the corridor. Lost in darkness, they were scrabbling, pulling at something Stanztrigger couldn't see, and raising it to their mouths. They were making primal, guttural noises as their heads bobbed, hands to their mouths.

Stanztrigger's lips curled, exposing cruel, crooked teeth. Were they eating? Why weren't they on duty? "You two! What are you doing?" His voice reverberated about the corridor, and the two Moreaus turned sharply, looking toward him. Still he couldn't make them out clearly. "Stand up and name yourselves!"

They stood, loping toward him after a small pause.

He squinted. He still couldn't see who they were. "Stop," he shouted.

They still came for him, and the hairs on the back of his neck rose. Didn't they realise who he was? Were they blind? "Last chance," he shouted once more. "Stop right there."

They didn't stop. Blurred and swathed in darkness, they were closing fast, and Stanztrigger's nose wrinkled as a putrid smell assailed him. They closed within three feet and, finally, he could make out exposed teeth, wide eyes and bloody mouths.

"That's far enough," he said, raising his pistol and firing. If his voice was loud, the report of his gun was even louder, and his ears rang as the foremost Moreau—now headless—collapsed to the deck.

The other—a boar with broken tusks and rings through its hairy ears—rushed on, getting within striking distance of Stanztrigger and reaching for him. Its fingers were almost on his neck before, with an expansive sweep of his spindly arm, Stanztrigger struck the boar across the face. The blow snapped his assailant's head through 180°, the spinal column sheering. It fell to the deck with a dying groan.

Stanztrigger paused for the briefest moment, staring at the bodies. They weren't getting up again, he concluded as he stepped forward. He knelt between the two bodies, grabbed the boar's body and hauled up its torso to inspect it.

"Who were you?" He took hold of the boar's chin, twisting the head to see its face. Once he'd been one of the security detail sent to the sick-bay, but now the green of his skin and blood in his eyes and mouth told Stanztrigger he'd become something else, something dead and rotten. He looked up the corridor to see the ravaged body they'd been feeding on lying in a torn, twisted heap. Leaning forward, he sniffed the boar's corpse before recoiling and turning his head away in disgust.

That smell! He hadn't smelt anything like that since ... No. It couldn't be!

He stood, the body slumping back to the deck. Then he rolled his shoulders and drew his weapon once again. It couldn't be him. Not Crepitus. Not after all these years.

A smile touched his animal mouth. But if he *were* here? What a welcome chance for revenge
....

#

Tatiana slipped in and out of consciousness, haunted by visions of Calci crowding her. A gaggle of Calci with Boyd's face, holding her down, stripping her naked, and feasting on her flesh as one lay atop her, slipping into her exposed sex as his dead, soulless eyes bore into hers.

Suddenly she was wrenched from her fugue by the sound of something metal falling to the deck, the resulting clang and jangle cutting through the galley.

She tried to focus, she tried to move, to make herself sit up. There was something in here with her. Who was it? The cook? Another intruder?

She tried to see, but her vision was darkened and blurred so badly all she could see was a fugue of dark greens and smudged, twitching patches of orange. Above the pounding of her slowing heartbeat, she could hear the bubble of boiling water and oil, the ticking of hot metal expanding.

The sound of boots on the deck.

"Who," she said, voice the weakest of whispers. "Who's there?"

A black smudge—humanoid and threatening—moved into her field of dimmed vision, blocking out the greens and oranges behind. Preparing to fight again, her free hand moved fitfully around the deck in search of a weapon. She found none.

The black shape moved over her.

"You ... You stay away," she said. "I'm warning you."

"Tatiana? Oh Christ. Oh, Princess."

Boyd! Thank God! She reached for him. He knelt beside her, and she felt herself being scooped up in his strong arms. She breathed deeply, taking in the familiar smell of his sweat and the strange smell of unfamiliar clothes. "Boyd? Boyd! be careful! The cook! He's still here! I hurt him, but—"

"There's nobody else here, Princess. Just you, me, and the voices in my head."

No cook? Where could he be, the little bastard? Had he crawled away to lick his wounds? Other questions flooded her brittle consciousness. "How did...? Here? How are we...here?"

"We crashed after you jumped to light-speed so close to that black hole. I woke up and found you'd been taken by somebody, so I came after you. Oh, Christ on a bike, Princess, that's bad."

She felt him moving her hand aside to get a better view of her wound. The sucking sound it made as she breathed was now joined with a strange, muffled flopping noise that emerged from the wound. She knew it was bad. She knew they had to do something. Fast. "Knife," she said as loudly as she could.

"What?"

She pointed weakly toward the knife she'd left on the hob. "Knife."

She felt his body shift as he looked over his shoulder toward the knife. "What about it?" There was a wary aspect to his voice.

"Use it. To seal. The wound."

#

The door began to open slowly before the hand gripped it, fingers gloved yet spindly, and forced it to one side. The servos sparked in protest, smoke curling out from the doorframe.

With the door forced open, Stanztrigger stepped through and into the corridor that led to the galley. The corridor's deck was lost beneath scummy water.

His eyes narrowed as he saw the galley door. Nearly there. His shoulders slumped and he closed his eyes. God, he was tired.

His eyes snapped open. No. No rest. Not yet. Not until they were off this planet. He didn't need sleep. He had his faith. And soon, when he reached the galley, he'd have answers from that girl. Her, and her friend.

#

She felt the heat radiating from the knife as Boyd held it close to her wound. Even now, it seared her skin. She flinched.

"Are you sure about this, Princess?"

"Boyd, please. If you don't ... I'll bleed to death. You ... you know that."

"Christ. I don't know if I can."

"Boyd. Don't do this. I need you ... to be strong. I need you to be strong ... for me." She paused, struggling for breath, fighting to stay awake. "If you falter, if you ... weaken, then I'll ... weaken too." With her free hand, she took his, squeezing hard. "But, Boyd, I need you ... to know I ... I lo—"

"No, Princess. No." She felt his finger on her lips. She pursed them to bequeath it the gentlest of kisses. "Not now. Not like this. When I get you out of here, off this planet, away from Crepitus, and the Long Knives, and Ivan and all his fucking baggage, then tell me." She felt something wet splash her cheek as he leant over her, looking down on her. A tear. "But not now. Not here. Not like this."

She nodded. "Okay. But I'll tell you, Boyd. I'll tell you. Soon. Because we're going ... to survive. I trust you. I trust you to be strong ... for me." She took hold of his other hand now, and the heat from the knife bit her skin. "Now do it."

There was the briefest of pauses before he pushed the flat of the red-hot blade against her wound, the heat from the knife burning the skin on contact. She howled with the dire agony of it. She howled so loud she felt something rip in her throat before her eyes rolled into her skull and she slipped into unconsciousness.

#

Tatiana, mercifully, passed out within seconds of Boyd holding the hot knife to her wound, cauterizing it with short, delicate applications. Now Boyd bore her over his shoulder as he made his toward the galley door, compromising haste with a concern for Tatiana's delicate state of health.

What's the rush? Where are we going?

"Sick-bay. I need to stabilise her. I may have sealed the wound but—"

Sick-bay? On this heap? Are you mad? She'd have more chance if you operated on her in a pig-farm.

Reaching the door, Boyd activated it. It opened slovenly. "And what do you care?"

He had the briefest impression of a long, thin shadow with bared teeth waiting on the other side of the door. Then the shadow lashed out, hitting Boyd so hard in the belly the air was driven from him. Staggering, only his newly acquired stamina kept him upright—but the second blow saw to that. Hitting him on the chin like a jack-hammer, the shadow put Boyd on his arse. Tatiana fell to the deck, landing in an ungracious pile.

Boyd blinked as his senses shifted and waned. His vision began to attain some semblance of focus, and he saw the shadow for what it really was—a ghoulishly thin Moreau with a ram's head and goat's legs—glaring down at Boyd whilst standing over Tatiana's unconscious body.

Part Five

Stanztrigger

Boyd was up and running in an instant. With his gun exhausted, he determined to use the only weapon now available to him: his body. He rammed Stanztrigger in the midriff with his shoulder, grappling the Moreau about the waist. Their momentum propelled them backward and through the galley door, to trip over the raised lip that kept the water in the corridor at bay. They fell to the deck in the corridor, water splashing over them.

Boyd was first up, holding the submerged Stanztrigger by the throat as his other fist came back instinctively.

That's it! Kill him! Kill him now!

He faltered. No. That wasn't why he was here. He just wanted Tat—

Stanztrigger's fist erupted from the water, thundering into Boyd's temple. Lights flashed before his eyes as he fell sideways and hit the corridor wall. He slumped against it for an instant, dazed—an instant that was all Stanztrigger needed. With astonishing speed and a snarl that was as primal as it was guttural, he exploded from the water and seized Boyd about the shoulders with his long, clawed fingers.

Wake up! Wake up, you useless—

Lifting Boyd from his feet, Stanztrigger slammed him against the wall, driving the breath from his body.

Do something, you idiot! The voice in Boyd's head was screaming now. He's going to kill you!

Stanztrigger drove Boyd into the wall once more. The Moreau's face was a sneering mask of teeth and blazing anger as he seized Boyd about the neck with both hands, turning to throw him across the corridor. Boyd flew through the air, trailing blood and spittle, before hitting the wall hard and falling to the deck with a splash, half submerged in the squalid water.

The next moment, and through a dizzy fug, Boyd found himself being hauled out of the water by Stanztrigger's skeletal hands. Now the Moreau held him fast, pinned him to the wall by the neck, and he was unable to move, to concentrate on anything more than trying to draw breath. As he gulped and gasped, the cold, hard barrel of a pistol was forced against his temple.

“Please...wait. I'm not...” He raised his hands in gesture of surrender. “I'm not here to fight you.”

Stanztrigger didn't answer. Instead he leaned close, his nose against Boyd's face as his nostrils flared.

"What are you doing?" Boyd asked, mystified.

There was no immediate answer, just a series of deep inhalations. Stanztrigger seemed to consider each one as though tasting wine. His hot breath—like his ship—was tainted with decay. When he finally spoke, his voice had the low, thick quality of a growling engine. "I smell war. Blood. Satumas. Pine." A further sniff. "A lost love, and a new attraction. I smell dependency. I smell..." He pulled back, eyes narrowed as he peered at Boyd. "I smell mutation. But I don't smell Calci."

Boyd coughed, holding his throat. "Mutation? What the fuck do you mean?"

Stanztrigger shook him again. "Don't take that tone with me, boy. I'll not allow such language on my ship."

Boyd gasped, struggling to breathe. "You're joking, right?" It was a long time since anybody—even Ivan—had admonished him for bad language.

Stanztrigger ignored the question. "How did these Calci get on my ship?"

"They attacked us. We managed to escape, but there are Calci bodies on the *Troika*. I don't know how they've managed to get here as well."

"And why are you here, why are you on my ship?" The Moreau leader looked him up and down with disdain. "Why are you wearing Lev's clothes?" He leaned close, snarling into Boyd's face. "Why does the blood of Calci taint my crew?"

"I don't—"

Stanztrigger shook him like a naughty boy. "Why? Answers! Now!"

"I don't know! I only came for the girl! For Tatiana!"

"Then you're from this '*Troika*' as well?"

"Yes. Your men. They took her. I came to get her back."

"And what of the Calci? What is your connection with Crepitus?"

Boyd blinked. "Crepitus?" Surely Stanztrigger couldn't believe he had anything to do with the Calci. He searched Stanztrigger's face looking for answers. He saw nothing in those hooded eyes and scowling brow than unbridled anger and suspicion. "There's no connection, Stanztrigger," he said. "No connection at all."

"So you're not one of his agents?"

"Fu... Hell, no."

A pause, and Stanztrigger let him go, turning away as Boyd fell to the deck with a splash. "Chaff said something about Moz eating the flesh of a corpse. I can only assume he became infected with the blood of the Calci, and now it runs amok on my ship." He cursed quietly and punched himself in the thigh. "I should have realised it was the Calci when Chaff told me about the corpses on the *Troika*."

Boyd rose to his feet unsteadily. "You sound like you've met the Calci before—and Crepitus."

“Met?” Stanztrigger’s laugh was heavy and humourless. “Fought. Decades ago. The Beggar Barons of Charon paid me handsomely to destroy him. He was ancient then, The Lord only knows what condition he’s in now.”

“I’m guessing you weren’t successful?”

Stanztrigger’s glare bore into Boyd. “Would the Calci be here if I were?”

“Fair point.”

Stanztrigger raised his pistol again and trained it on Boyd’s head. “Still, I should just kill you now.”

Boyd spread his hands. “What’s the point of killing me? What’s the point in fighting? All I want is to get Tatiana back to the *Troika*, and to get off this planet and away from Crepitus. That’s all.”

“Yet you’ve killed six of my men that I know of. And my cook is missing.”

“You stole from me.”

Stanztrigger kept the pistol trained on Boyd, but the expression on his face shifted. Boyd discerned the slightest nod, and a raise of one eyebrow. “That,” he said, “I can understand.” He lowered his gun.

“Look, you and your crew, you’re trapped here, right? Your ship’s bugged, and so’s the *Troika*. So why don’t we work together? Let’s take out these Calci, and see if—between the *Tower* and the *Troika*—we haven’t got enough parts to get everybody of this planet.”

“Why should I trust you?”

“Why shouldn’t you? Why would I want to double-cross you? You’re the one with the loaded gun.”

Stanztrigger didn’t reply. Holstering his pistol, he reached into one of the pouches on his flak-vest and produced something delicate and gold. It took a moment for Boyd to realise what it was: a pair of pince-nez. With a single stride Stanztrigger was in Boyd’s face, the Moreau fixing the tiny spectacles across his nose with his bony fingers. He squinted through them, peering into Boyd’s eyes. But Boyd held the Moreau’s stare. He didn’t blink. He didn’t need to. If Stanztrigger was looking for duplicity or treachery, he wouldn’t find any.

Again the nod and the raised eyebrow. “Very well. Get this girl, this Tatiana, and we move out. We stand together. But, be warned: if you cross me, I’ll crucify you.”

Boyd nodded curtly. “Understood.”

#

Upon seeing Tatiana for the first time, Stanztrigger had seemed stunned, kneeling to inspect her through his pince-nez. Then he’d gone onto all fours, sniffing her in that unnerving, primal way. “I smell courage. Grief. Determination. Infatuation,” he had said. “An exceptional beauty, but fading fast. She needs medical attention. You’ve stemmed the bleeding, but there are internal injuries to contend with.”

Now, with Tatiana over his shoulder, Boyd and his new ally stepped into the *Tower*’s benighted sick-bay. Boyd’s eyes narrowed as he swept his reloaded pistol in a wide arc across the bloody medical centre. There may have been white sheets and walls at some point, but now all that could be seen were various shades of smeared crimson and crusty purple. The air was tainted with the smell of rotting flesh.

Party's started without us, Boyd.

"Oh, so now you're back," Boyd said, muttering under his breath. "You were pretty quiet when I was being grilled by Stanztrigger."

Well, you seemed so happy playing Doctor Doolittle with goat-boy that I didn't want to intrude.

"Put her here, quickly," Stanztrigger crossed to a bed and tore its bloody sheets aside.

Boyd complied, moving to the bed and setting Tatiana down and gently. He looked at her. Unconscious, her breath was irregular and shallow, the vivid blue of her skin paling by the second. Her lips were turning white.

"There," Stanztrigger said, pointing to a door at the end of the room. It was almost lost amongst the panorama of blood. "That's the store room. Get me Nandomine, Vapour, sterile dressings, and a *very* big needle."

Boyd moved swiftly away from Tatiana's bed, intent on reaching the store, when he pulled up short, squinting in the darkness of the sick-bay. He could see a leg protruding from between two of the bay's empty beds. It too was smothered with blood.

Be careful, Boyd...

"I know what I'm doing," Boyd edged forward with slow, long strides, focusing on the leg. As he neared the gap between the beds, he could make out more of the figure. The leg ran up to a pair of hips. Then he saw the other leg was missing, and a rent, gaping stomach nestled in the ripped remnants of a doctor's smock. Moving forward, he saw a chest, then shoulders, splayed arms that twitched, and finally the head of a pig Moreau. It turned toward Boyd, and its rotten teeth bared in a snarl as the animated corpse tried to reach for him, clawing at the air.

"I think I've found one of your crew, Stanztrigger." He didn't take his eyes off the doctor as he raised his gun, training it on the poor creature's head.

There was no reply. Boyd glanced to his side. Stanztrigger had vanished. Boyd froze. He listened. He could hear something. The sound of a struggle coming from where Stanztrigger had stood—the sound of grunting and knuckles pounding flesh and bone.

Boyd!

"Not now."

Boyd! Calci!

"I've seen him, alright?" Boyd turned back to the doctor.

Not him, you idiot! Him!

Boyd turned on his heel and crouched. But it was too late. Brandishing the doctor's half-eaten leg as a weapon, a further Calci hit Boyd hard across the forehead. His right eyebrow split, sliced by the leg's exposed bones, and blood flooded into one eye as he fell backward between the beds, dazed. His grip, however, tightened on his pistol.

Get up! Get up!

His vision cleared almost instantly, the pain and fear vanishing. He'd literally fallen into the doctor's lap, his shoulder filling the void where the stomach should have been, and now the doctor grabbed at him, holding him by the shoulder and forehead as it craned its body into a sitting position. Above Boyd, the lurching guard reached for his neck.

The Calci's mouths were open, teeth exposed. Their eyes twinkled, and Boyd could have sworn a smile distorted the guard's flaccid mouth.

"Not today, boys," Boyd said through gritted teeth. "Places to go, people to see."

He swept his leg across the deck, taking the guard's feet from under him. The guard toppled backward with a frustrated, primal howl as Boyd elbowed the doctor in the face. The Calci's features collapsed in a cascade of viscous blood and mucus as Boyd now turned and grabbed at its head, slamming its porcine face into the deck.

The doctor's arms flailed, but something else pricked Boyd's peripheral vision. The guard was on its feet now, bearing down with a slaving greed. Boyd raised his pistol fluidly and, still blinking blood from his eye, he emptied the gun into the creature. Bullet after bullet smashed into its head, reducing it to little more than a miasma of bone, blood, teeth and brain. The body remained on its feet for a moment, staggering and ill co-ordinated, before it fell sideways onto the bed to its right.

Still the doctor tried to seize him, despite its bludgeoned mess of a head. It grabbed Boyd by the face, its grip weak. Boyd turned back to it, and revolving the empty pistol in his hand, set about the doctor's forehead with the gun's butt. It didn't take long for him to split the skull open and expose the brain. It took even less time to reduce that brain to a paste, the doctor's haphazard attack coming to a stop.

Nice work. You're quite the brute, aren't you? I like it.

Boyd stood, his stolen uniform now ripped and covered in gore. Wiping the blood from his eyes, he stepped out from between the beds. "Will you *please* shut *uaack!*"

Stanztrigger was back, his fists choked with foul smelling blood that was also splattered across his face and flak-vest. He seized Boyd by the throat, lifting him from the deck. "Damn you, Crepitus!" he bellowed. "Godless scum! How dare you do this to my crew?"

"It's me!" Boyd managed to gasp. "Not Calci! Boyd!"

Stanztrigger paused, squinting. Leaning forward, he sniffed at Boyd. "I am sorry," He put Boyd down. "I became confused. The blood on your clothes. You reek of Calci."

Boyd rubbed his neck. It was already bruising where Stanztrigger had held him by the throat. "Christ on a bike, Stanztrigger. Try wearing your damn glas—"

Stanztrigger slapped him hard across the face. The blow sent the stunned Boyd staggering two paces. His hand went to his stinging cheek "What the...?" Damn it if those weren't tears in his eyes. Nobody had slapped him since his Da had died. "What was that for?"

"Blasphemy." With that, Stanztrigger turned and strode to Tatiana's bed, leaving Boyd to watch him, slack-jawed and incredulous.

#

The supplies Boyd found in the store had been meagre but there were enough to do the job. Now Tatiana was stabilised, with Stanztrigger administering Nandomine for her pain, Vapour to boost her strength. He's used a long needle to pierce her chest, released air pressure building up inside her punctured chest-cavity, and a sterile dressing to act as a one-way valve puncture, allowing air out, but not in.

Boyd had watched him the whole time. The Moreau's hands moved with a deftness and delicacy Boyd would never have attributed to a creature with such a brutal reputation and history of violence. With Tatiana—who remained unconscious—stabilised, Stanztrigger had unzipped his flak-vest and, delving inside it, produced a crucifix on a gold chain. Kissing the

tiny cross, he had lowered his head, lips moving in prayer as his eyes closed. Again, Boyd wondered at the dichotomy this towering creature presented.

“That’s the best I can do,” Stanztrigger now said, tucking the cross back into his flak-vest and removing his pince-nez. “She needs more thorough attention, but at least she’ll live long enough to get her back to your vessel.” He stopped. “What? What are you staring at?”

“Oh, errr, sorry, I was just...” Stanztrigger glared at him, and he had to gather himself to finish the sentence. “Religion. I never really thought Moreaus’d have much use for it.”

“Created as slaves. Treated with disdain. Viewed as expendable. Yes, human, I can see why you’d think we wouldn’t need a little faith.” Before Boyd could reply, a muffled buzzing came from within one of the pouches on Stanztrigger’s flak-vest. He quickly reached into the pouch and lifted his comm to his lips. “Stanztrigger.”

“Sir, this is the bridge.” The voice was timid and quivered with unbridled fright. “The Pantry. It’s been compromised.”

“Compromised?” The Moreau’s brow furrowed. “Elaborate.”

“The guards have either abandoned their posts, or have been killed by some...*things*. The sensors on the cages have all been triggered. Whatever killed the guards is now loose in the pens.”

Stanztrigger’s head went down, and his eyes closed. “Understood. What about you? Is the bridge secure?”

“No, sir. One of the doors is jammed. We’re trying to seal it, but it’ll take time.”

“Remain where you are.” Stanztrigger turned to look at Boyd. “I am coming to get you.”

“Aye, sir.”

“What’s this ‘Pantry’?” Boyd’s hands were on his hips. He wasn’t going to like the answer, he knew.

“A holding area used to house a hundred or so descendants of the slaves we had onboard when we crashed.”

“Your food?” Boyd’s stomach lurched. He shouldn’t have been surprised, the notoriety of Stanztrigger’s Eaters should have prepared him for that, but still...

“Our food.”

“They got religion too?”

Stanztrigger ignored the question. He gestured at the remains of the Calci strewn about the deck. “For every victim the Calci devour, they’ll merely wound two more, infecting them, condemning them to a purgatorial, flesh-eating existence somewhere between life and death.”

“So, assuming whatever’s loose in the Pantry *are* Calci—”

“Then, right now, they’re making more. Within the hour we could have close to seventy Calci at large on my ship.”

“Will they find us?”

“The Calci smell two things: fear and flesh. They’ll find us. Now, grab Tatiana. We are leaving.”

#

This is crazy, Boyd. Just shoot this smelly idiot in the back and let’s get out of here.

“Shut up,” Boyd whispered under his breath. “If we’re going to have any chance of getting out of here, any chance of beating the Calci, any chance of repairing the *Troika*—any chance *at all*—we need Stanztrigger.”

They’d ascended the *Tower* swiftly, using stairs that spiralled around a massive conduit that rose through the entire vessel. This spinal column was housed in a bigger, sparsely lit chamber, and a long drop awaited anybody who might stumble off the stairs. It may have had railings once, but they were long gone. A crisp cold nipped at them as their breaths steamed, and the disembodied echoes of gunfire, shouts and screams echoed from the decks below.

Boyd jogged after Stanztrigger as the Moreau left the staircase, moving with purpose and poise along one of many narrow mesh bridges that married the stairs to the decks beyond the chamber’s walls. For all Stanztrigger’s pace, Boyd was surprised how easily he kept up with him, even with Tatiana over his shoulder.

Now, stepping into a corridor, Boyd could see the doorway to an altogether different bridge. The *Tower*’s central command. The great hall from which the ship—in its glory days—would have been guided to victory after bloody victory. Its door was still open, and the darkness beyond seemed to mock them.

Stanztrigger stopped and began to reload his revolver. Popping the chamber outward with a deft click of his wrist, he inserted bullets the calibre of which made Boyd’s eyes water.

Assessing their surroundings, Boyd looked down. “Stanztrigger?”

“I see it.”

Several trails of blood ran from the length of the corridor, and there were liberal splatters of the clotted, dark liquid close to the door. Sure signs of a struggle.

Looks like we’re too late.

Boyd grunted under his breath.

“Quickly,” Stanztrigger moved at a sprint, pistol at the ready.

Now Boyd had trouble keeping up. The speed with which Stanztrigger raced into the bridge was astounding. By the time Boyd had followed, the Moreau was stood on the fringes, head down, and eyes shut.

Boyd stopped and groaned inwardly. It may have dimly lit, but the butchery was easy to see. The circles of terminals and monitors that circled the captain’s chair were liberally coated in blood, and the smell of putrid flesh troubled the air. The silence was oppressive, and the faintest hint of gunpowder left a subtle inflection on Boyd’s tongue. Weapons had been fired here, presumably in some desperate attempt to hold Calci at bay. He glanced downward. Spent cartridges left a trail from the door to the concentric circles of monitors. It was cold, even more so than the rest of the ship.

Not to be impeded by the terminals in his way, Stanztrigger vaulted over them. He then knelt, vanished from sight.

With much more caution, Boyd moved after him, making his way between the decrepit computer stations with tentative steps as his gaze and his pistol swept the darkened bridge. He saw the remains of two Moreaus, ripped apart and gorged upon, their fate illuminated only by stuttering monitor screens and the meagre lights that hung from the darkened ceiling. Their dismembered bodies were awash with blood. One had a look of horror frozen upon her kitten features. The other body didn’t even have a head.

Finally he found Stanztrigger. Cradling a further victim in his arms, he was rocking back and forth, the hair about his eyes was wet with tears. The victim—a tiny girl with a sparrow head—was little more than a head, shoulders and a spine. Her beak was open, tongue protruding, and her eyes were wide and lifeless.

“Stanztrigger? Look, I’m sor—”

The Moreau’s head went back, and his agonised howl rent the air. Such was its pain, such was its energy and anger, that a shiver went up Boyd’s spine. When the Moreau was done, he stood, lowering the girl to the deck with reverence. Turning to Boyd, he moved toward him, fists clenched and teeth bared.

In reflex, Boyd raised his pistol. He’d seen that look on hundreds of people’s faces, and they’d all wanted to kill him. “Stanztrigger?”

The Moreau reached him but, looking past, merely pushed Boyd aside. With shoulders hunched and head down, with eyes blazing and breath steaming, Stanztrigger bore down on one of the operational terminals.

What’s he doing? I don’t like the look of this...

Boyd stepped toward Stanztrigger slowly. “Stanztrigger? Hey, mate. You okay?”

Stanztrigger ignored him. With succinct and rapid movements, he tapped out a sequence on the terminal before him. In response, the computer chimed in a tiny voice, and Stanztrigger grasped a microphone attached to the station by a flex. “This,” he said, eyes focused somewhere far away, “is Stanztrigger. The *Tower* has been infected. As I speak Calci are sweeping through the vessel. All remaining crew are ordered to abandon ship immediately. Do not engage the Calci. I repeat, do not engage the Calci. Those who survive will rendezvous at the ruins to the west. Those who encounter the Calci and are bitten are ordered to take their own lives, or face an eternal damnation. May The Lord go with you. Stanztrigger out.”

Boyd reached Stanztrigger, and touched him gently on the arm. “It’s okay, Stanztrigger. We can beat these Calci. We’ll sweep each deck—”

“You’re naïve to the point of idiocy, human. It’s over. Crepitus wins again.”

“So, what are you gonna do?” Boyd’s voice rose, and his grip in the Moreau’s arm tightened. “Just give in? Let the Calci take your ship?”

Stanztrigger laughed a sardonic, bitter laugh. “Take my ship? I think not.” Again his clawed fingers began to move over the computer. “If we can’t have the *Tower*, neither can the Calci. I won’t allow it. Nor will I allow my crews’ souls to be trapped in those cadaverous cages.”

Boyd? Be careful. I think he’s goin—

“Me too,” Boyd whispered before, tightening his grip still further and pulling the Moreau to face him, he said, “Stanztrigger, don’t do it. If you blow up the *Tower*, that’s it, we’re done. Without your ship to cannibalise, we haven’t a prayer of repairing the *Troika*. We’ll be trapped on this planet. For good.”

“I’ve survived fifty years. I can survive a further fifty.”

“Bully for you. But we can’t. *Tatiana* can’t—”

“That’s no concern of mine, human.” With a sweep of his arm, Stanztrigger struck Boyd in the ribs. Lungs voided, Boyd’s eyesight darkened, and a dull roar filled his ears as the blow lifted him from his feet and propelled him through the air. With an “Oooff!” he hit the deck,

Tatiana landing beside him. The impact seemed to rouse her, and she groaned, eyes still shut as her face contorted with pain. Boyd lay, scrabbling for his senses. He tried to get up, but all he could muster some ill coordinated fit. He couldn't breathe, his eyesight was all blues and blacks, and all sound about him was muffled and without texture.

Stanztrigger turned back to the computer. A further sequence of rapid keystrokes, and it was done. First one klaxon sounded, then another, and then another. Soon the bridge rang to the sound, the chorus joined by more distant klaxons in the corridor beyond, and then the spinal chamber beyond that. Multi-layered and spectral, they had a lamenting quality.

"The self-destruct sequence is initiated," Stanztrigger said, turning to Boyd. "Now we have fifteen minutes to get off the *Tower*."

Part Six

Bite Me

Stanztrigger and Boyd left the bridge, running down the corridor to the stairwell. Boyd still had Tatiana over his shoulder, but the girl was regaining consciousness. Her eyes flitted open, only to close again, and she groaned periodically whilst her limbs twitched.

"We have to reach the hangar," Stanztrigger said. "There will be Hammers prepared by my men ready to attack and seize the *Troika*. We will use them to get off the *Tower*."

Boyd grunted. He hadn't seen a Hammer in years. In fact, they hadn't been *made* in years. Still, he didn't care how old they were if they got the three of them out in one piece.

They emerged from the corridor into the stairwell before traversing the narrow mesh bridge. There they reached the stairs that spiralled down the chamber's spinal conduit. Stanztrigger's pace didn't abate, seemingly undaunted by the possibility of falling off the stairs. Boyd was more circumspect. He didn't know exactly how high they were, but it must be at least two hundred decks.

With the chamber echoing to the sound of Boyd's boots and Stanztrigger's hooves on the stairs, they pressed on. They'd descended a further two decks before Boyd pulled up, pointing. "Calci!"

Stanztrigger stopped, and squinted.

Five decks below, on a narrow bridge that led from the stairs to a darkened doorway, four Calci—once Stanztrigger's dog headed guards—were moving toward the staircase. In bloodied fatigues, clutching old submachine guns, they were looking up at Boyd and Stanztrigger. Even from here, Boyd could see their slack mouths, pallid skin and dead eyes.

"No matter." Stanztrigger began to run again. "We'll deal with them soon enough."

"Um, Stanztrigger? They're pointing guns at us."

"Residual instinct. The Calci don't use gu—"

The Calci fired, and bullets stabbed through the air about Boyd and Stanztrigger, ricocheting off the metal of the stairs and the central conduit. As sparks showered them, Boyd crouched and hid under his arm in reflex.

"I stand corrected." Stanztrigger hadn't bothered to crouch, hadn't bothered to seek some sort of shelter. He merely raised his pistol and fired, the boom of his gun bludgeoning the air.

Below, one of the Calci flexed as Stanztrigger's bullet thudded into its torso, bursting out of its back in a bloody haze. Still the Moreaus fired. Boyd, propping Tatiana against the conduit and shielding her with his body, fired back. At this range, however, and with such a poor pistol, he hadn't a prayer of hitting his target in the head. Instead the round punched a hole in the target's groin. Such a wound would have stopped a normal Moreau, but not a Calci. Undeterred, the Calci continued to fire. Bullets hissed passed Boyd, and still the sparks fell upon him, piercing his skin and clothes like hot needles.

Boyd and Stanztrigger continued to fire. By chance Stanztrigger blew a hole in one of the Calci's head, the body convulsing as it toppled off the bridge and into the darkness below. In return, Stanztrigger was hit, roaring in anger and pain as a volley of bullets traced an arc of sparks across the conduit before writing a concussive line across his chest. He staggered back, hit the conduit, and slumped onto his haunches.

"Stanztrigger!"

"I am fine." He was still firing, but one hand was on his chest, blood escaping from beneath it and venturing down his flak-vest.

"We need to get off this bloody bridge! We're sitting ducks here!"

"I will not run! I will not falter!" He was stood now, holstering his pistol. "I! Am! *Stanztrigger!*" With that, he leapt from the staircase, arms and legs stiff and outstretched.

Boyd reached for him, shouting, "No!"

The Calci continued to fire at the Moreau even as his gaunt frame bore down on them. Boyd didn't have time to gauge if they hit or not, Stanztrigger hit the bridge, hard, buckling the mesh and flexing the narrow structure. Two of the Calci, flailing, lost their balance and pitched into the darkness, vanishing into the depths below. The last fell onto its back, its SMG clattering down beside it. Stanztrigger, too, was pitched to the side and hung from one hand from the weakened bridge.

Boyd—convinced the Moreaus had outplayed his hand—looked on as—still dangling—Stanztrigger put his other hand to his wounded chest. From his vantage point, Boyd could see a glazed look had taken possession of the Moreau, and the steaming of his breath was erratic and shallow. He could also see the Calci looking down and—seeing Stanztrigger—it rolled onto its hands and knees and began to move toward him. Its canine mouth was open, and thick saliva coated its teeth and oozed from its gums.

"Fucking idiot," Boyd put his forehead into his palm as he shook his head in exasperation.

Leave him. We don't need him.

"Do you know the way to the hangar? To the Hammers?"

No, but—

"Neither do I. We need hi—"

With a rapid series of metallic *pings*, more bullets struck the metal of the conduit just above Tatiana's head and the ricocheting bullets whistled past Boyd. Looking up, his eyes narrowed and his teeth ground at the sight of more Calci. Lurching on to a bridge above there were six in all. Two—once Moreaus—fired haphazardly at Boyd, the rest were once human. He guessed they'd been prisoners in Stanztrigger's pantry, but now they were jaded, leering ghouls covered in blood and bite marks. With a loping gait, they crossed the bridge and reached the staircase.

“Bugger.” Boyd fired back as the Calci continued to shoot at him, but his inaccurate weapon could inflict little more than ineffectual flesh-wounds. Yet more bullets stabbed at the metal about him, and he knew it was only a matter of time until they scored a hit—lucky or otherwise.

He turned to grab Tatiana, but paused as he looked over his shoulder. Stanztrigger still hung from the bridge, and the Calci was closing in fast as it licked needy lips. Shaking, bloody, the beleaguered Moreau attempted to draw his pistol, managing only to take the weapon from its holster before it slipped from his weak fingers and spiralled into the abyss below. Boyd blinked, frozen. He knew he should just run and take Tatiana. He should find the hangar himself, or maybe get to the dock and steal that Dogfish. But he couldn't. There was something about this Moreau. Something so epic, that—even as the weakened legend fought to retain a grip on the bridge, even as his life leaked away through the holes in his chest—he left Boyd mesmerised. With his determination, with his faith, with his anger, there was something about him, something of Nemo, or Ahab, that Boyd could not abandon.

“Wait here,” he said, whispering in Tatiana's ear. Again she stirred, eyelids flickering. Her hands twitched. “I'll be right back.” He kissed her forehead. “I promise.”

Right back? What are you...? Oh, you've got to be joking!

With a last look at Tatiana and a quick glance at the creatures above, Boyd turned, sprang forward and—with a thrust of his boot against the edge of the stairs—launched himself into the air just as Stanztrigger had done. Arms and legs pumping, he fell with a clang to land in a crouch. He wavered, but grabbed at the bridge to steady himself. The Calci snarled as it turned to face him and tried to rise to its feet, but Boyd sprang forward and struck the creature across the chin, knocking it off the bridge.

The gunfire continued to rain from above. A bullet hit Boyd in the thigh—but he ignored the pain. Now it was his turn to snarl, diving forward and seizing the abandoned SMG. Whipping round, he trained the gun on his attackers.

“Bring out your dead!” he shouted above the chatter of the SMG as he fired a prolonged burst. The gun twisted and bucked in his hands, but even though he only held it in the one hand, he was strong enough to make the shots count. His bullets tore through the Calci and they lost their footing, slipping off the bridge and plummeting out of sight with their limbs threshing the air.

“Boyd!” Stanztrigger shouted. “The girl!”

Twisting, Boyd saw the last four Calci were almost upon Tatiana, closing within feet as they slavered and groped, their bent, twisting bodies throwing theatrical shadows on the side of the spinal conduit. Boyd fired again, this time in shorter bursts for fear of hitting Tatiana. The four Calci were chewed up by the volleys, dancing in a shower of sparks as they were riddled with bullets. As Boyd exhausted the SMG's magazine, three of the creatures—bodies smoking—pitched forward and fell off the stairs. One, however, fell sideways, landing on the stairs mere feet from Tatiana. Instantly, it began to stir, pushing itself up on its punctured arms and glaring at the Oridian.

“Tatiana! No!” Boyd froze. He didn't know what to do. He couldn't fire. He couldn't reach her. He—

The Calci lunged, mouth bearing down on Tatiana. At the last instant the girl's eyes fluttered open and she lurched to one side, the Calci's face smashing into the conduit. Blood erupted from its nose and forehead, and, as the Calci rose to its feet, it blinked and rubbed at the gore

in its eyes. With an uncoordinated shove, Tatiana pushed at its belly, and the creature lost its balance, crying out as it fell off the stairs and plunged to its death.

Tears stung Boyd's eyes. She looked toward him, flopping back against the conduit as she smiled a weak smile and gave him an even weaker thumbs up.

Heart racing, blood pounding in his ears, Boyd looked about him. There were no more Calci. He looked down at Stanztrigger. It was the Moreau's turn to look impressed.

#

Having hauled Stanztrigger off the bridge and into the corridor beyond, Boyd returned to Tatiana. Reaching the girl, he took her in his arms and held onto her. "Thank Christ you're okay."

"Of course I'm okay." She grimaced as she spoke, and her hand went to her throat, stroking it gently. "I'm a Valentine."

"How do you feel?"

"This wound really hurts." Her voice was strained and coloured by the effort required to ignore the pain. "And my throat hurts when I talk."

For a moment, Boyd knelt on the stairs and breathed in the smell of her hair and revelled in the feel of her skin on his cheek. "I'm getting you out of here, Princess," he said in a gentle whisper as he drew back and kissed her forehead, "and I'm taking you home."

#

When they returned to Stanztrigger, the Moreau had stripped off his flask-vest and opened his shirt. He was peering at his chest through his pince-nez as he used a tiny device to staple the wounds closed, wincing as he went. He looked up as Boyd—supporting the weak Tatiana as she staggered beside him—entered the corridor.

"Hello, young lady," Stanztrigger said with a smile.

"Um. Hi." Tatiana looked faintly embarrassed, and she glanced sideways at Boyd.

"Princess, this is Stanztrigger. Stanztrigger, this is Her Highness Tatiana Cyzarine Valentine of the Enlightened Court of Oridia."

"Ah, Oridia. A beautiful planet. Seductive in its purity. You suit it well."

"That's enough small talk," Boyd said as he saw Tatiana blushing deeply. "C'mon, we need to get outta here." He reached down and helped Stanztrigger up. Around them the klaxons continued to howl. "We're running out of time."

#

"We are twenty decks above the hangar," Stanztrigger said. "This is the quickest way."

They stood at a set of rusty doors. With a *ping* they opened, revealing an elevator within. Although dimly lit by a single bulb that hung from its ceiling, wiring exposed, there was nowhere to hide for the Calci crouched inside. Once it had been a human from the Pantry, now it was a monster gorging itself on a luckless Moreau whose mouse features were frozen in an agonised rictus.

The creature barely had time to look over its shoulder, a look of surprise intruding on the blood and gore on its face. Boyd fired immediately, and the Calci's head was smashed open.

Boyd, Tatiana, and Stanztrigger stepped into the elevator, boots barely gripping the floor through the spilt viscera. Stanztrigger pressed at the worn buttons, selecting the appropriate deck. The doors shut, cutting off the sound of the klaxons, the sudden silence as intrusive as any muzak.

Stanztrigger smiled, but his shoulders were sagging, and he looked down, closing his eyes. He suddenly looked very weary, and his hand went to his stomach as it grumbled loudly.

Boyd took Stanztrigger gently by the arm. The sleeve was wet with blood, and the Moreau recoiled immediately, wincing as a hiss of air escaped his gritted teeth. “You okay?” Boyd asked.

“We’ll be there very soon,” the Moreau said, changing the subject. “You need to be ready. The lift is located on the periphery of the hangar.” He looked away, as if embarrassed. “The Calci may be converging on my men in the hangar waiting to attack the *Troika*. They may be upon us before we draw breath.”

“We’ll cope.” Boyd said “We’ll be off this ship in five minutes flat. Trust me.”

“You, young lady, will need this.” Stanztrigger turned back and offered Tatiana a small pistol from a holster nestled in the small of his back.

Tatiana shook her head. “No. I can’t. Uncle doesn’t approve.”

Stanztrigger’s look was quizzical. “Doesn’t approve?”

“Her uncle had some sort of epiphany years ago, fighting against the Theocracy,” Boyd said. “He forsook guns, and now he insists Tatiana and her sister don’t use them either.”

“Epiphany? Fighting the Theocracy?” Stanztrigger put the gun away. “He sounds like a man of principle. I like him already.”

“He has his moments.” Boyd’s tone was dry, and it earned him a reproachful glance from Tatiana.

“Can either of you fly a Hammer?” Stanztrigger asked.

“I may be able to,” Boyd said. “Been a while, but...”

“And you?”

“Sure. How hard can it be,” Tatiana said with a shrug and a wan smile.

“Won’t you be flying it?” Boyd asked Stanztrigger.

“I’m not coming.”

“What the hell? Why? Are you crazy?”

Stanztrigger gripped the cuff on his sleeve, rolling it back to expose a vicious wound on his forearm. The skin was green and festering, the blood a deep, clotted purple. Boyd looked at the wound, and then into the Moreau’s face.

“Oh, Christ...”

“I was bitten when we were ambushed in sick-bay. I’m fighting it, but even now I can feel the poison inside me. I don’t know how long I can hang on.”

“Isn’t there something we can do?” Tatiana said. “Back on the *Troika*? Maybe Dolly can—”

“No. There is nothing to be done.” He looked at them, and smiled. “And I am glad.”

Boyd blinked, stunned. “What?”

“Boyd, I am tired.” Stanztrigger closed his eyes and let his head roll back. “Very tired. It is fifty years since I have slept. I can’t do it anymore. Even my will and my faith can’t defeat this. Crepitus has beaten me. Finally.” He looked at them again, and that familiar fire crept back into his voice, his eyes blazing beneath arched eyebrows. “He has taken my crew from me. He has taken my ship. With them gone, I have nothing to strive for.” He reached for Boyd, grasping him by the shoulder. “But you, you do. You have Tatiana. You have the *Troika*. Promise me you’ll get back to them, and get this girl to safety.”

Boyd nodded, lost for words. Stanztrigger stepped up to him, bending to whisper in his ear, “and promise me you’ll kill that fucking twat Crepitus.”

#

The elevator door opened, and the sound of klaxons, gunfire, screaming, shouting, thunder, and the throb of engines combined to batter Boyd, Stanztrigger and Tatiana.

Then Boyd’s pistol joined the cacophony. A gaggle of Calci Moreaus were stood in a loose pack with their backs to the lift, firing SMGs. They fell like skittles as Boyd fired successive shots into their skulls, their brains bursting out of exit wounds in their foreheads.

Boyd assessed the situation. Before him lay the hangar. Three stories high, its octagonal walls were grimy and wet. Driving rain speared through the open bay door, the water on the deck shining from the glare of spotlights in the metal ceiling, the bodies of gnawed Moreaus and decapitated Calci breaking the surface of the water. In the centre of the hangar sat a Hammer: a small, armoured gunship with a hammer-headed, dropped nose cockpit, a narrow fuselage sporting wings for canons and rocket pods, and an open ramp to the rear. All around, clutches of Moreaus fired panicked bursts at gaggles of Calci that swamped the hangar, lurching from doorways or holding their ground as they returned fire or dragged their ravaged bodies through the water.

Stanztrigger pointed toward the Hammer as he bent to take two SMGs from the Calci Boyd had dispatched. He threw one to Boyd before snatching up another. “There! Get ab—” His voice was drowned out, a deafening crack of thunder bursting through the hangar as the darkness beyond the hangar doors was eclipsed by pure, brilliant lightning. “Get aboard! You have four minutes before the *Tower* goes up. I will draw their fire.”

Boyd looked at Stanztrigger. The Moreau showed no sign of fear as he looked back at him. “It’s been an honour,” Boyd said, extending an open hand.

“Likewise.” Stanztrigger’s grip was firm. Even after they had shaken hands, however, he retained his grip on Boyd’s hand, pulling him close to whisper in his ear, “And, Boyd? Get to a doctor. You’re very sick.”

“What do you me—” It was too late, with a bellow of “I! Am! *Stanztrigger!*”, the Moreau was away, sprinting toward the Hammer as he fired his two SMGs simultaneously, targeting two groups of Calci.

“Tatiana!” Boyd shouted over the sound of gunfire. “Let’s go!” He beckoned her to him, and she obeyed, leaning heavily on his chest. Wrapping her arms about his back, she hauled her legs up, tucking them against his belly. Untroubled by this extra load, Boyd sprinted after Stanztrigger.

A crackle of gunfire scratched at the air, and Stanztrigger went down, twisting and arching his back as bullets thudded into him. He fell headlong into the dirty water, dropping his SMGs and groping at his back as smoke spiralled from his shredded flak-vest.

“Shit!” Boyd sprang forward, sighting the Calci who had shot Stanztrigger and gunning them down. Reaching the fallen Moreau, Boyd knelt beside him.

“Leave me,” Stanztrigger managed to say, gasping. He was already drawing another pistol.

Yeah, leave him! We need to get out of here!

“We’re not leaving you, sir.” Tatiana had to raise her voice over the sound of the battle. She paid for it, gasping in pain and messaging her throat once more.

“But—”

“No ‘buts’. She’s right. Wound or no wound, we’re not leaving you. Now get the fuck up and move your arse.”

Stanztrigger’s eyes flashed and his nostrils flared.

“What he said,” Tatiana said.

Boyd? Will you pay attention? The Hammer! It’s lifting off!

He looked toward the gunship. Sure enough, the craft was lifting from the deck, Newton system whining. Its rear ramp was still down, and a starved tiger Moreau tried to clamber onto it, only to be cut down by Calci fire. Falling to the deck, the Moreau lay there, bleeding as it looked to the Hammer. His eyes were wide as he reached for the craft, for salvation, but seconds later Calci descended upon him.

Boyd? Come on! Move!

“Time to go,” Boyd said, springing forward. For all his injuries, Stanztrigger fell in behind him, keeping pace as a trail of blood flourished in his wake.

They circled the Hammer and bore down on its rear ramp. It was only at shoulder height. Boyd cast aside his SMG and, with a heave, lifted Tatiana onto the ramp before hoisting himself up. Reaching back, he grasped Stanztrigger’s wrist and hauled him aboard. Bullets ricocheted off the ramp and the metal about them, and Boyd saw a unit of Calci approaching the Hammer, firing as they went.

“Get to the cockpit,” Stanztrigger shouted as he turned to return fire, ignoring the bullets that scythed passed them, “and get us out of here.”

Boyd looked over his shoulder. The interior of the Hammer was lined with benches with empty lockers above them, doors flapping open. It was lit by weak, orange lights, and it stank of oil and urine. From his vantage point, he could see a Calci in bloodied Theocracy fatigues leaning over the pilot, feasting on his neck. Blood was spraying onto the canopy, and the pilot’s boots beat against the bloodied plexiglass as he thrashed and howled. There was something about that Calci kit that Boyd had seen before.

“Princess? You’re flying.”

“What about that Calci?”

Upon hearing them, the Calci turned to glare at Boyd and Tatiana.

“I’ll take care of him, Princess.” Now Boyd knew where he’d seen this one before. The wolf Moreau who’d taken Tatiana from the *Troika*. The one driving the Dogfish who’d tried to cut him down with a machine gun. Now, however, he was empty handed, but his wolfen face was twisted and snarling, the fur about his mouth lost beneath a sea of foaming blood. His eyes were bloodshot and wide, and his clawed hands dripped with gore. Panting, his green tongue flopped from behind his teeth, licking about his chops in a wide arc. Only this lupine Calci

stood between them and control of the Hammer. “Right, y’bastard,” Boyd said, fists clenched as he moved forwards, “bring out your dead.”

A sound somewhere between a snarl and a howl bubbled out of the Calci as it leapt. Flying through the air, its gaping maw bore down on Boyd’s neck only for him to swat the creature from the air with a thunderous left hook to the chin.

The Calci hit the deck, rolled, and sprang back up. It butted Boyd in his solar plexus with the hard bone of its forehead, driving the breath from him. He staggered back against the bulkhead, falling onto his arse. Clutching the bench there, he began to rise to his feet, only to see the Calci bearing down in him once more.

Twisting, Boyd took hold of a metal door from the lockers above the bench, ripping it from its hinges. As the Calci leapt for him once again, Boyd clubbed it across the face with the metal door, blood and teeth flying from its head. The Calci fell onto its back, mouth hung open whilst its tongue flopped from its mouth and its limbs went limp.

That’s it! Finish him! Finish him!

Boyd moved in for the kill, casting the door aside. He reached the Calci. Time for this fucker to die, he concluded.

The creature had other ideas, foot lashing out to strike Boyd in the knee. He shouted in pain and fell forward. The Calci rolled out of the way, and Boyd struck the deck, face down, clutching his knee. He rolled onto his back, only for his opponent to straddle his chest. With a glint of its bloodied teeth, its jaw snapped shut on his shoulder, teeth tearing through cloth, skin and muscle with savage ease. He howled as blood spouted from the wound, filling the ghoul’s mouth.

No! Boyd! No! Please! You can’t die here! We can’t die here!

Breathing shallow, losing feeling in his extremities, Boyd lay there, the Calci teeth in his shoulder. He could hear Stanztrigger firing. He could hear the pitch of the Hammer’s engines change as Tatiana took control. He could hear the *Tower*’s klaxons. The space between their shrieks was almost a continual wail. They were almost out of time.

Then, out of the darkness, a new sensation. A sweet, zesty smell that spelt the tingle of citrus on the tongue and the sting of juice in bitten fingertips. Satumas. Satumas... and something else. Pine.

The Calci’s jaws slackened, then the teeth left Boyd’s shoulder. With the last, fading ebb of his consciousness, Boyd lifted his head as the rent muscles in his neck flared in pain. With a slack mouth, limp limbs and a glazed eye, the Calci sat up, falling onto its haunches with its hands in its lap.

The gun! Go for its gun!

Half blind and guided by instinct, Boyd reached for the Calci’s belt, and the pistol stuffed inside. Fingers weak and hands trembling, he took it and, with his sight failing, he emptied the weapon into the Calci’s head. Its body flopped backward, slumping to the deck with only the name on its parka—Chaff—to identify it.

Don’t say I never do anything for you.

Satumas and pine. Already Boyd’s strength was coming back and his senses clearing. With jerky movements, he touched his face. It was tacky, with a thick, sticky film on his skin. Looking at his finger tips he saw a clear, thick solution that glinted in the artificial light. He’d seen that sheen before.

Back on Parlour. Back in the library. Back in *her* library.

“Portia?” he said, his voice an incredulous whisper.

The gentle laugh oozed about his head.

#

The *Tower*'s death-throws began below the water-line. Engineering went up first, the hydrogen powered reactors achieving critical mass and taking out the bottom of the ship in an explosive furore. As the explosion decimated the bottom of the tower, as the water in the lagoon flared orange and white below the murky water, as chunks of the ship's hide erupted from the surface and lanced into the air, the *Tower* began to topple.

A second explosion was barely contained beneath the water, its report muffled by the lagoon. As the remains of the *Tower* then plummeted into the water, it cracked and vanished in a sphere of fire and shattered metal that lit the island in a brief, fierce flash, only for the flaming debris to be swallowed by leaping, hissing water as the wreckage plummeted to the bottom of the lagoon. The boom and concussion of the explosion tore across the island, shredding the quaking trees and throwing the ash on the ground into a choking wave.

This wave of ash swept out over the beach, consuming the *Troika*. In the corvette's flight-deck, Katarina turned away from the ash that burst through the smashed canopy, enveloping her as she squeezed her eyes shut and buried her face in the nape of her arms, coughing.

The wave of debris began to settle almost as quickly as it had devoured the island, and the coughing Katarina grasped the mic of her comm set. “Come in Boyd. Do you copy, over? Come in, Boyd. Do you read me, over?”

Her voice was trembling, and so was she. Up to her waist in water, she was so cold she had begun to lose the feeling in her legs. Her hands shook violently, and her lower lip bled as she chewed it.

She paused, looking out over the beach. A haze of ash hung over the beach, bleaching out colour and muffling the sound of the howling wind, of the thunder, and of the deep throb of colossal engines that made her teeth vibrate. Looking up, looking over the pall of ash, she could see the black clouds that hid the sky parting as a white, jaded mass began to emerge. “Boyd, please. Are you there?” Her tiny voice was almost lost in the dim. “Boyd? Tatiana?”

Finally the clouds dissipated, consumed by intakes, vents and docking bays that punctuated a vast expanse of bone—crafted into the underbelly of a starship—which blotted out the sky. It was scarred and cracked, and fires burnt within its dreadful mass. Spotlights lanced from the ship's underbelly, sweeping the cowering island beneath, and troopships—those all too familiar troopships built to look like sheep skulls—began to pour from its hangars and docking bays.

“Is anybody there?” Katarina asked in despair as she stared at the apparition in the sky. Where was Ivan? Vast? Stalin? They'd been here when she'd regained consciousness. They'd promised her they'd be back, and then they'd vanished into the *Troika*, muttering about ‘repairing it’ and instructing her to ‘raise Boyd’. So where were they now? “Please. Is there anybody there? Anybody at all?”

The answer was metronomic and uniform. At first they were a vague outline in the curtain of ash, the impression of the bodies solidifying as they emerged from the haze. Skeletal warriors, row upon row of them, moving with perfect synchronisation and purpose, their bodies boosted by grafts of metal and cybernetic joints, their weapons trained on the *Troika*.

Katarina's shoulders sagged at the sight of them, hands falling into the chill water as her head sank.

It was all over. Crepitus was here, and he had them.

The Valentine Chronicles will continue with *Bad Blood*

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