

Hunting the Corrigan's Blood: Chapter 1

written by Holly
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The corpse's left eye squinted at me from mere centimeters away. Decomposition lent her face an increasingly inscrutable expression; the first time I'd regained consciousness, when I found myself tied to her, she looked like she had died in terror. After a while, she started leering at me, as if she had reached the place where I was going and took perverse pleasure from the thought that I would join her there soon. Now, having had her moment of amusement at my expense, she meditated; beneath thousands of dainty auburn braids, her face hung slack, bloated and discolored, the skin loosening. Threads of drool hung spiderwebbish from her gaping mouth. Her eyes, dry and sunken and filmed over beneath swollen lids, still stared directly at me.

For a while, when I'd been hallucinating, the corpse had talked to me. She'd whispered that they would come back and throw me out an airlock, into the hard vacuum of deep space; that my vile mother was stalking me; that I could never run hard enough or far enough to find freedom—that death would be my only freedom. But my mind was clear now. No hallucinations. No talking corpses. Just me and horrible pain and aching, tantalizing thirst and a stench that even several days of acclimatization couldn't minimize; the stink of decomposition, of piss and shit, of the gangrene that I suspected was starting in on my right leg. Me and all of that and the body of the young woman who had waited on me during my business dinner with Peter Crane in the members-only club Ferlingetta.

I think it's important not to overlook her. She and I, after

all, were sisters of a sort. Kindred spirits. She was dead, and I was almost. We were bound together by our plight, and by flexible moleibond-braid wrist restraints that had been spot-grafted to our skin. And I figured we were where we were because we had something more than that in common. I didn't know what, but something.

I guessed that I had been without water for almost three days. I could see the shifting of the station's light cycles through the slats in the narrow metal door against which my rotting companion and I leaned. I recalled two separate spans of darkness and two of light. Two days that I knew of, plus whatever time I'd spent unconscious, and that felt like a lot. The gag in my mouth—permeable to air moving in but not to air moving out, so that I wouldn't suffocate as long as I could exhale through my nose—didn't prevent my tongue from turning into an enormous ball of hot sand. The worst thing was that my thirst didn't distract me at all from my pain.

I hurt—but such plain words cannot convey the depth of my agony. Fire stabbed through my right side, a fire that burned hotter and more horribly with every breath I took. I've had broken ribs before, and I had them again. Whoever did this to me had fractured most of the bones in my right ribcage. My right hand throbbed, and when I tried to move it, the fingers didn't respond. Perhaps my attackers jumped on it until they felt the bones give way and grind themselves into pulp. If that wasn't what they did, it was what it felt like they had done. A million needles buried themselves deep in my thighs; my lower legs throbbed as if they had swollen beyond the capacity of the flesh to stay together and as if they would now burst. My left leg was bent so that my knee jammed into the metal wall behind the corpse, while my broken right leg twisted backward at an angle so acute the shards of my lower femur poked forward from above where my kneecap should have been like fingers trying to claw their way out my swollen, tattered flesh.

I wondered if Badger would ever find me. I didn't think he would find me alive. Not anymore. But I didn't want him never to know what had happened to me.

I beat my head against the metal door jammed up against my right side, and listened to the booming echoes thundering away into a cavernous, uncaring silence beyond. The first time I came around, I'd pounded myself into a stupor trying to get free or to get someone's attention. But whoever had grabbed me had made sure I wasn't getting out on my own and equally sure that no one would wander along and rescue me.

My attempts at screams for help came out as throaty little whimpers, my thunderous head-banging left nothing but unbroken silence in its wake, and finally, with my head throbbing and flashing lights whirling behind my eyelids, I gave in and let darkness descend.

Giggling woke me.

The corpse was staring at me, but now she was awake, too. The warmth of our tiny cell hadn't done her any good.

"You're dead," she told me. "Just like me. Now that we're both dead, they're going to come back and break your bones and suck out your marrow. They're going to eat your body, and drink your blood, and beat drums with your bones."

Delightful. It was so nice to have company.

"Nobody's going to rescue you," she told me, and her grin grew wider. "It's too late for that. You and I will never tell our secrets."

I knew all about my secrets; I hadn't planned on telling them anyway. But I did wonder what hers were. I tried to ask her—subvocalized around the gag, but she just laughed at me.

"That's why we're here. We had such juicy secrets."

I hated being dead. I hadn't wanted to die, and I really hadn't wanted to die at twenty-eight, beaten, shoved into a locker with a snide corpse, and deprived of the chance to make twenty million rucets.

That money would have let me pay off the loan on my ship, a refitted single-crew fantail corsair with a full-sized cargo hold and berths for twelve, a ship I'd named Hope's Reward.

And all I'd had to do for the money was find a missing yacht, Corrigan's Blood, that had belonged to Peter Crane, the owner of Monoceros Starcraft, Ltd., and bring it back.

The corpse flashed a wide smile; it kept growing wider as her face started to rip. The bones bulged out, and her jaws came at me, teeth gnashing. I heard them whirring and clicking and thumping clicking thumping whirring

I beat my head against the door again. Pounded it hard, trying with all my strength to break free from the hungry, grinning corpse, fighting with everything in me

Whirring clicking thumping whirring

Outside of our cell! Those sounds came from outside of our cell. They were the first I'd heard in days. A bot. That wasn't her teeth, it was a bot. I pounded my head harder, and was rewarded with the sound of metal tapping on metal. The bot's sensors had picked up the noise, and now it was investigating. I could hear its arms working the latch that held the door closed.

It beeped and whirred and tapped and scraped, and nothing happened.

Too late anyway, of course—I was already dead. But at least Badger would know what had become of me.

I kept making as much noise as I could. Moments passed, while the bot sat outside the locker, grumbling to itself and

tapping and twisting at the latch. And then I heard the sound of running feet. Human feet. Someone had looked up when the auto-bot reported a problem with one of the lockers, had heard the sounds my struggles through its sensors, and had come to help. I hoped.

“Oh, my God! What a stink!” a male voice said.

I beat my head against the metal and made such noises as the gag allowed. From the other side, I heard tools working on the door. “Shit. Hold on,” he said. I stopped beating my head on the door, and was surprised how much better that felt. Tiny lights flashed behind my eyelids and a red haze of pain throbbed inside of my skull. The man added, “I’ll get you out. Someone has spot-sealed the metal but I can break the seals.” I could hear him straining in between words, fighting the door.

Then something clanged, and the door flew open, and bright light and cool clean air blew across my face – and my friend and I flopped sideways onto the floor. Hard floor. Why didn’t anyone ever make floors soft and spongy? The pain in my arm and leg and ribs and head got a lot worse when I hit.

When I twisted left, I could see my rescuer standing over me. Metallic bronze Melatint skin, wave-cut Chromagloss silver hair, gold-flashed teeth, coppersheen eyes. Very stylish. Badger would approve, I thought. My rescuer held the collar of his worksuit over his nose and mouth with one hand, and worked at the flash-grafted gag in my mouth with a laserclip he held in the other.

When he pulled the gag free, he lunged back and leaned against the lockers some distance from us, and puked on the floor. The bot clicked and chuckled it annoyance at him and cleaned up the mess as he made it. It had been shoveling out the floor of the locker until his accident; when he finished, it went back to its previous work.

"Who are you?" he asked. He kept his face tucked behind his collar, and his cloth-muffled voice sounded weak and thready.

"We're dead," I told him, but even without the gag, the words didn't really come out. "We're dead," I said to my pal the cadaver, and she stared right through me, her bones once again inside her skin and her grin gone. She was pretending she couldn't hear me, and I was annoyed enough with her that if I could have kicked her, I would have.

The dockworker watched my lips move for a moment, then shook his head. "Never mind. Reju on the way." His eyes were watering; the tears that rolled down his cheeks were normal-looking. I was disappointed. I'd almost expected him to cry gemstones.

I heard the approach of a reju, and the voices of men who would undoubtedly be space port controllers: sporcs. And I heard Badger's voice raised over theirs. Good old Badger. He'd been searching for me. Hadn't given up. Probably had links up to all the official coms, doing a little unofficial listening. When the report of bodies in a locker flashed across his compac, he came fast.

While the sporcs took care of my friend, the reju attendants loaded me into the long, sleek gray portable cellular rejuvenation unit: the medichamber. I kept telling them not to bother, that I was dead already. They weren't listening. Nobody listens to a corpse.

I saw Badger leaning over me, asking me things I couldn't answer; heard him tell the officers that this was his captain, Cadence Drake; saw them nod and point from me to the other corpse and then the reju lid came down over my head and I felt the needles and tubes snake into place.

Can't reju a corpse, I thought. Can't.

Can't.

Liquids flowed through my veins. Sprayers washed my skin, and replaced the unspeakable stink with a sweet scent that I recognized from too many previous reju stays as Meadow #2. I preferred designer washes like Talisman or Savage Lust, but at least the stocker hadn't filled the spray tank with Lilac. I don't know what a Lilac is or was, but anything that stickily, sappily sweet ought to have been consigned to deep space, along with whoever made it.

My head cleared. The hallucinations went away. I wasn't dead after all; I'd hung on long enough; I had beaten my abductors and I was going to live.

Since I was going to live, I thought it might be nice not to feel like the inside of an afterburner. I kept hoping for a shot of zorphin, which would have made me groggy and happy and would have chased away the pain, but the sporc's would want to talk with me and zorphin would make that process difficult.

Badger leaned over the reju and smiled through the faceplate at me. "I'm glad you made it, Cady. Really glad. I thought I'd lost you." His voice crackled through the speakers, but even with the distortion, I could feel his emotions. Fear, relief maybe love.

"You aren't going to lose me," I told him.

Badger worried the inside of his lower lip with his teeth for a moment, then nodded. "What happened?"

I gave him as much of a grin as my cracked lips and battered face would allow, and said, "We got the job."

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