

DESCENT

by

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‘Is this right, Captain?’ Constable Gottschalk handed his boss a cup of coffee, but received no thanks. ‘I know we follow orders, but this guy’s never said he was anything other than innocent. He has an appeal date.’

‘He should have waited on it,’ Captain Emerson replied. ‘He chose to run.’

‘I know, sir. I’m not disputing that. I just . . .’ Gottschalk looked past the Captain to the armoured black van squeezed onto the pavement at the foot of one of the large, abandoned tenements lining the street, the large, white “K9” identifier visible through the late-day shadows. ‘I’m going to feel bad about this one.’

Captain Emerson looked up at the strip of amber sky between the tall buildings, then at his watch.

‘He’s got fifty minutes. That’s time enough to change his mind.’

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Trent Morgan rolled the ambulance to a stop outside the emergency entrance of Three Sisters of Sorrow hospital, the sirens silent but the blue strobes running, reflecting from the red-brick fascia of the ageing building and the smog-blackened signs that now hid directions to mothballed departments. He grabbed a high-visibility jacket from behind the driver's seat, pulling it on over his stab vest, and holstered a sidearm alongside a bloodied nightstick. It was a struggle unloading the stretcher through the rear doors without a partner, but no one was around to see him fumble to extend the trolley's wheels. He slammed the doors closed and then pushed the trolley, with its black-bagged cargo, to the entrance, swiping a security pass before ramming the heavy door aside.

Inside, the triage nurse looked away from her computer screen for a moment but, seeing the zipped bag on the trolley, returned to her work. Trent pushed through another set of doors.

Away from the public areas of the building, the charitable status of the hospital was more obvious – the lack of funding evident in the flickering lights, patched walls and exposed wiring. The gurney rumbled through potholes in the linoleum. Trent spotted a sign for the haematology unit, unglued, simply propped against the wall. He had no choice but to trust the arrow and keep moving.

The haemo department doors lacked security – no one would enter if they had a choice – and he wheeled inside, drawing his gun. A technician was unloading a refrigerated trolley of blood bags, moving slowly in his hazmat suit; he looked up to see Trent, and Trent's gun.

'Are you fucking kidding me?' the man asked, his voice muffled by the visor of his suit. 'You want to shoot anything in here, you'd be best shooting yourself. Quicker that way. You hit one of these bags . . .'

'You're going to help me,' Trent said. 'You're going to make me not have to shoot you.' He reached for the head of the body bag, pulling the zip down far enough to reveal the naked man inside, his nose and eyes dark with bruises. 'You recognise him?'

The technician looked closer and nodded.

'He's alive. I just needed his clothes and transport. His partner is in the back of the ambulance out front. I'm not looking to kill anyone.'

The technician replaced the loose blood bags into the trolley and closed the lid before pulling the protective hood from his head. 'What do you need?'

'New blood' – Trent holstered his gun long enough to remove his coat – 'and you've got half an hour to give it to me.'

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The sky now dark, Captain Emerson returned to his car, stepping over the cables from the mobile floodlights. He sat in the driver's seat, pulling the door closed.

'Control from Emerson?' he asked into his radio. There was a pause, then his reply.

'Go ahead, Captain.'

'Do you have Judge Minter on the line?'

'Connecting you now, sir.'

Another pause, then an older voice spoke.

'Captain Emerson. Do you have him?'

'No, Your Honour,' Emerson replied. Only now, in privacy, did his voice reveal any trace of regret. 'I have teams across the city, but you know as I do, we didn't get him early, so our chances now are almost none.'

'Agreed.' Judge Minter paused. Emerson could hear him breathing. 'Then it's out of our hands. Under article

one-seventy-seven of the People's Charter, I authorise the retrieval of Trent Morgan. Bring him in, Captain.'

'Understood.' Emerson looked at the silver crucifix hanging from the car's shotgun mount, dangling on a thin chain, glowing dully in the floodlights. 'Emerson out.' He climbed from the vehicle, striding along the street to where his men were gathered, far from the K9 truck. 'It's time,' he said, his voice clear, carrying along the street ahead of him as he splashed through the puddles. 'Get set up, and get me the padre.'

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'What group are you?' the technician asked as he dug through blood stock data on the computer.

'B negative,' Trent replied.

'You're not giving me much help here, Trent.'

'You know who I am?' Trent asked, pausing in unbuttoning his shirt. 'And what do you mean?'

'Yeah, I recognised you from the trial coverage. If it's any consolation, I don't think you did it.'

'No?'

'Nah. Guy did that was a fucking animal. I never saw that much evil in you. I don't now.'

Trent sat on a stool, reaching for his shoes, but he stopped. 'They were my children,' he said.

'I know, man. I know.' The room was quiet for a moment, the only sound the regular beeping from the refrigerators. 'But, what I mean is, I don't carry much blood. It goes into bodies as fast as we can get it out. And B neg is not a common type.'

Trent didn't interrupt the technician as he tapped at the computer keyboard, searching. 'No. I'm sorry, Trent. I don't have any.'

'Nothing?'

‘No, unless . . .’ The technician crossed to the blood trolley and scrolled through the touch display built into the lid. ‘I’ve got three litres in here, which would be enough to keep you going as long as you took it steady, but it’d take me an hour or so to clean it.’

‘Just give me all of it, then shoot me up with adrenaline’ — Trent continued undressing — ‘I don’t have time to rest.’

‘No, Trent, you don’t understand. This is dirty blood. There are so many viral agents in here . . . It’s not a question of what disease you’ll catch but how many. You will die.’

Trent stopped unlacing his shoes. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Bradley.’

‘Bradley. I’ve been on death row for two months, and you know what’s coming after me. Dying of some disease even a week from now is my best chance. Please help me.’

Bradley stared at Trent for a moment, then pulled his hood back on, sealing it shut. ‘Okay,’ he shouted through the visor. ‘Get that guy off the gurney and drag it over here.’

#

Captain Emerson stood clear of the truck as the handlers lowered the rear ramp. Two of the four men, all dressed in armoured suits, climbed the ramp and unlocked the security door, giving them access to the cages. The men fed long-handled snares into the first cage, working them left and right as they tried to snag the screaming, thrashing form inside. Their colleagues waited at the foot of the ramp, armed with automatic shotguns, which they kept trained on the cage.

‘You ever worked K9, sir?’ Constable Gottschalk asked.

‘No,’ Emerson replied. ‘Pay was never good enough. Never would be.’

‘I don’t know how they sleep. I couldn’t.’

‘You can get used to anything, Gottschalk, given long enough.’

A scream echoed out of the back of the truck, a bestial sound, driven through a dead throat.

Gottschalk looked at the Captain, but Emerson’s face was impassive.

Footsteps approached. ‘Captain Emerson,’ the priest said. He was also dressed in body armour, as thick and restricting as that protecting the K9 squad, but with a light-reflective cross painted onto the breastplate. His voice was distorted, relayed from a microphone in his helmet to small speakers in the fascia.

‘Padre,’ the Captain replied. ‘Do you have the prisoner’s sample?’

The padre held up a small, glass test-tube, encased in a protective metal frame.

‘Over to you then.’

The padre approached the K9 truck and climbed the ramp, escorted by the marksmen. With the snares attached, one of the handlers typed a code into the lock on the cage door, his fat, gloved fingers mashing the oversized keys. The locking bolts boomed as they were pulled down into the floor of the truck, and the door crashed open. The two men holding the creature fought to restrain it, forcing it down onto the floor, spreading its limbs.

The padre took two cautious steps, placing him within the zone marked out by the long handles of the snares. His voice issued clearly from the helmet speakers.

‘Trent Alastair Morgan, according to the will of the people, I sentence you to retrieval. May God have mercy on your soul.’ He twisted the metal frame surrounding the test-tube, breaking the glass inside and dripping the contents onto the ramp, a foot away from the beast, before stepping back.

The reaction was immediate. The low growling that had accompanied the padre’s words now rose to a shriek, and the handlers released the snares, stepping off the sides of the ramp, backing away under cover from their armed colleagues.

The beast pounced on the spilled blood, lapping it from the ramp, its long, dirty hair falling into the glistening pool. Its fingers clawed at the metal of the vehicle as it drank.

Captain Emerson could sense his men backing away further at the sight. They were sensible to fear the creature, but now it had Morgan’s scent, they were safe as long as they didn’t do anything stupid, anything to provoke it.

The K9 truck rocked as the beast leapt from the ramp, locked on its prey. Emerson watched the creature scabbling for traction, its claws scraping at the asphalt as it worked up to speed. Meeting Gottschalk’s eyes as he turned, he had nothing to say to the young constable, nothing that could ease the guilt.

He climbed into his car and reversed slowly back down the street, ignoring the officer who waved him through the barricade.

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Trent tried to relax on the gurney as Bradley fed two long needles into the veins of his forearms, working the thick tubes along his vessels before taping them down

and moving onto the other arm. It was hard work in the restrictive suit, and he wasn't gentle.

'I'm really not happy doing this,' Bradley said.

'My heart bleeds,' Trent replied through gritted teeth. 'If you can't do it without hurting me, just do it fast.'

'Okay, okay.' Bradley rammed the last pair of needles home and added the tape. He moved around the gurney to the transfusion unit, guiding the rubber tubes up and over Trent's shoulder, but froze at the sound of a crash and scream from across the building.

'Fuck,' Trent spat, sitting up and tearing the needles from his arms. 'Thanks anyway, Bradley.'

'Shit, shit,' Bradley panicked. 'You've got to run, man. C'mon. Fucking run!'

Trent grabbed his shirt and shoes from the stool, and was backing away from the doors when the creature butted them open. Seeing no recognition in its pure-white eyes, Trent had no warning that it was about to leap at him, but his instincts were sharper than his mind, and he dropped his shoes, grabbed one of the diseased blood bags, and hurled it at the beast. The plastic split, showering both the creature and the wall behind it with blood, leaving it running down its face, into its mouth. Licking its lips, it reached for the torn bag where it lay on the floor, bringing the plastic to its face to suck down the remains. Both Trent and Bradley moved slowly away, trying to reach the doors on the other side of the room without distracting the beast from its gluttonous revelry.

Feeling the door behind him, Trent watched the animal closely, trying to gauge the level of its preoccupation with the dirty blood. Looking at its eyes, he saw the whiteness fade in the centre, as if something were rising to the surface of a milky pond. He dismissed

it as spots of gore, but the flickering movement now visible in those eyes alerted him. He had to move.

Pushing Bradley aside, out of the creature's path, he backed quickly out of the door, then ran, his bare feet pounding the floor. He heard the doors crash open behind him but kept running, dropping his shirt as his arms pumped.

Spotting a door to a stairway ahead, he shouldered through it, making no effort to secure the door behind him. Instead he hit the stairs, heading upward. He made it two floors before he heard the door splinter below him, heard the resonant booming of the creature jumping from one handrail to the next, leaping up the central shaft of the stairwell. Knowing he would be brought down in seconds, he pulled open the next door he found and left the stairs, finding a long, unlit corridor ahead of him. He kept running, looking for his next opportunity to escape, but could see nothing ahead.

The door he'd just used didn't even click closed before it was thrown from its hinges, the beast thundering after him, its claws ripping into the linoleum floor as it tore along. Eighteen months in prison – on remand and on death row – had left Trent lean and pure, but his abilities were pitiful compared to the beast's.

Seeing his imminent death, and the large, frosted-glass window at the end of the corridor, Trent gave up. Covering his head with his hands, he dived for the glass, feeling it give way before him, tearing at his sides as he breached into the alleyway beyond, falling, bleeding, screaming.

The impact from behind felt like a bus had followed him through the window, knocking the air from his lungs. The tearing claws at his back, arms and legs snagged him tight, but the creature's momentum pushed them both further across the alley, into the derelict mill building opposite. The windows had all

been smashed, the loading bays on each floor boarded up a long time ago, the wood now rotting. The beast twisted as gravity competed with their momentum, steering them toward one of the doors on the first storey, but letting Trent's body take the full impact as they smashed through, landing on the wooden floor. The creature's teeth bit into Trent's shoulder as they rolled, and the pain flashed bright in his head, focussing his fear into coherent thought.

Seeing a chain winch still clinging to the rotting joists of the floor above, Trent grabbed at the chain, bringing it up behind him, around the creature's neck. Unconcerned, the beast kept moving, dragging the chain with it. As it pulled taut over the pulley, the chain wrenched the winch from the floor where it was moored, the assault shattering the boards around it, allowing it to fall through to the floor below. The beast was hauled, screaming, from Trent's back, flying up to the rafters as the chain thrashed through the pulleys, only to smash the pulley mounting from the ceiling, adding more mass to the creature's bonds as it was dragged back to the floor.

The creature came to rest straddling the shattered joists, suspended across the hole in the floor, pinned by the weight of the chains and the lifting mechanism swinging below. Trent lay bleeding, his head turned to watch the beast as it struggled. Only when he was convinced the animal couldn't escape did he allow himself to black out.

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Trent woke hours later. The opening into the building, surrounded by the shattered remains of their incursion, revealed grey light as the sun penetrated the alley. The

floor creaked as the creature, still bound by the weight of the winch, strained to free itself.

Trent pushed himself upright, pulling his torn, battered legs beneath him. He pressed at his wounds, finding them tacky and firm, beginning to heal. Walking was still a distant hope, but he could crawl, and he approached the beast, dragging himself nearer.

He knew what to expect – had read the disclaimers during his incarceration – but it was still somehow more alien than its biology should dictate. It was a man, thin and wiry, with pallid, grey skin. Its feet and hands were drawn into tight fists, its fingers and toes armed with thick, black talons. Its face was distorted by the mass of teeth pushing from between its lips, the canines thick sabres, overhanging the bottom jaw.

Horrific as the creature was, the details added by its police masters were nauseating. The metal collar had saved it from having its neck crushed by the chain, but even unbound, the controller restricted its movement, tight up beneath its jaw. From the collar, a metal tag dangled, a single word – the creature’s name – engraved upon it: “Penance”. Trent moved closer, close enough to meet the creature’s eyes, which had now cleared, resolving to reveal maroon irises, pierced with pinpricks of black pupils. The eyes swivelled, fixing upon him.

‘Look what they have made of me!’ the creature growled. ‘I am a God, and they render me bestial.’

Trent was surprised by the eloquence of the creature’s speech. Conditioning through starvation not only turned them into singular, tormented hunters, driven through fear and rage to locate and eviscerate their marked prey, it also stole their higher functions, leaving them no more guileful than an animal. No more able to reason, or be reasoned with. The blood Trent had supplied it had been sufficient to restore its mind, though he knew its humanity was forever gone.

‘You’ll find no sympathy here,’ Trent said.

The creature rolled its eyes to the alley. ‘The sun,’ it snarled.

‘Like I said — your problem. I’ve got my own.’

Trent shuffled around, his movements slow and careful as he worked his way from the beast.

‘Please,’ the creature moaned. The sound was pitiful. ‘This was not my choice. This is what they made me. I do not want to die like this.’

Trent paused, already exhausted. ‘You’ll kill me,’ he said.

‘No. I am more than a beast. I am restored. I can converse. I can choose. I can choose to take another.’

‘Why would you?’

‘I have to. It is all I have to offer for my freedom.’

Trent watched the creature, trying to detect either truth or deceit, but it was impossible. There was so little of the human left in the creature’s face, he could no more read its intentions than a lizard. He turned his back and began moving again.

He’d covered half the distance to the stairs when the sun breached the building. The creature moaned, the noise rising to a scream, then a roar as the sunlight moved across its face and body. Smoke filled the large room, spilling across the floor. The crackle of flames was audible over the creature’s screams, the antique wood charring, the creature’s body bubbling, liquefying.

The smell of the smoke was hideous, and Trent coughed hard, trying to clear the greasy suspension from his lungs. Gasping for clean air, the smoke suddenly cleared, rushing away. He looked back, seeing the remaining length of chain disappear through the burning boards, then into the hole in the floor. He heard a metallic crash from below.

Trent tumbled down the stairs to the ground floor, landing at the doorway to the main workflow. He

looked in to check that the beast was dead. The taloned extremities were largely intact, arranged like compass points around a rose of jellied remains, in the middle of which lay the metal collar, blackened by the smoke but otherwise intact. Putting the sight from his mind, Trent dragged himself to the back of the building looking for a way out.

Having found a broken window large enough to fit through, Trent pulled himself up and over the sill, then half-tumbled out, feeling the sharp texture of the derelict ground pressing into his bare flesh. He crawled along behind the building, deep in the shadows. Reaching the end of the mill, peering out into the daylight, Trent felt an uncomfortable prickling in his eyes, as if he might pass out. He sat back against the wall, waiting for the sensation to pass, then leaned around the corner again. The unpleasant sensation returned, forcing Trent back into the shadows. Accepting that he was in no shape to keep moving, he relaxed against the wall, waiting for his strength to return.

He was in no rush; for the first time since his escape, he thought, he could afford to wait a while.

THE END