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Opening extract from **Bloodtide**

Written by
Melvin Burgess

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The top thirty floors had broken away a long time ago, but the Galaxy Building was still the tallest in London. Engineers had cleared it up so it was safe up there – sort of. A man with close, curly white hair was standing on the viewing platform, pointing out landmarks. His face was a net of fine, soft wrinkles and hard lines cut across by a Y-shaped scar over one eye. He was dressed in a loose suit, rolled up at the sleeves. As he leaned forward to point out Big Ben, St Paul's, Tower Bridge, Docklands and beyond, the man's jacket hung open. Under the suit was a shoulder holster. You could see the neat, deadly shape tucked inside.

This was Val Volson. He owned half of London.

By his side, following his finger, was a tall, wiry girl aged fourteen. She was wearing a short skirt and leggings and a little green jacket which hung open to reveal another shoulder holster containing another, smaller gun. It was handmade for her – girl-sized. But just as deadly.

You could see it all from up here – the buildings of London, its hills and peaks as far as the suburbs and the Wall.

Beyond the Wall, dappled in the distance, lay the halfman lands – acres of rubble and tumbling walls, and the trees turning yellow on this mild autumn day, pushing their way through the Tarmac. After that, the world began.

And far out of sight to the northwest, Ragnor. Its towers and buildings were said to dwarf Old London. Halfman captives said that it seemed to float on the air, made of glittering stripes of light and glass and dark stripes of shadow. At night it shone like a bright little galaxy in the great world Outside. Its very existence was a reminder that London was locked out of the world.

‘And when we’ve got the rest of London just like that,’ said Val. He pushed his thumb down hard onto the palm of his other hand to show just where he wanted the rest of London. ‘Then, my girl, we’ll break out into the halfman lands. And after the halfmen it’s the fields and the farms and the villages and the towns. And after that we take Ragnor itself and deal with the security forces...’

‘But the halfmen!’ cried the girl, in an agony of delight and terror.

‘That’s the easy part. They’ll be all dead and gone by then. Then... England... Europe. Be part of the nation again. We’ll *be* the nation. Yeah. Not long now. We’re getting so close, Signy!’

The girl stared greedily outwards. She had heard these stories all her life. They had been crooned to her like lullabies in the cradle even before she could understand the words. Now it was all coming true.

‘But we all gotta make sacrifices. D’you see...?’

Signy ground her toe onto the platform savagely. ‘I don’t want to go away,’ she said.

‘But you will.’

The girl looked briefly up at her father’s smiling face, then away.

‘You can win as much for us like this as I have in fifty years of fighting.’

‘I wanna be in the bodyguard.’

‘You can be in Conor’s bodyguard.’ He thumped his chest. ‘I’ll insist!’

‘I hate Conor.’ Val – King Val, he was being called these days – stood upright and shrugged. Love... hate. So what? ‘This is family,’ he said. ‘This is *business*.’

Val was disappointed in his daughter. He didn’t expect her to want Conor, but he did expect her to want to do as he said.

The girl turned her chin up. ‘There are better ways for me to fight for us,’ she argued. ‘I’m better than any of them. You know that.’

‘Ben and Had and Siggie wouldn’t whine when I gave them a task.’

‘That’s not fair! This isn’t a task, it’s a lifetime. You wouldn’t ask them to go away and whore for you.’

Val hissed dangerously between his teeth. ‘They’ll marry whoever I tell them to.’

‘This is different.’

‘Because you’re a girl?’ teased Val.

‘That’s not fair! I only want to be treated the same. This isn’t the same.’

Val glared back at his angry daughter. It was she who was being unfair. ‘You’ll be like a spy...’ he said.

‘You can’t be a spy every second of your life, that’s *stupid*.’

She said the word slowly as if she liked the taste of it. Val’s hand dashed out to beat her round the head but she was out

of the way before his hand was raised.

‘I’m a fighter! Catch me if you can!’

Val stood and watched her dance around. He was getting tired of this.

‘But you *are* a girl,’ he said sulkily. ‘I can’t help the way things are.’

‘I thought you were the one to change the way things are!’

Val turned away. ‘You’ll do it anyway,’ he said flatly.

Signy put her little handgun back in the soft holster under her arm and growled, ‘I’ll do it – because I follow orders. But I hate it. Promise me one thing, then.’

‘Name it. You know I’d do anything.’

‘That you’ll give me the chance to kill Conor when the time comes.’

‘This is a treaty. There’ll be no such time. But if it does... I promise.’

Signy nodded. ‘Conor never kept a treaty yet.’

The two of them turned to go down. Val put his arm protectively around his daughter. ‘I know it’s hard.’

Signy smiled sweetly up at him. ‘You’d have killed anyone who dared to touch me, and now you hand me over to him to do anything he likes,’ she said.

‘Don’t think I like it either...’

‘Poor you!’

‘...but every father has to give his daughter away.’

‘Conor has some funny appetites, I bet.’

Val turned a cold eye on her.

‘I wonder what’ll turn him on? I wonder how he’ll enjoy using Val’s daughter?’

Val was suddenly furious. He pushed her from him violently so she stumbled on the stairway.

‘You don’t care for me at all!’ she shouted furiously. ‘You’d never let the others leave your side . . . never!’ She pushed past him and ran down the long winding stairs. How was it possible to hate and love and admire her father so much all at the same time?

‘But I love you!’ She heard his voice crashing down the stairs after her. It made her cry all the more because she knew it was true.

There were two of them, skinny kids dressed in black. The black was like a uniform. One was a boy and one was a girl. Two was a stupid number to go out hunting this sort of prey but these kids had been trained.

‘Last time ever,’ said the boy.

‘Last night of my life,’ said the girl.

‘Don’t be daft. There’s always a life. You just gotta make one up.’

‘Shut up.’

‘Sorry . . .’

‘Last night of this life, then.’

‘I don’t want to do this anymore. If you get hurt tonight, he’ll kill me.’

‘But you will, won’t you, Sigs?’ The girl grabbed the boy tightly by the hand.

Siggy squeezed her back. ‘I can’t believe he’s making you do this. He’d never send any of us away.’ He meant, the boys. ‘We should all get together and tell him – he can’t treat you like this!’

Siggy dropped his hand and glared. He was just making it harder. ‘But he’s right, you see,’ she said.

‘Had don’t think so.’

‘Had don’t know everything.’

‘Treaties with the likes of Conor...’

Signy shook her head. ‘It’s my fate to do it, Sigg. It’s just not a happy fate, that’s all.’

Sigg frowned. ‘But don’t you want a happy fate, Signy?’

‘Why should it be?’

Sigg stared at her. If it was him... ‘I’d run away.’

‘You’re weak,’ she said.

‘You’re stupid.’

‘It’s not stupid to make a sacrifice for something great.’

Sigg pulled a face. Of all the family he was the only one who looked down his nose at glory. ‘You know what I think of all that stuff.’

Thoughtfully, Signy spat on the ground at his feet and ground it in. There was a long pause.

‘So what are we gonna get tonight?’ he asked.

‘Big fat pig. Full of dripping!’

‘Oh yeah!’

Sigg and Signy ran quietly across the polished marble floor. Of course, the stairs were all heavily guarded, but they knew one way out that even King Val would never think to guard – down the glass lift shaft with all its grisly fruit. Then away, past the shattered tower blocks, broken away and worn by the wind like shells in the sea. The few remaining topmost windows glinted in the moonlight. Past the broken church spires and the crumbling storeys of buildings that once housed banks and the offices of international firms, past the roads breaking up with elder trees and buddleia. A group of men working by firelight were loading chunks of broken Tarmac into a vat to melt down. They needed it to extend the

car park for the wedding guests.

Nothing was new, everything was old – ever since the government moved out a hundred years ago and left it to rot under the rule of Gangland.

The kids ran right out of the tall buildings of the City and on towards the West End. It was as dark as velvet. There were no street lights. The poor slept in gangs in the doorways and it was dangerous out, unless you were rich enough to be armed.

During the day Oxford Street and Piccadilly were still thick with people, the shop windows still bright with electricity, even though it was generated privately. The shops were still packed to bursting with new goods. A lot of it was copies – citymades, usually, but some of the richer shops stocked goods smuggled in by the halfmen from Outside. Fashionable clothes, electrical goods, CDs, TVs, fruit from halfway round the world, wine from France. You could get anything if you could pay for it, except two hundred thousand tonnes of asphalt or concrete to keep the roads in order.

All around Westminster and the City it was slums and farmland. You could see cows tethered to parking meters munching slowly on hawthorn, pigs scavenging for rubbish in the streets, open sewage pits, rubbish tips, whole fields where the houses had been knocked down for land to grow crops. Terraces of houses had the walls knocked through to make long barns to house cows or pigs. Sometimes Siggie and Signy went that far, to poke their noses in amongst the moist smell of dirty people and damp walls, the thieves and the beggars, the rubbish and illness. But today was a day for Signy. She wanted fast life, fast people. She wanted a big fat pig and a game of Robin Hood.

The fat pig's name was Alexander. He was dripping all right. Rings on his fingers, chains on his neck. It served him right. It was stupid to wear stuff like that, it was asking to be robbed. Mind you, he was at a party inside a heavily guarded house. The other guests were all businessmen, smugglers, gangsters – it was the sort of occasion when you could actually dress up and show off your wealth for once. Alexander had done just that. The dripping was everywhere – stuck on his fingers, dripping out of his wallet. He was expecting a game of cards later in the evening and he could afford to lose heavily.

They got him in the toilet – on it, actually. He was a big man; he could have fought back, but they were quick as ferrets. Two sharp little knives were suddenly pricking his fat neck.

'How did you get in here?' he gurgled. The two kids laughed. The big one held a knife at his neck and pressed the top of his head down so he couldn't get up. Alexander was fat, getting up wasn't so easy at the best of times. The small one ran round and round in circles like an animal doing a trick, tying the rope round and round the toilet until he was all strapped up. It was over in about twenty seconds. 'Too easy,' sighed the small one. She sniffed the air and glared at her victim.

'Sorry,' he begged.

They relieved the pig of its dripping – the rings from its fingers, the fat bulge of wallet from its inside pocket, the gold cufflinks, the chains, everything. Then they strapped some toilet paper stuck on with packing tape in its mouth so it couldn't squeal, stuck the toilet roll on its lap and made their escape the way they'd come in – through the ventilation shaft. Alexander's eyes bulged with fear and rage as he watched

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them remove the grill and creep out. What about the security guards? This building was covered in security guards!

Outside, the children removed their masks. Signy shook her long hair out.

‘Good?’ grinned Siggy.

‘Nah, too easy,’ she complained again. They left with the booty, to give it away to poor kids. They didn’t need it. What more money did the Volsons need? It was a game, like Robin Hood. But it wasn’t really fair, either, not like Robin Hood at all. It was the richest family in London doing the stealing, whoever they gave it to after. But gangmen and kings can get away with what they want. Even if they got caught no one would ever dare to harm them. They could’ve got past the guards just by showing their faces.

Still . . . it was dangerous enough once the robbing started. And it was fun.