

# Bioship

*Neal Asher*

THE SEA IS a deep umber, carrying peaty silt in every wave. Flashes of pink and white break through like wounds in dark skin, where multi-legged beasts squirm and feed in the laden water. Easily breasting the swell comes the ship. Two rudders like flippers jut from the rear of this inverted turtle hull. A gap-ing manta maw hovers muddy water and squirming crustaceans, which are filtered out, and the wastewater jets from the stern boil the sea and drive the ship ever onward. On a deck of glittering oyster-shell nacre, Sian Simmiser stands with Tom John Cable and gazes with slot-pupiled eyes at the horizon. Cloud, like a steel cliff rising up into the lavender sky, is the subject to their regard.

“And so the season rides upon us like apoca-lypse,” says Sian.

“Poetic,” replies Tom John. “But fifty days of rain holds no poetry for me.”

Sian smiles at him and wonders if he realizes that everything he says holds a kind of poetry to her. She turns at the sound of the cabin door popping and tries not to glare at Captain March.

“Two days and the hold’ll be egg-bound,” he says. “Leastways we’ll be back in port for the worst of it.”

March chews at his lip tendrils and stares speculatively at Sian, who turns away, annoyed at this attention from him she has had over the last few days, further annoyed that Tom John does not give her the same. She glances beyond the captain to the high bridge where many of the crew watch the coming storm through transparent shell.

“The ship could do with a rest. Seas have been thick here,” says Tom John.

“She’ll work until the last or know the conse-quences,” the Captain replies.

Sian pretends not to be needled by that. The *Quill* is asexual so should never be referred to as “she.” Also, this particular captain’s cruelty to his bioship is something that both disgusts and fright-ens her. She has

seen the results in the *Quill*'s almost obsequious manner to him—the way it opens doors and extrudes hull steps whenever he approaches, and has biolights scuttling to keep up with him when he patrols the lower hull.

“Best I check below. Make sure she’s ready to close up,” says Tom John.

“I’ll come with you,” says Sian—anything to get away from the captain’s piggy gaze and wet mouth.

“You know, you should be careful,” says Tom John as they cross the deck.

Sian glances back to the captain who strolls to the rail with his hands clasped behind his back. Careful? Should she accede to the captain’s obvious lust when that is what she most wants to avoid? Careful because of some other nebulous threat?

The hatch comes up with a ripping sound as the resinous seal exuded by the ship breaks and Tom John leads the way down into the dim luminescence of the hold. Sian follows as he reaches the bottom of the ladder, conscious all the way down of his presence below her, hoping he is watching her descend. She wonders what it will take to finally get through to him. Must she walk naked into his cabin? Today she wears a toga with no undergarment. She wonders if the draught she is getting is worth the effort. Halfway down the ladder she looks down and sees Tom John staring up. She smiles at him. He blushes and swallows and moves quickly away from the ladder. Sian feels a satisfaction at a chase well begun.

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CAPTAIN MARCH STARES at the sea and wonders just what Sian’s game is. Over the sensory link from her cabin to his, she has shown him what she wants—provocative and posing naked. He has signaled his agreement, but she seems not to notice. Perhaps it is time for a bit of coercion? She must know what he is, so that must be what she wants. He needs to get her alone, but Tom John seems to have a limpet-like attachment to her. So thinking, March abruptly turns from the rail spines and seads for his cabin. The *Quill*, sensing his approach to his own quarters, unseals the shell door and swings it aside on hinge muscles, and inside extrudes a sleep-clam, which it opens to reveal scarred and lacerated flesh. March moves past the clam to where a nerve node protrudes, with veins extending from it across the glistening wall. He hammers the node with his fist and the whole cabin shudders. With a sucking inhalation, the *Quill* abruptly retracts the clam,

forming a sensory manifold out of the surface of the node—a complexity of tubes and a single squid’s eye.

“Now I have your attention,” March says, inter-lacing his fingers and stretching them against each other. He is about to reach out to the manifold when he notices a web of flesh blistering out from the wall between two veins.

“Did I ask for this?”

His reply is a flickering of random pixels in the surface of the flesh, which slowly resolve into a picture. This picture is one he knows the *Quill* has built by sonar imaging, as its source is utterly light-less. He sees a smooth surface breaking into ripples around an area where a snakelike form has attached. Here, then, is his solution—remoras are Tom John’s field of expertise.

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THE MOTORS ARE spliced from bivalves and their action produces a sound as of huge wet sex. Tom John is utterly conscious of this as he connects nutrient sacks to the huge pulsating bodies. Each sack weighs twenty kilos and the work of bringing them from the refining organ is making Sian sweat, in the dark warmth of the hold, and this sweat is sticking her toga to the curves of her body. And Tom John is aware of this too. With his wrist spur, he punctures each bean-shaped sack before pushing it into the feeding receptacle of each motor and, at each motor, he presses his fingers into the sensory pits of the nearby wall to bring biolights scuttling across the ceiling to gather above him. The creatures cling with black spider legs as, tic-like, they attach to the ship-flesh ceiling and cast down blue luminosity from their sugar-bag bodies. He feels somehow safer with this light about him—less susceptible to Sian’s obvious intent. Increasingly he is wondering why he should deny himself. The captain’s claim that she has cho-sen him does not seem valid.

“That should keep them through the storm,” says Sian, as he takes the last sack from her and pushes it into its elastic receptacle. Tom John nods and surveys the length of the water arteries to the clustered spherical filtration and refining tanks at the fore. The sucking roar from beyond these is now diminishing, and the tanks suck and groan with less vigor.

“Closing up,” he observes.

“Then there’s nothing more we need to do down here,” Sian replies.

Tom John turns to look at her, and she regards him, waiting.

“Nothing we need to do,” he says.

Sian lets out a slow and heavy breath and shakes her head.

“There is something I need you to do,” she tells him.

How ignorant can he pretend to be?

“Someone might come,” he says.

“I want you to come,” she tells him.

They move face to face and he reaches out a hand to her. She takes his hand, brings it up to her mouth and chews at the palm before sliding it down to rest it on her neck, his wrist spur at her throat. Gently trapping his hand with her chin, she undoes the belt and stick-strip of her toga and shrugs the damp fabric to the shell-scaled floor. He notices how her seadaption is not at odds with the smooth lines of her body. Her wrist and ankle spurs carry the mauve pigmentation of her skin, her stomach ribbing runs in a smooth curve from below breasts that seem just the final peak and fold of that ribbing, and her red slotted-pupil eyes and black hair are in perfect complement.

“Here,” she says, pulling him by his hand to one of the water pipes. Guided by her he turns at the last with his back to the pipe. She opens his shirt then pants and, while holding and rubbing his penis, pushes him back so he is sitting on the pipe. In his excitement, he has almost slewed the resinous seal on his glans. She smoothes it away with her thumb, before straddling both him and the pipe. He reaches around one taut buttock to find her seal is long since slewed away, and soon she is sliding onto him. They move to the rhythm of the motors and soon exceed it.

The captain walks out of the darkness to them when they are dressed and ready to return to the deck, and Tom John knows by his flushed look and bitten lip tendrils that he has been in the hold for longer.

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SENT LIKE A child to her cabin because a remora has penetrated the hull. Pressured to go there when she objected because of her infringement of ship's law, and that look the captain gave her, head to foot, greenish slime

on his upper lip from an obviously faulty seadaption—why else the ugliness of lip tendrils and chitin on the palms of his hands, why else the barb on his tongue and his pointed teeth? Sian fumes as her door rips open accommo-datingly and her sleep-clam extrudes and after a moment opens. She ignores it as she discards her toga and pulls a sponge with its trailing stalk from the wall pit. As she swabs herself down and the fluid from the sponge slews down her body to be absorbed by the floor, she swears quietly, and does not notice the squid eye—the sensory link she has no knowledge of—closing in the wall for the last time. Some day, she tells herself, she will have her own ship and no longer be at the beck and call of such a man. Finished washing, she returns the sponge to its pit then flings herself down on the soft wet flesh of her sleep clam. Her eyes are shut when that softness closes down on top of her and gently muffles her screams.

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As HE MOVES into the lower hull, Tom John is worried about what the captain might do but knows that for the present the remora must take precedence. In a chamber with the shape of a heart he strokes a nerve node with the back of his hand and steps back so that his shadow is not cast across it by the two biolights that have followed him. To his surprise, the node extrudes a sensory manifold before blistering up a map to show the location of the remora penetration. He gazes into the squid eye and wonders why it must sense him before providing what he needs. He glances aside at the bladder cache to where the veins from the node spread, like tree roots.

The long, coffin-sized bladder splits with a faint popping and Tom John stoops over it to take out the short bony harpoon he usually uses for this chore. There is another surprise—the weapon revealed to him is a stinger—rather excessive for dealing with a remora. It consists of a tube of ribbed muscle the length of his arm, with two handgrips, and a magazine of stings slung under-neath. The pit-trigger in the forward grip is operated by his wrist spur. He takes up the weapon and holds it so the nearest biolight illuminates the translucent magazine sack. There are four stings inside and he sees that three of them are a different color from the first to be loaded. He again gazes up at the ship's sensory manifold, and the eye gazing back at him is lidded and tightened, before opening again. Squeezing the first of the stings up into the launch tube of the stinger, he goes off in search of the remora, uncomfortable with the fact that the *Quill* just winked at him.

Beyond the heart chamber the ship opens out, braced by bony struts between hull divisions. The biolights, keeping with him, are now many

meters above. He walks quickly to the rear of the ship, water arteries and food canals becoming revealed in the floor and ceiling. At the appropriate place, he turns to the port and heads for outer hull. Soon he sees that the remora's point of penetration has been accurately located for him, as here is a healed wound, bulbous with tangerine scar tissue. Strangely, it is not a recent wound. He studies the floor and sees the slime trail heading, inevitably, to the rear hold, and follows it. This trail too is not recent—it is grayish and glutinous, as are all old trails on shell where they cannot be absorbed by the ship.

Soon Tom John sees mounded spherical eggs, each large enough to contain a man, bound to the walls of the hold by lattices of hardened resin. Over one such mound is poised a wrinkled ovipositor spurring from a thick ceiling artery. It is still, now that the ship no longer harvests the protein of the sea to convert it into this mounded product. At the first mound, Tom John sees the remora.

The creature is a giant lamprey, but one with ridged chitinous blades on its head stretching back from a triangular mouth filled with red cutting disks. It has penetrated a ship egg, has obviously been feeding for some time, and is now bloated with this unaccustomed bounty. Sensing Tom John's presence it rears up from its gluttony and indolently swings its head round to face him. Tom John feels no fear as he walks in close enough to be sure not to miss, then aims and triggers the stinger. The weapon contracts in his hand then spits out the loaded sting, a barbed glassy spike with two poison sacs attached. The sting penetrates below the remora's mouth and the sting sacs pulse as they drive the poison into the creature. The effect is electric—the remora flings itself into the air then comes down convulsing and thrashing. After this, its body pulls into a tight arc to the sound of crunching vertebra, and slowly the creature ties itself into a tight fleshy knot. Tom John turns away and trudges back the way he came, as already the floor is softening around the dead creature, in readiness to draw it down.

The heart chamber is open to him when he returns to it, but the bladder cache inside is closed. The ship's eye regards him and opens up an organ-ic screen.

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SIAN GASPS GRATEFULLY at clean air as her sleep-clam opens, and realizes that the air is fresher and colder than usual. She sits upright and sees that her door is open on to a wall of gray cloud and drizzle-laden air, and captain March. She quickly steps from her clam in fear that it might

close on her again and stands to face the captain.

“Simmiser, Simmiser,” he says, and licks at his top lip with his barbed tongue.

“What do you want?” she asks, knowing the answer.

The Captain steps through the doorway, and the door hinges closed behind him. “I’ve come to take what you offered and should have given.”

He leers at her nakedness and slides his thumb down the join of his shirt and to the top of his pants. When he drops his pants and steps out of them, she sees that in his seadaption what she should have seen long before—he is made for sadism. His barbed penis is erect and the hooked scales on his thighs glitter in the blue light.

“I made you no offer,” she says.

“You could have closed the sensory link any time you wanted,” he tells her.

She backs up, but there is nowhere to go and soon he pins her to the wall. “What link?”

“Enough of your games,” he mutters, his words slurred.

She fights him but he is hideously strong and quite obviously enjoys her struggles. Soon he will enter her in one way or another and she knows then that the agony will begin. She fights all the harder as he spins her and throws her face down on the clam. But suddenly he bellows with rage and has released her. Sobbing, she turns and sees that he is now facing the wall. A nerve node has appeared there and extruded a manifold and unblinking eye. Why does an unrequested sensory link anger him so? March drives his fist into it, once, twice, then again. The *Quill* rocks with the pain of his blows and the cabin door springs open to give access to the storm. The howl of the wind and the roar of the sea nearly drown out three sucking thuds. March is screaming and groping for the three stings that pump venom into his back. On the floor he thrashes and groans and squirts green chyme from his mouth. He knots fetal, hands and feet clenched to fists, the only movement on him the still-pumping stings. Underneath him the floor softens as the *Quill* prepares to take him down.

“The ship wanted this,” says Tom John. “And a rapist deserves no less.”

Sian Simmiser does not reply as she teases the captain's hook scales out of her thigh and paints finger patterns on her mauve skin with her red blood. She glimpses up at the watering squid eye that regards her. Hides her fear, her knowledge.

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