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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 Now the outdated computers were largely silent, the few that worked offering the only illumination in the dim bridge.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 cutter."

"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 cutter'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.”

To be continued...

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