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Flesh

by Paul L. Mathews

Part Two

The Tower That Ate People

Hurling into the trees, Boyd was barely aware of the baleful moan of the wind as it swept through the dead forest beyond the beach. All about him the rotten, faeces-brown trees waved and undulated like a crowd in an auditorium, urging him on as he ran through thick mud that choked the ground.

“I am tracking Princess Tatiana through a transponder in her vacuum suit, Master Boyd,” Doll Two said, its voice conveyed to Boyd via the comms set in his ear.

“Which way, Dolly?” Boyd’s limbs pumped with an almost metronomic rhythm, and his breathing was steady and even.

“The amphibious vehicle containing the Princess is following a convoluted trail through the forest. If you maintain your present course and speed, you should be able to intercept it in approximately ninety seconds.”

*Why bother. We don’t need her. You should be trying to repair the Troika. Crepitus is still out there, y’know?*

There it was again, the voice in his head. Boyd gritted his teeth. He didn’t know who it was, or how it had got there, but it was becoming annoying. “Shut up,” he said tersely as he dodged sideways to avoid colliding with a tree.

“As you wish, Master Boyd.”

“Not you, Dolly.”

“Oh, I am sorry, Master Boyd. Are you conducting another conversation of which I am unaware?”

“Apparently, yes.”

“Very good, sir.”

#

Chaff gunned the amphibious vehicle down the twisting track. It wasn’t easy, with the Dogfish’s deranged tracking constantly pulling to the right. The garrulous, strained lamentation of the vehicle’s aging engine and the rattling of loose panels and faulty suspension almost drowned out Moz’s cries. Chaff risked a quick glance over his shoulder. Clutching his wounded thigh in the back of the vehicle, Moz rolled to and fro as he tried to stem the bleeding. His camouflaged trousers, once grey, were now crimson, and his face was ashen.

“Just hang on, Moz!” Chaff shouted over the noise of vehicle. “We won’t be long.”

He turned back, and—through instinct and surprise—his foot went for the brakes.

Suddenly the track was blocked by a human. Stood tall and defiant, his bare feet and body-stockings were ripped and blood-stained. Head lowered, he glared through black lashes as he raised a pistol and aimed for Chaff.

Chaff wrenched his foot from the brake and slammed it back onto the accelerator. “Don’t call my bluff, boy,” he said through snarling teeth as he gripped the steering wheel hard.

Whoever this man was, however, he wasn’t calling anybody’s bluff. First one shot rang out, then another. The first bullet shattered the windshield, showering Chaff in glass, the second tore into the Moreau’s shoulder. He barked in pain, hand going to his wound, eyes shutting. Losing his grip on the wheel, the vehicle’s faulty tracking took over, and it veered violently to the right, plunging off the track and spearing between the trees. Chaff opened his eyes just in time to see the drop beyond leering at him, but it was too late. Momentarily airborne, the Dogfish was almost serene in its flight before—maintaining its horizontal attitude through momentum alone—it splashed down into an estuary that lay some thirty feet below.

Chaff was thrown against the big steering wheel, and he felt something break in his chest. His head snapped forward then back, and his vision immediately became blurred and darkened. His ears rang, and his faculties were confused. Pain besieged his every fibre.

His first instinct was to just curl up and hide. It’d be easy. Just let go, and sleep. Moz cried out once more, however, and Chaff forced himself to sit upright. Moz. The prisoner. He had to get them back to the *Tower*.

He dipped the clutch, wrenching at the Dogfish’s stick-shift to engage the propshaft. As the water behind the vehicle began to churn and swell, and the Dogfish began to move forward, Chaff then threw a further lever on the steering column, locking the wheel in position. A brief pause for a ragged breath, and he craned himself out of the driver’s seat and headed for the rear of the vehicle.

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“The Princess appears to have changed direction and slowed somewhat, Master Boyd.”

Boyd swore, throwing the pistol to one side. It had jammed after the second shot. Now he’d have to finish things off with his bare hands.

Sprinting, he followed the impromptu track made by the amphibious vehicle. He had to get to the Dogfish before its crew had chance to recover. The markings on that thing—and their equipment—said Theocracy, and they fought to the bitter end.

In minutes he was leant against the brittle husk of a decaying tree. Smashed and bent, it bore testimony to the passage of the vehicle. Beyond it was a thick, congested collection of trees with a Dogfish sized hole punched in it. Beyond that he could see the estuary, and the vehicle moving away as it flayed at the water, moving inland.

He squinted. He could see Tatiana. She was still unconscious, thrown against the rear of the cabin. Suddenly the Dogfish’s lupine driver, with a bloody shoulder and loping gait, was craning himself out of that cabin, and heading for the machine gun.

*Boyd! Look out!*

He had the merest opportunity to duck back before the firing started. The chatter of the gun stabbed through the forest just as the bullets sliced through the trees about Boyd, and the Scot was showered in sharp, hot splinters of bark and masticated wood. He had a brief moment to realise his cover was being chewed up by the machine gun's fire before, with a crack and a groan, the tree he was hiding behind began to buckle.

*Move, Boyd, move!*

He made for another tree, crouching low, but to no avail. A bullet grazed his shoulder, the impact throwing him backward as he shouted in searing pain. Falling onto his back, he only had time to put his arms across his face as—with a petulant groan—another tree behind him fell, trapping him with its dead weight, smothering him with its damaged bark.

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Chaff kept on firing until the barrel of the machine gun glowed white hot, and the ammunition ran out. Even then he stood with the trigger depressed as it clicked incessantly, the barrel trained on the smoking copse of trees.

The smoke began to clear, and he could finally see the devastation he had wrought. He had levelled the trees, and all that remained was a shredded mass of decimated pulp and mulch. There was no movement. Surely nobody could have survived that barrage?

He took the mic from his pocket, movements slow and mechanical, and spoke into it. "I'm returning to the *Tower* now. I was pursued briefly, but it's taken care of."

"Any further casualties?"

"Moz has been hurt. Shot in the thigh. He's bleeding badly. He may not make it."

"Bring him back anyway. If we can't stitch him back together, he can be eaten."

Chaff gulped, head lolling to the side as he closed his eyes and breathed in the sea air in an attempt to clear his senses. "Yes, sir," he said, the words almost an amorphous mumble.

Putting the mic away, Chaff looked at Moz and the girl. She seemed okay. She was still unconscious, but Moz appeared to have deteriorated. His rat head twitched fitfully on his slender shoulders. The skin about his eyes had darkened, and—as the light failed, storm clouds gathering above—his chops and mouth almost looked green. He'd fallen silent and still now, breath shallow and skin sweaty.

"Come on, Moz," Chaff said as he moved toward the youngster. "I've already lost four good men. I don't want to lose you too..."

#

Boyd could hear rain falling on wood, and the slur of wind over an uneven surface above him. Water was soaking his body, and his face was wet. He tried to take a deep breath, only to find his mouth and nose were blocked with brittle, hot bark. His eyes snapped open. He could see nothing.

He was buried! He couldn't breathe! He had to get out! Every inch of his body focused on gaining his freedom. His arms and legs thrashed against the oppressive weight above him. Arching his back, pushing against the darkness, he bucked. In minutes he

was upright, forcing his way through the blanket of ruined trees, coughing up bark, ash and dirt.

*Welcome back.*

He couldn't be bothered to answer. He pawed at his eyes before looking about him. The light had deteriorated, and now rain was lashing from the brooding sky as wind whipped about him, the frenetic air thick with the smell of burnt wood.

He moved a finger to the earpiece of his comms set. "Dolly?"

"Welcome back, Master Boyd. I was beginning to worry."

"How long have I been out?"

"Not long, sir. Five minutes. You really do seem to be recuperating rapidly."

"You're telling me..." His hand went to his shoulder. It was soaked in blood, but the wound wasn't all that deep. A flesh wound. He stuck a dirty finger in it. It seemed to be knitting with surprising speed. "Do you still have a fix on Tatiana?"

"Yes, Master Boyd. She has moved inland along a river, and is now approaching some form of lagoon in the centre of the island."

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The rain lashed harder as the Dogfish turned the corner and nosed its way into the lagoon. Slumped against the wheel, weary, bleeding and fighting to stay awake, Chaff allowed himself the smallest of smiles.

"Almost there, Moz," he shouted over his shoulder, knowing full well the kid may have been dead by now.

The lagoon was big, its turgid waters surrounded by faces of sheer rock broken up with the odd shoreline of stony beach. Fetid trees flanked the tops of the cliffs like sentinels, and, even from here, Chaff could see the camouflaged guard towers they concealed were unmanned, such was the paucity of men available these days.

At the centre of this lagoon, contrasting with the drab grey of its surroundings sat Stanztrigger's ship, the *Tower*. A hulking Theocracy vessel built—as with all Theocracy capital ships—along a vertical axis, it sat at the centre of the lagoon with three quarters of its height lost beneath fetid water. Once it would have gleamed, the brass-like glory of its hide reflecting the light of stars, savaged worlds and burning ships, but now its battered hull was covered with rust and moss. It never ceased to amaze Chaff how easily Mother Nature could consume one of the Theocracy's finest, given fifty years or so.

Slumping in his seat, he steered the Dogfish toward a makeshift dock fitted to the side of the *Tower*, and gunned the engine still further. Every second counted if Moz were to survive. That, and his belly was painful and empty, his thoughts drifting to his blue, fleshy prize...

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Boyd's pursuit, guided by Doll Two, had taken him from the edge of the estuary to the centre of the island. Hurling through the trees, he'd barely been cognisant of not only his mounting cuts and bruises, but also the old, stone ruins he passed. Once they'd been temples, halls and houses, but now they were reduced to rubble, the scorched, broken remains subsumed by ash and fallen trees. He didn't know how, and

he didn't care. All he wanted was Tatiana, and now he crouched in a badly constructed guard tower that overlooked the lagoon, watching the Dogfish as it sidled up to a makeshift dock on the side of the ship. Two Moreaus stationed there—one with a lion's head and the other with that of an otter—were already clambering aboard the amphibious vehicle, one tethering it to the dock as the other helped the wounded wolf from the cabin.

"Brilliant. A Theocracy ship." It was a few years now since he'd fought the Theocracy, and he'd been hoping it'd stay that way. "This just gets better and better."

*Look at that ship. It's got to be sixty years old.*

"From what information I can elicit from the scanners," Dolly said to Boyd over the 'net, "I would suggest the vessel is a Conviction class battleship. They were commonly employed by the Theocracy in their third war with the D'Kothren..."

*... But judging by that damage just above the waterline, it was probably attacked en route to the frontline and marooned he—*

"Okay, that's enough, both of you," Boyd said.

"Both?" Dolly paused before continuing. "Master Boyd, have you been drinking?"

He ignored the question, staring at the vessel. A faded minotaur was painted on the ship's hull. "That may have been built by the Theocracy," Boyd said, "but it's not a Theocracy ship."

*So, whose is it?*

"Stanztrigger."

*Whotrigger?*

"He was the leader of a company of man-eating Moreau mercenaries called the Eaters. Used to do a lot of work for the Theocracy. They took payment in flesh and human slaves. They disappeared years ago, before I was born. Nobody knows what happened to them. They must have been marooned here all that time."

"Do you think this is his ship, Master Boyd?"

"I know it is," Boyd said, looking toward the stylised minotaur. "I'd recognise that painting anywhere. Stanztrigger was a legend. Ivan and Gregor used to talk about him all the time. They always said the Theocracy would have won even more wars if the Eaters hadn't vanished."

His head sank and his shoulders sagged. Stanztrigger. Great. He'd have preferred the Theocracy. Or, even better, a drink and a good meal. His hunger so acute now as to be painful. Wrestling also with a raging thirst, he'd have given anything for a stiff dram.

He looked up. The rain was getting harder, and he'd swear his skin was starting to burn. The sky was murky now, and clouds swirled above the Theocracy ship like black milk in grey coffee. It did not, Boyd concluded, look natural.

*I told you. Crepitus. He's coming. He's coming, and he's going to kill us all.*

"Us? You're suddenly very familiar."

"Familiar? I'm sorry, Master Boyd, but I really am most confused."

“Don’t worry about it, Dolly.” He stood, and began to strip what was left of his cut and bloody body-stocking. “I’m going to have to swim over to that ship, okay? I’m gonna have to go offline.”

“Very good, Master Boyd. We shall remain here and await your return. Vast has established some ad-hoc defences, and I believe Master Ivan and Mistress Katarina may awaken soon. I look forward to seeing both yourself and Mistress Tatiana as soon as possible.”

“Count on it, Dolly.”

#

The lion and the otter carried the unconscious Moz from the Dogfish whilst Chaff dragged his blue prize behind him. Holding her by her wrists, he hauled her across the ramshackle dock, pulling her along on her backside as her head lolled about her shoulders.

He paused to look up and peered at the black, swirling clouds. There was no doubt about it: The rain stung.

Finally he was inside the ship, the blue girl in tow. As soon as he was inside, he turned to close the old, scarred door. It groaned and cranked as it slid down, sealing them in.

“You two! Get off!” Turning back, Chaff saw Cook shooing the lion and the otter away, the pair moving in on the captive girl, grabbing at her as they licked their lips. As they backed off, their disappointment was written all over their faces.

“You,” Cook said to the lion whilst pointing at Moz, who’d been dumped on the dirty, rusty deck. “Get him to sick-bay. Tell the doctor to do what he can, but not to waste too many drugs. If he dies, save what you can in the Pantry and recycle the rest.”

The lion nodded. Young, barely more than a cub, his skin was pale and his mane dirty and plastered in dirt. He bent his lanky, malnourished frame and took Moz by the collar before beginning to drag him away.

“You,” Cook said, turning to Chaff, “report to Stanztrigger. He would speak to you about this girl’s ship, this *Troika*. Once you have debriefed him, report to sick-bay and have that shoulder looked at.”

“But, Cook, I’m worried. What about the weather?”

“What about it?”

“The rain. The clouds. There’s something wrong out there...”

“Let the weather do as it pleases.” He began to shuffle after the otter as it picked up the girl and carried her off toward the galley. He put his hands behind his humped back and squinted at Chaff over his shoulder. “We are quite safe here.”

#

The rain was lashing down now, a Moreau guard with a kestrel’s head and skinny, taloned fingers hunched against it as he brought the hood up on his rain cape.

“Lev, report,” his comm said, distorted and disjointed.

Stationed on top of the *Tower*, hands resting on a railing along the edge of the ship's hull, the Moreau squinted into the rain and out across the lagoon, its waters a blanket of circles under the rain. "All clear... I think."

"You think?"

He didn't answer immediately. Startled, he looked over his shoulder as a fleeting intrusion on his peripheral vision disturbed him. He peered into the gloom. "It's very dark all of a sudden. It's almost like night out here." Seeing nothing, he turned back.

The voice in the comm. laughed. "What's wrong, Lev? Scared of monsters?"

"Because you should be." Naked and wet through, Boyd emerged from the darkness behind the guard, grabbing him by the beak and shoulder before snapping his head around.

"Lev? *Lev*? Report! Lev!"

Boyd took the comm and threw it into the lagoon. Minutes later, having stripped the Moreau and donned his ill-fitting uniform, he threw the body after it, watching it fall before plunging into the water below.

The waters of the lagoon were encrusted with scum, and the hull of the *Tower* wasn't much better. Yet Boyd had found it remarkably easy to swim one and scale the other. Even now, skin burning from the rain, he felt fresh and strong.

Turning, he headed for a hatch in the hull that lead into the *Tower*. "Right, y'bastards," he said as he crouched, seizing the hatch's handle, "bring out your dead."

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The *Tower*'s galley was a contrast of black and orange, the darkness assuaged by brazen fires from lines of ovens and hobs. It was filled with steam, the sound of bubbling and boiling, and the incessant *drip drip drip* of leaking water. It was stifling hot, and the air was thickened by the haze of burning oils and fat.

In the centre, the girl was suspended from the ceiling, her bound hands over a meat hook. The cord bit into her skin, and it was soaked in her blood. Still in her vac-suit, the name "Tatiana" stencilled on its chest, her head lolled back and forth as she dangled there, but there were signs of animation in her face. A twitching of eyebrows. A crease of the forehead. A flex of the lips. She would be awake soon.

Cook was stood by a nearby table as he watched, smiling as he picked up a carving knife and began to attack its gleaming edge with a knife sharpener. His excitement was betrayed by the twitching of his cracked lips, by the shaking of his hands, by the greedy, almost salacious twinkling in his tiny black eyes.

"Wake up, Tatiana," he said. "It's time for supper."

*To be continued...*