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Flesh

by Paul L. Mathews

Part Three

Supper's Ready

Hand on his wounded shoulder, Chaff shuffled into the *Tower's* musty chapel. Only a selection of brave candles served to exorcise the darkness, and Stanztrigger's black mass was almost concealed in the gloom as he knelt before the chapel's tiny altar and golden crucifix. His eyes were closed, lips moving in silent prayer, and Chaff—moving to stand beside him—dared not interrupt his leader's supplications.

“Speak,” Stanztrigger said after a moment, crossing himself as his eyes opened.

“Sir,” Chaff said, lupine head bowed, “I came as soon as I got back to the *Tower*.”

Stanztrigger stood, looking down on the wolfen Moreau. “Did you get that girl back in one piece?”

“Yes, sir. Cook has her now.”

“Excellent. We will toast you when we eat her.”

“Thank you, sir.” Chaff bowed.

“Will that be all, Chaff?”

The Moreau didn't answer. He looked at Stanztrigger, but couldn't hold his gaze. He looked away, hands twitching

“Something troubles you, Chaff.” Stanztrigger placed a hand on his shoulder, squeezing gently.

“Sir... I'm worried. About Moz. He ate something back on the *Troika*. A bit off a corpse. I've got a funny feeling about it...”

“‘Funny feelings’ are for the pubescent,” Stanztrigger said. “Do not worry about Moz. He is in good hands. Now, you should get to sick-bay also, and have that shoulder looked at. I am going out to this ‘*Troika*’ as soon as the men are ready. You're going with me.”

“Go out to the *Troika*? Me? Again?”

Stanztrigger leant forward, peering at Chaff through the gloom. “I will need your experience. The other men are boys. You know that.”

“We... we should wait. The storm outside—”

“Never mind the damned weather, Chaff.” Stanztrigger's tone changed, sharpening like a spear. “I've been waiting for a vessel to land here for decades. A vessel to take us *home*. I'm not waiting any longer. Now go, and meet me at the hangar when you're ready.” He reached into a pocket in his fatigues, producing a small comm. Before activating it he said, “We shall take this *Troika*, and, once we're off this planet, we eat this Tatiana.”

#

“This is Stanztrigger. All officers and ancillary crew are to report to their stations immediately. All marines are to proceed to armoury and then hangar bay. Sick-bay to full readiness. This is not a drill.”

A brief burst of static heralded the end of the transmission, and the speaker above Boyd’s head fell silent. Crouched in the darkness of the dilapidated, sparsely lit corridor, pressed into a doorway, he watched two Moreaus walking passed. They were like everything else here—rotten and dying. One—an aging, grey-muzzled dog—coughed violently, and was forced to stop whilst his female compatriot—a feline—stopped to hit him on the back.

Boyd, the voice in his head said, if you insist on finding Tatiana, you’d better hurry. This place is going to be crawling with soldiers soon, and I’m guessing they’re going after the Troika.

“Be quiet,” Boyd said, his voice a harsh whisper. With that he slid from the shadows, stolen knife in hand. Falling upon the two guards from behind, he put the dog out of his misery with a swift cut across the throat. It was so dim in this corridor that Boyd could barely see the blood splatter the deck as the old dog collapsed, gargling, but the look of surprise on the cat’s face was obvious.

“I surrender! I surrender!” she said, hands reaching for the ceiling.

Boyd studied her. Grizzled and worn, this Moreau’s scars suggested she’d seen plenty of action. Now, however, she just looked tired and empty. “What’s your name?”

“Lorelei.”

“Okay, Lorelei,” he said, the point of his knife now resting at the Moreau’s throat. “Your friends have been on my ship and taken something from me. A girl. A blue girl. Where is she?”

#

“Wake up, girl,” Cook said, knife resting on Tatiana’s chest. “It’s time for supper.”

Cook moved the tip of the blade over Tatiana’s vac-suit, its point biting into the thick material. “Why don’t you wake up and talk to me?” he said, his eyes shining in the reflected fire of his ovens and hobs. “I get so lonely here. I’ve been down here so long, in this galley. Alone.”

Moving the knife to the vac-suit’s collar, he made an incision. It was just deep enough to cut the suit, but not Tatiana’s skin. He sliced across the neck, separating the suit’s circular metal collar. “Stanztrigger and I are only two left, you know? All the rest of the original crew, the ones who crashed here, they’re all dead. Now there’s only us.”

Placing the knife below Tatiana’s throat, he cut downwards, slicing the suit open. Still he drew no blood. “But nobody comes here, to my galley. Not even Stanztrigger. They’re all scared of me, I can tell. They think I’m some murderous old bastard who likes cutting people open, who likes hurting them. You don’t think that, do you, Tatiana?”

There was still no response from Tatiana, whose head continued to move back and forth in a random fashion as she began to approach consciousness.

“You’re very quiet, Tatiana,” Cook said as he took a step back, appraising the girl. “But it doesn’t matter.” He raised the knife, the reflected firelight dancing on its blade. “You’ll be singing like a newborn soon enough.”

#

Stomach knotted and empty, Chaff staggered into sick-bay, one hand on his wound, the other on his belly. “Doctor?” he said. “How is... Moz ...?”

His voice tailed off as he looked about, confused. Like all the *Tower*, the spacious sick-bay was dark and damp, but Doctor did what he could to keep the place clean. Now, however, it was liberally splattered with blood. Of Doctor and Moz, there was no sign.

Chaff looked about, eyes narrowing and a growl building in his throat as he let go of his belly and drew his pistol. It didn’t make sense. There were at least three Moreaus in here before Moz reported to sick-bay. Chaff stood still and silent as he peered at the blood-spattered walls, the beds and their idle Doctorpus units, and the floor.

Translating the splatter pattern, he flexed his fingers on the butt of his gun as he stepped cautiously toward a gap between two of the beds that lined the opposing wall.

Reaching the gap, his fears were confirmed. Lying on the floor, uniform torn and stomach ripped open, was the doctor. Half man, half pig, a look of pained astonishment was frozen on his porcine features. His face was a pallid white, the skin about his mouth and eyes a curious green. It must have been a trick of the dim light, but Chaff was certain his face was twitching, despite the abject lack of viscera in his exposed, rent midriff.

Chaff looked about him, looking for Moz. It had to have been him. Chaff had known there was something odd about his comrade when he was lying wounded on the Dogfish. His skin had looked weird. No doubt something to do with that cadaverous meat he’d eaten on the *Troika*. Shoving his pistol in his belt, Chaff took his comm from his pocket, activating it as he put it to his lips. “Bridge? This is Chaff in sick-bay. We have a problem. Doct—”

His report was cut off as Moz emerged from the shadows behind. What little of his skin could be seen through Doctor’s blood was sickly and green, his rat eyes were bloodshot and wide, and his movements were jerky but swift. In a panic, Chaff dropped his comm and reached for his pistol, but it was too late. In two strides Moz bridged the distance between them, seizing Chaff by the shoulders as he lunged, sinking his bloodied teeth into the old wolf’s neck.

#

“This is Stanztrigger. Security detail to sick-bay immediately. I repeat: Security detail to sick-bay immediately.”

Washing his hands in preparation, Cook looked up toward the speaker. Even once the announcement was over, it leaked a residual buzz. “He really is remarkable, you know—Stanztrigger?” he said, turning back to the motionless Tatiana. With her heavy boots and vac-suit cut away, the Oridian was dressed in only her body-stocking. Picking up a further knife and licking his lips as he looked at Tatiana, Cook’s intentions for this body-stocking—and the soft, blue flesh beneath—were clear. “Without him in charge, I doubt we’d still be alive. Wasn’t easy. We’ve all had to make sacrifices.” He looked toward the bubbling cooking pots and hot ovens. “Some, of course, had to make bigger sacrifices than others.

“In all these years we’ve been stuck here, since we crashed, he’s never slept. He says he refuses to until we’re off this planet. I asked him once, how he did it. He said it was ‘Faith’.” He stopped a foot or so short of Tatiana, and his eyes narrowed as he took a firmer grip on her knife. “Come on, Tatiana. Why don’t you talk to me? I can see you’re awake.”

“I was waiting... for you... to shut up,” Tatiana said quietly as her eyes opened. Her voice was slightly slurred, and her eyes unfocused. “I couldn’t get a word in edgeways.”

Cook smiled a false, brief smile. It quickly transformed into a sneer, and he lunged for Tatiana with his knife. Tatiana’s response was equally as swift, her foot kicking out and striking him on the chin. Halted in his tracks, Cook took a step back, and, a moment later, Tatiana’s leg swept out once more, this time striking the knife from his hand with the side of her foot. The next blow hit him square between the eyes, and the old man reeled backward, falling to the deck beside a row of worktops cluttered with chopping boards and knives.

“Oooo... a struggle.” Cook’s smile was as dark as his narrowed eyes. He stood and reached to the worktop beside him, taking up another knife. “Excellent. Been a while since I’ve had to fight for my dinner.”

He turned back toward Tatiana, only to see the young woman pulling herself up until her chest was level with the meat-hook between her bound wrists. Face flushed and jaw clenched with the strain, Tatiana raised her legs above her head, wrapping them about the chain suspending her from the ceiling. Cook started forward, forcing his old, crooked limbs forward as best he could. By the time he’d reached his supple young quarry, however, Tatiana had used her purchase on the chain to gain some slack on her bound wrists, freeing them from the meat-hook. Unfurling her body, she dangled up-side-down as she grabbed Cook by the collar with bound hands and drove her forehead into the bridge of his nose.

Cook squealed, falling to the floor once more as his long nose broke and blood filled his eyes, mouth and sinuses. “Bitch!” he shouted as he began to stand, wiping the blood from his eyes with the back of one hand, the other waving his knife about him to ward off any unseen attack. “I’ll gut you! You hear? I’ll gut you!”

The next thing he saw of Tatiana was an azure blur as the Oridian dropped to the deck, twisting in the air like a cat to land on her feet, before rushing him, reaching for his neck. Old and frail as he was, however, Cook was not an easy target. A well-judged thrust of his knife, and he stopped Tatiana in her tracks, stabbing her in the ribs. The knife sliced through the body-stocking with ease. The familiar give of flesh, the resistance of bone, followed.

Tatiana screamed, and she screamed loud, falling to the deck, landing beside a row of hobs covered with bubbling pots and pans. A flower of blood flourished on her ribs, and the Oridian clamped both hands over the wound as she began to roll to and fro. Her face was contorted with pain, eyes shut and teeth clenched as she bit down, spittle flecking her lips.

“That’ll do for starters, young lady,” Cook said with a smile, blood filling the gap between his big front teeth. Knife raised above his head, he began to move toward Tatiana. “Now, let’s get to the main course, shall we?”

Stanztrigger listened to his men dying. Having left the captain's chair to stand beside the sparrow's station, he listened as the security detail dispatched to sick-bay—six Moreaus in all—screamed in fear and agony. Finally their cries were truncated by bubbling, bloody gargles.

“That's coming from Chaff's comm,” the sparrow said. Trembling, she didn't look at Stanztrigger. “It's still open.”

“Do we have functional surveillance equipment near sick-bay?”

“None,” the sparrow replied. “But we've just received a report from Lorelei. She was on her way to the hangar when a man attacked her and killed Stat. He wanted to know where the girl was...”

“What 'girl'? The prisoner from the *Troika*?”

“Aye, sir.”

“And this man killed Stat?”

“Aye. Also, he was wearing Lev's uniform.”

Stanztrigger's eyes darkened as he drew a pistol strapped to his thigh. “Lock these doors behind me, girl,” he said as he turned and strode to his chair with such purpose sparks flew as his cloven hooves struck the metal deck, “and don't let *anybody* in, understand?”

“Where are you going, sir?” Now she looked at Stanztrigger, eyes wide and a tremor in her voice.

“Something's killing my crew,” he said as he took the flak-vest from the back of his chair, “and whoever this man in Lev's gear is, he has answers.” He donned the flak-vest, zipping it up to his chin. “I'm going to find him.”

#

Moving cautiously, pistol held in both hands, Boyd continued down the murky corridor. The sound of his boots sloshing through inch-deep water competed with the *drip drip drip* of incessant leaks. The corridor's weak light was reflected by the dirty water, dancing along the walls and ceiling like Saint Vitus.

You should have killed her.

“Are you joking? Did you see her?” Boyd said under his breath as he recalled the sight of the cat Moreau—knocked unconscious with the lightest of blows to the chin—slumped in the doorway. “She was hardly worth the effort. None of these guys are. I'm not even sure why I've gone at 'em so hard. Bad language'd be enough to beat most of 'em.”

Don't be so sure. They're starving and desperate. Every one of them you leave alive could make you pay for it later. In blood.

“Whatever. Just shut up for a minute, okay?” He'd stopped now. Having reached the end of the corridor, he paused by a rusty door and peered at a faded, mouldy map laid into the wall at the end of the corridor. They were near the *Tower*'s sick-bay. He looked harder, looking for the galley. “There!” he said, pointing to the map. “The cat said Tatiana'd been taken there, to the gall—”

The door beside him hissed open, revealing one of the ship's crew. Stock still, shoulders slumped and head down, its face was lost in shadow.

Boyd raised his pistol immediately, stepping away from the door and the figure beyond. “Don’t move...” His eyes flicked to the name stencilled on the figure’s parka “Moz. I don’t want to kill you. Just move aside.”

His first instinct was to shoot on sight, but the image of that cat Moreau, so thin and empty... These people didn’t deserve to be slaughtered. They should be pitied, if anything.

The figure offered no reply, nor did it move.

Boyd...

“Not now.”

Boyd, really. I’ve got a bad feeling about this.

Then the figure raised its head, revealing a rat’s head. Sickly green skin surrounded eyes red with burst blood-vessels. Its skin was ashen skin and its slack mouth was choked with blood, the teeth caked in loose, torn flesh. Then, in a burst of speed, it rushed at Boyd, grabbing for the Scot even as Boyd fired again and again until his pistol was exhausted. Oblivious to the bullets that thudded into its torso, oblivious to its wounds, it seized Boyd by the neck, squeezing hard as its gaping mouth bore down on the Scot’s face.

#

Through a blaze of pain, Tatiana heard the old cook’s irregular steps on the metal deck. Forcing herself to open her eyes, forcing herself to fight the pain, to focus, she saw him looming toward her, knife above his head.

Tatiana had to move. Pain or no pain, she’d not come this far, she’d not fought the Witch and Portia and the Calci, just to be killed by some old man with a knife.

He was almost upon her now, poised to strike down with the knife. There was a sinister smile on his face, eyes wide and delirious. Tatiana kicked out with her foot, buying herself some time as she struck him hard in the knee. The old man swore as he collapsed onto his hands and knees, still gripping the blade. He and Tatiana looked at each other, sight locked. Tatiana reached up, hoping to grab the edge of the stove beside her and pull herself up. Instead her fingers fell upon the handle of a cooking pot that projected from the edge of the stove. Grabbing it, acting on instinct alone, she heaved, planning to strike the cook on the head. Only when she felt how heavy the pan was did she realise it was full. As she swung it toward the old man it decanted its contents, hot oil cascading onto the cook.

He howled as the hot oil seared his head, face and shoulders. Hands going over his burnt face, he collapsed onto his back, and the smell of burning fur and flesh assaulted Tatiana. Writhing, he kicked at the air, revolving on his humped back like an inverted cockroach. Sickened by the sound of his suffering, Tatiana crawled onto her hands and knees, lurched forward, and struck him hard on the head with the empty pan.

The unconscious cook fell silent, and now it was Tatiana’s turn to fall onto her back, hands going once again to her wound. She could barely see, her blurred vision crowded by swathes of darkness. Skin clammy, she was suddenly very cold. A horrid sucking noise came from her wound whenever she managed to breathe. There was blood in her throat. She groaned, eyes closing, as the grip on her wound slackened.

She was dying, she could feel it. She was dying, and her life was flooding through her fingers.

To be continued...

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