

Flesh

by Paul L. Mathews

Part Four

The Knife

Dropping the gun, Boyd seized Moz by the jaw with both hands and held the slavering mouth at bay as its fetid breath washed over him.

Look at him! He's a Calci! The voice in his head shrieked. I told you! This has got to be Crepitus's work!

Moz seized Boyd's wrists with an alarming strength, and the two became locked in a test of strength. Boyd redoubled his efforts, a groan escaping his lips as his arms began to shake, the muscles burning. Still he squeezed Moz's jaw, and a crack of bone sounded through the corridor. Moz's face compressed, the jaw broken and his chin forced under his tiny nose. With muffled cry, he wrenched Boyd's arms aside and, letting go, staggered back as though dazed.

Boyd stumbled backward, almost losing his footing in the water that hid the deck. He was sweating, and, for the first time since he'd woken up on the *Troika*, his pulse was up as his heart-rate quickened. This wasn't going to be as easy as he'd thought ...

Take his head off! Take his head off! Don't let him bite you!

"I know," Boyd said through gritted teeth as he crouched, circling his foe, "what I'm doing."

Moz, standing still and erect as he ripped off his ruined jaw and cast it aside, watched Boyd as though waiting for a chance, waiting for an opening. There was still an intelligence in those eyes, a cunning. This wasn't one of the mindless Calci the crew of the *Troika* had faced in the Elephant's Graveyard, or the lurching Wardread of Protos Alpha he'd fought beside his old unit. This was sharper. Keener. Qui—

It sprang at Boyd, clawing at the Scots face with a vicious rapidity. It tried to shout, but all that emerged from its exposed pharynx and flopping tongue was a bizarre farting of expelled air. Its blunt, broken fingernails made no impact on Boyd's skin, but the way Moz was trying to dig those fingernails into his eyes told the Scot he had to end this quickly before he was blinded.

Ducking under Moz's flailing arms, Boyd stepped past and behind his opponent. Turning, he trapped Moz in a full nelson grapple. Fingers locked, his teeth gritted as he closed his eyes and pushed hard at the back of Moz's head. Boyd let out a primal cry, body stiffening as he lifted the struggling Moz from the deck. Still kicking, Moz fought to the last, but his fate was sealed. With a deep crack, blood and mucus burst from his pharynx as his neck snapped and the back of his skull fractured under Boyd's pressure. Seconds later the skin of his neck tore, and seconds after that, his head came off, the larynx, sinews and sternomastoid muscles in pursuit as it flew through the air and vanished into the dirty water.

Letting the lifeless body fall, Boyd staggered back, eyes wide as he stared at the spot where the head had gone under. Bile rose in his throat. He looked down at his bare hands, covered in thick blood. How? How could he do that? How did he have the strength? Where did this fitness, recuperation and speed come from? What was he becoming?

The voice in his head laughed gently.

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Tatiana dragged herself across the deck to Cook's unconscious body and seized his knife. She wasn't going to die like this. She refused. She was Gregor Valentine's daughter.

Heaving herself to the galley's glowing hobs, she forced herself off the deck into a crouch, then stood, legs quivering violently. The wound in her ribs continued to suck air and seep blood as she breathed, and the hand she clutched over the wound was thick with congealing blood. With her eyesight failing, she squinted and blinked to focus on the knife. Her breath was coming fast now, in deep, ragged gasps, but she had to concentrate, to stay conscious. She placed the knife on the hot hob then, wavering, she clutched the edge of the cooker in an attempt to remain upright.

It didn't work. Shock and the loss of blood and oxygen overcame her, and she collapsed once more, striking her head hard against the metal deck.

#

Making his way through the *Tower*, Stanztrigger strode into a dingy corridor, pistol in hand. He stopped to glare at two Moreaus crouching at the other end of the corridor. Lost in darkness, they were scrabbling, pulling at something Stanztrigger couldn't see, and raising it to their mouths. They were making primal, guttural noises as their heads bobbed, hands to their mouths.

Stanztrigger's lips curled, exposing cruel, crooked teeth. Were they eating? Why weren't they on duty? "You two! What are you doing?" His voice reverberated about the corridor, and the two Moreaus turned sharply, looking toward him. Still he couldn't make them out clearly. "Stand up and name yourselves!"

They stood, loping toward him after a small pause.

He squinted. He still couldn't see who they were. "Stop," he shouted.

They still came for him, and the hairs on the back of his neck rose. Didn't they realise who he was? Were they blind? "Last chance," he shouted once more. "Stop right there."

They didn't stop. Blurred and swathed in darkness, they were closing fast, and Stanztrigger's nose wrinkled as a putrid smell assailed him. They closed within three feet and, finally, he could make out exposed teeth, wide eyes and bloody mouths.

"That's far enough," he said, raising his pistol and firing. If his voice was loud, the report of his gun was even louder, and his ears rang as the foremost Moreau—now headless—collapsed to the deck.

The other—a boar with broken tusks and rings through its hairy ears—rushed on, getting within striking distance of Stanztrigger and reaching for him. Its fingers were almost on his neck before, with an expansive sweep of his spindly arm, Stanztrigger

struck the boar across the face. The blow snapped his assailant's head through 180°, the spinal column sheering. It fell to the deck with a dying groan.

Stanztrigger paused for the briefest moment, staring at the bodies. They weren't getting up again, he concluded as he stepped forward. He knelt between the two bodies, grabbed the boar's body and hauled up its torso to inspect it.

"Who were you?" He took hold of the boar's chin, twisting the head to see its face. Once he'd been one of the security detail sent to the sick-bay, but now the green of his skin and blood in his eyes and mouth told Stanztrigger he'd become something else, something dead and rotten. He looked up the corridor to see the ravaged body they'd been feeding on lying in a torn, twisted heap. Leaning forward, he sniffed the boar's corpse before recoiling and turning his head away in disgust.

That smell! He hadn't smelt anything like that since ... No. It couldn't be!

He stood, the body slumping back to the deck. Then he rolled his shoulders and drew his weapon once again. It couldn't be him. Not Crepitus. Not after all these years.

A smile touched his animal mouth. But if he *were* here? What a welcome chance for revenge

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Tatiana slipped in and out of consciousness, haunted by visions of Calci crowding her. A gaggle of Calci with Boyd's face, holding her down, stripping her naked, and feasting on her flesh as one lay atop her, slipping into her exposed sex as his dead, soulless eyes bore into hers.

Suddenly she was wrenched from her fugue by the sound of something metal falling to the deck, the resulting clang and jangle cutting through the galley.

She tried to focus, she tried to move, to make herself sit up. There was something in here with her. Who was it? The cook? Another intruder?

She tried to see, but her vision was darkened and blurred so badly all she could see was a fugue of dark greens and smudged, twitching patches of orange. Above the pounding of her slowing heartbeat, she could hear the bubble of boiling water and oil, the ticking of hot metal expanding.

The sound of boots on the deck.

"Who," she said, voice the weakest of whispers. "Who's there?"

A black smudge—humanoid and threatening—moved into her field of dimmed vision, blocking out the greens and oranges behind. Preparing to fight again, her free hand moved fitfully around the deck in search of a weapon. She found none.

The black shape moved over her.

"You ... You stay away," she said. "I'm warning you."

"Tatiana? Oh Christ. Oh, Princess."

Boyd! Thank God! She reached for him. He knelt beside her, and she felt herself being scooped up in his strong arms. She breathed deeply, taking in the familiar smell of his sweat and the strange smell of unfamiliar clothes. "Boyd? Boyd! be careful! The cook! He's still here! I hurt him, but—"

"There's nobody else here, Princess. Just you, me, and the voices in my head."

No cook? Where could he be, the little bastard? Had he crawled away to lick his wounds? Other questions flooded her brittle consciousness. “How did ...? Here? How are we ... here?”

“We crashed after you jumped to lightspeed so close to that black hole. I woke up and found you’d been taken by somebody, so I came after you. Oh, Christ on a bike, Princess, that’s bad.”

She felt him moving her hand aside to get a better view of her wound. The sucking sound it made as she breathed was now joined with a strange, muffled flopping noise that emerged from the wound. She knew it was bad. She knew they had to do something. Fast. “Knife,” she said as loudly as she could.

“What?”

She pointed weakly toward the knife she’d left on the hob. “Knife.”

She felt his body shift as he looked over his shoulder toward the knife. “What about it?” There was a wary aspect to his voice.

“Use it. To seal. The wound.”

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The door began to open slowly before the hand gripped it, fingers gloved yet spindly, and forced it to one side. The servos sparked in protest, smoke curling out from the doorframe.

With the door forced open, Stanztrigger stepped through and into the corridor that led to the galley. The corridor’s deck was lost beneath scummy water.

His eyes narrowed as he saw the galley door. Nearly there. His shoulders slumped and he closed his eyes. God, he was tired.

His eyes snapped open. No. No rest. Not yet. Not until they were off this planet. He didn’t need sleep. He had his faith. And soon, when he reached the galley, he’d have answers from that girl. Her, and her friend.

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She felt the heat radiating from the knife as Boyd held it close to her wound. Even now, it seared her skin. She flinched.

“Are you sure about this, Princess?”

“Boyd, please. If you don’t ... I’ll bleed to death. You ... you know that.”

“Christ. I don’t know if I can.”

“Boyd. Don’t do this. I need you ... to be strong. I need you to be strong ... for me.” She paused, struggling for breath, fighting to stay awake. “If you falter, if you ... weaken, then I’ll ... weaken too.” With her free hand, she took his, squeezing hard. “But, Boyd, I need you ... to know I ... I lo—”

“No, Princess. No.” She felt his finger on her lips. She pursed them to bequeath it the gentlest of kisses. “Not now. Not like this. When I get you out of here, off this planet, away from Crepitus, and the Long Knives, and Ivan and all his fucking baggage, then tell me.” She felt something wet splash her cheek as he leant over her, looking down on her. A tear. “But not now. Not here. Not like this.”

She nodded. “Okay. But I’ll tell you, Boyd. I’ll tell you. Soon. Because we’re going ... to survive. I trust you. I trust you to be strong ... for me.” She took hold of his other hand now, and the heat from the knife bit her skin. “Now do it.”

There was the briefest of pauses before he pushed the flat of the red-hot blade against her wound, the heat from the knife burning the skin on contact. She howled with the dire agony of it. She howled so loud she felt something rip in her throat before her eyes rolled into her skull and she slipped into unconsciousness.

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Tatiana, mercifully, passed out within seconds of Boyd holding the hot knife to her wound, cauterizing it with short, delicate applications. Now Boyd bore her over his shoulder as he made his toward the galley door, compromising haste with a concern for Tatiana’s delicate state of health.

What’s the rush? Where are we going?

“Sick-bay. I need to stabilise her. I may have sealed the wound but—”

Sick-bay? On this heap? Are you mad? She’d have more chance if you operated on her in a pig-farm.

Reaching the door, Boyd activated it. It opened slovenly. “And what do you care?”

He had the briefest impression of a long, thin shadow with bared teeth waiting on the other side of the door. Then the shadow lashed out, hitting Boyd so hard in the belly the air was driven from him. Staggering, only his newly acquired stamina kept him upright—but the second blow saw to that. Hitting him on the chin like a jack-hammer, the shadow put Boyd on his arse. Tatiana fell to the deck, landing in an ungracious pile.

Boyd blinked as his senses shifted and waned. His vision began to attain some semblance of focus, and he saw the shadow for what it really was—a ghoulishly thin Moreau with a ram’s head and goat’s legs—glaring down at Boyd whilst standing over Tatiana’s unconscious body.

To be continued...