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Safe and Sound

by Paul L. Mathews

Part Two

The Hunter

The dwindling light outside offered scant relief from the darkness inside the library, and Tatiana and Boyd had to resort to using their torches. Having crept in through the open doors, they stood in a small foyer, dank and dark. The air was stale and tasted of mould. Utter silence reigned. There were no skeletons, only what once must have been austere desks and coral walls lined with tall, abstract sculptures—all buried under dust and a network of thick, brooding web.

White and stringy, the strands were everywhere. It wasn't tightly woven, and the gaps were more than big enough to step through, but Tatiana could see it tremble ever so slightly in response to even the smallest of noises. "There's loads of it," she said as she reached out to touch the web.

"Tatiana..." Boyd lurched toward her, "...don't tou—"

Too late. "It's sticky!" She tried to pry her fingers away, but they were stuck fast.

Boyd heaved an agitated sigh. "Here..." Reaching into one of his utility pouches, he produced a tiny aerosol with which he sprayed her finger tips. "Now don't touch anything else!"

"Okay." Tatiana eyed him warily as the small aerosol dissolving the web on contact.

"You'd best keep it," he said, placing it in her hand. He clearly wasn't convinced she could keep her promise.

She took it from him and popped into her jacket pocket.

"What did Ivan say this planet was called again?" Boyd's voice was hushed as he eyed the assorted web strands warily.

"Parlour." Tatiana replied, just as quietly.

He laughed. It was a humourless and empty laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"Said the spider to the fly?"

What's he on about? "No, sorry, I don't follow you?"

“Never mind,” he said before changing the subject, gesturing at one of the three pistols on his belt—a small, manageable number. “Want one?”

“Are you joking?” she asked, shocked. “If Uncle Ivan found out...”

“Ivan’ll never know,”

Tatiana stopped to look at him reproachfully, raising an eyebrow. “Won’t know? Ivan?”

“Good point.” Boyd underlined her unease by drawing his big revolver and checking the chamber, spinning and replacing it with a deft flick of his wrist. “I don’t like this, Princess,” he said, raising the weapon parallel with his head as he looked about. “Big webs generally mean big spiders. We should get back to the shuttle.”

“Yeah... Maybe...” Her voice tailed off, and then she and Boyd turned to face each other, brows furrowed in confusion.

“What’s that smell?” they asked each other, simultaneously.

It had assailed her senses from out of nowhere—a thick, dense scent that tickled the skin and filled the nostrils

“Satsumas and pine,” Boyd said. “Reminds me of Christmas.”

“Really? Tatiana frowned. *What’s going on here?* she wondered. *That smells nothing like satsumas and pine...* She closed her eyes and felt herself sway a little. *I feel sorta... sleepy. Everything seems to be swimming a little. What is that smell?*

Her eyes snapped open.

Father’s cologne! It smells of Father’s cologne! “We can’t go back,” she said. There was an urgency in her voice that matched the way she grabbed Boyd’s arm, gripping hard. “We’ve got to keep going.”

Is he here? Her mind raced, trying to imagine a scenario—*any* scenario—that would make it possible.

“I’m... not sure, Princess.” The hollowness in Boyd’s tone betrayed his uncertainty though, and she could see the way he peered into the semi-darkness, scanning, as if he too were looking for something. Did he, too, feel the same compulsion to push on?

“Boyd,” she said in a tiny voice. “Please?”

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The further they penetrated the convoluted confines of the library, the stronger the scent and the weaker the light. Eventually only their torches exorcised the pitch darkness.

As they systematically moved from room to room, each choked with books, dust and web, Tatiana noted that Boyd hadn’t looked twice at the tomes, and there were a lot of them to see.

Tatiana hadn't either. *Books from a world without trees?* she'd thought when they'd first approached the building. *They've got to be kinda rare. Maybe we should keep a few to sell—we're gonna need the money for supplies, after all.*

Such mercenary speculations were now forgotten.

“Big webs mean big spiders,” Boyd had said, and Tatiana had to admit the thought unsettled her. That, and the dark. “The Dark's only good for one thing, *Tzarina*,” Father had once told her. “Hiding monsters.”

The thought of her Father—the chance he might be here—made her ignore the dark and her primal fears. That and the slightly light-headed, intoxicated feeling that was starting to possess her the further they went into the library. *This can't be good*, she kept telling herself. *Why do I feel so... stupefied?* She looked at Boyd, and the vaguely glazed look to his eyes told her he was feeling the same. *No, this can't be good. But I don't care. That smell...*

They pushed on regardless, incited and invited by the scent that stroked their skin like a prospective lover.

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It scuttled through the library on spindly legs. The intruders were close now, it realised. They were close to its food.

It had to stop them.

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Tatiana and Boyd reached the end of a long corridor. They found an old door. It was heavy, rough and made—as ever—of coral.

God, Tatiana thought. *The scent. It's so strong here. It... I'm sure I can even feel it on my skin.* She moved the torch beam about. It highlighted a haze of liquid that hung in the air. *Something's not right about this. Father's cologne was never this strong. I'm nearly choking on it*

Boyd braced his pistol in both hands and glanced at Tatiana before kicking the door open. Tatiana, her thread-bare nerves finally tearing, shouted out in a combination of shock and fear as she looked into the room. Hidden in shadow was a selection of bodies, clutched possessively by cocoons and webs.

“Oh, God,” Tatiana said, hand going over her mouth. *Oh, God, please. Please—not Father! Anybody but him...* Then she shined the torch upon them. They were amphibious, with bald, cranial heads, gawping eyes and slack, gaping mouths. Tatiana guessed they were once native to the city—but now, from what little she could see, they were little more than half-eaten meals in a silken pantry.

The sight of the part-devoured cadavers, and the relief that none of them were Father, made her feel nauseous. Still covering her mouth, the other hand went to her mouth. “I think I'm going to be sick, Boyd,” she said, bile rising in her throat.

“Shhhhhush,” a gentle, feminine voice behind them chastised. “This is a *library*...”

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The distorted beasts below had been forced to slow down, their rate of ascent stalled as they neared the upper echelons of the towers.

Even now, as the city above fell into dusk, the insipid sun gently sliding into the boundless ocean, the light was still too strong and the pain too great for eyes so used to countless years in the depths.

Impatient and frustrated, they came to a halt. Slowly their numbers swelled as those behind caught up, until the side of the towers were swathed in an oily mass of limbs, mandibles and black eyes. Fights broke out, and the less fortunate squealed as they were butchered, subsumed by a fervent swell of bloodlust and hunger.

The mass bubbled and shifted, waiting for the sun to go down.

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Boyd stared at the creature, his eyes narrowed. “Who are you?” he said, his pistol raised and pointed straight at the alien’s head.

Tatiana looked from the creature, to Boyd, and back again. The creature didn’t respond. She merely stared at them both. Clothed in delicate white silk she was humanoid and totally hairless. *She’s pretty, in a sorta... alien way*, Tatiana thought. *She reminds me of Shona*. The similarity between the creature and the friend she’d left behind—without having the chance to say goodbye—struck her very distinctly. *I wonder... I wonder if this girl will be my friend too?*

Tatiana glanced at Boyd, and—despite the fact he had his gun squarely levelled at the creature’s head—she could see he was a little unsure of what to do next. It was obvious the scent that had so intoxicated them emanated from this creature—the light from Tatiana’s torch highlighted a viscous sheen on her skin that the Princess assumed was responsible—but the alien didn’t look like the least bit threatening. She was just looked at them in a way that seemed combined curiosity and perhaps a little anger at their intrusion into her home.

Boyd’s finger was twitching on the trigger. “*I said...*” now he shifted his stance, raising his other hand to steady his pistol, “... who *are* you?” There was no response.

Father’s cologne, Tatiana thought. Her nostrils flared as the scent became heavier. *The smell’s so much stronger*. She asked carefully: “Do you understand us?” The creature blinked its big white eyes in silence.

“Do you *understand?*” Boyd’s arms were definitely trembling now as if he was struggling to hold up a great weight.

The creature blinked again, turning her head slightly to stare at Boyd. “Portia,” she said. “My name is Portia.”

Boyd narrowed his eyes. “Okay, *Portia*, what are you doing here?”

She held his gaze. “I live here.”

“And are those creatures in there yours?” He jerked his thumb toward the captives beyond the coral door, his tone matter-of-fact as if he saw this kind of thing everyday.

“Yes. I store them there for food.”

Food? Tatiana reflected on this for a second, glancing at Boyd. *That’s kinda... gross.* The thought faded away, however, as she thought: *God, she even sounds like Shona!*

Portia suddenly looked at Tatiana and smiled broadly, the way you’d smile at an old friend...

...And Tatiana smiled back.

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The setting of the sun was inexorable, and as the shadows lengthened about the city, so did they swell, thick with the twinkling of eyes and the twitching of limbs.

Slowly, cooly, the darkness grew, and the shadows fell upon the stairs of the library, and—across the city—the shuttle Tatiana and Boyd had left behind.

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Boyd glared at the arachnid. Tatiana watched him closely, wondering what was going through his head. *Does he want to shoot her? Be her friend? Does she remind him of Shona as well?* And now the cologne scent was increasing. Boyd shuffled, blinked, as though affected too.

“How...” He spoke between gritted teeth, his brow furrowed in an effort to focus attention. “How did you get here?” Was he, Tatiana wondered, as light-headed as she felt?

“I’m... I’m not sure,” Portia said, smiling broadly at him. It was Shona’s smile.

“Not sure?” Tatiana said.

“I think I remember landing here, a long time ago, with my sisters. I was very young. I grew up here, in the city’s sewers. It’s all I know, all I’ve ever known.”

Portia had moved closer to Tatiana now, staring all the while at Boyd’s gun. *Is she trying to get into striking distance? Tatiana wondered. Or is she just trying to gauge if we’re a threat, if she can get to me before Boyd shoots? No—that doesn’t make sense. Shona would never do that.*

“And were the people here already dead?” said Boyd, blinking rapidly, as though his eyes stung.

“Um, no. But I remember them going mad and starting to kill each other.”

“They killed each other? Why?” Tatiana said.

“I’m not sure. I only know what I’ve read—accounts of the last days of their civilisation recorded by scholars.” Portia smiled at Tatiana again. “The population started mutating, changing. They transformed into strange, blood-hungry creatures that tore each other apart.”

That was horrible. “Do you know why?” Tatiana asked.

“I don’t.” Portia shrugged. “No one knows. All I do know is that what’s left of the populace is a mass of mutated savages.”

“So you and the folks just moved in here and started picking up the scraps, right?” Boyd said.

Portia didn’t answer. She looked down at her feet with an air of embarrassment, declining to answer.

“And where’s the rest of your family?” Tatiana said.

Portia’s body seemed to sag a little. “They’re gone now,” she said, her voice lowering an octave, “and I’m all that’s left...”

Tatiana’s expression softened. *Poor kid. She looks so lonely.* “You mean... You mean you’re alone here? All your sisters are dead?”

“Yes,” Portia said quietly as she turned those big white eyes on Tatiana, “I’m trapped here. All alone.”

“So why live in a library?” Boyd said.

“I like to read,” she said with another shrug.

The impact on Boyd was visible, the aggression draining from his face.

“And how did you get here?” Portia asked, smiling at Tatiana again.

The shuttle! Tatiana thought. *We left it unguarded!* Tatiana turned to Boyd. “D’ya think we should get back to the shuttle?”

He couldn’t answer straight away. He was clearly having trouble concentrating, his eyes lacking in focus and his expression neutral. “Aye,” he said. Tatiana could see it took some time for her question to percolate through his fogged up senses. “C’mon,” he said, tearing his gaze away from Portia. “Let’s go.”

“Go where?” Portia’s eyes became narrow and astute.

“Our shuttle—“

“You have a shuttle?” Just for a fraction of a second, Tatiana felt the scent slacken off and dissipate, as if the creature’s concentration was broken.

“Yeah,” Tatiana said with a smile.

There was lull, and Portia studied Tatiana as though mulling over this new information. Then, “Well, I’d get out of here, if I were you,” she said. “The mutants only come up to the city when the sun goes down. If they know you’re here...”

“I agree,” Boyd said, finally succumbing to the weight of his gun and lowering it as he grabbed Tatiana’s arm with his free hand. “We need to go.”

Tatiana hesitated, drawing away from Boyd and glancing back at Portia. *The scent. It's changed.* It seemed lighter now. Fresh and invigorating. *I don't seem so sleepy, somehow. In fact, I feel kinda good.* "Okay," she said. "But we're taking Portia with us."

Boyd blinked, looking at Portia and Tatiana in turn. Portia smiled sweetly at him. "We are?" he said.

"Yes."

"But we..." Boyd's words stumbled to a halt and Tatiana felt the scent becoming even more vivid, even more captivating. "But we don't know anything about her," he said, staggering through the words like a drunkard. "She could be some sort of threat. It's my job to keep you safe—"

"Safe from who? Her?" Tatiana laughed, gesturing at Portia. "She's what? Five foot and seven stone sopping wet. She's no threat, Boyd."

Boyd looked from Tatiana to Portia. His eyes were heavy-lidded and soporific. "Right, fine," he said.

Portia smiled.

Such a nice smile, Tatiana thought, absently. *So much like Shona's.*

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From out of the library Boyd, Tatiana and Portia fled into the encroaching night, the towers, palisades and bridges all about them falling into darkness as the sun finally drowned beneath the waves of the horizon.

With only a few automated street lights left working, and only a half-moon to show the way, the city was dark and foreboding, and what moonlight there was struggled to fight a way through the imperial skyline. Tatiana's torch beam thrashed through the darkness as they ran headlong back toward the shuttle.

"How far?" she asked Boyd, her breathing even and steady.

"About two more blocks," Boyd said, gasping. He wasn't as young as he used to be.

Portia, for her part, kept perfect pace, her eyes alert and probing.

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Rasping heavily now, sweat collecting on his weathered brow, Boyd signalled to Tatiana to turn off her torch as the three of them pressed themselves to the side of a tower, hidden in the shadows.

Before them sat the shuttle, its running lights blinking rhythmically as it sat awaiting their return. The doors still shut, the interior lights still dimmed, it looked undisturbed. The park itself was relatively well lit by moonlight, and they saw no sign of life.

"Okay," Boyd said, turning back to Tatiana, "We make a run for it. Me first, then you."

“And me?” Portia said.

Boyd turned to look at her. “Um, I guess you come last,” he said, stumbling over the words.

Tatiana looked at Portia. *This... this doesn't make sense. Suddenly she doesn't look so much like Shona. She just looks kinda bland and ordinary. Why have we brought her again?* She breathed in the fresh-air, the scent so thin in the open it barely pricked her senses.

“Take this,” Boyd said. He tried to press a gun into her hand.

“No, Boyd!” she said, pulling away. “You know Ivan doesn't—”

“Ivan'll never kn... Oh, never mind.” Without fanfare or flourish, Boyd drew another revolver, brandishing the two weapons with professional ease. “Well Princess, you might have balls like grapefruits,” he said, “but I'm a coward, an' my courage is measured in rounds-per-minute. Now let's go”

They set off, sprinting, Tatiana's stolen treasures and Boyd's kit chattering in the silence.

They'd only crossed about half the distance to the shuttle, rushing headlong across the open park, before it all began to go wrong. Tatiana had been warily taking in the surroundings and she realised just how exposed they were right now. Suddenly, the sound of gunfire and the sensation of her armoured car overturning echoed from her past. *This is a perfect spot for an ambush*, she realised

Sure enough, she was right.

Creatures emerged from the towers above, spilling onto the park periphery like rising sewage. A tide of indistinct shapes, cloaked in the darkness, they were wave upon wave of black, asymmetrical bodies and hungry, staring eyes. Silent and swift, they closed in with alien speed.

“Get to the shuttle!” Boyd shouted as he levelled his guns.

It's no use, Tatiana realised even as he opened fire. *It's all over...*

To be continued...