

Safe and Sound

by Paul L. Mathews

Part Four

The Fly

Boyd awoke with a start and a small shout. Dazed and confused, he struggled, only to realise he held fast, arms pinned to his side, he looked down as best he could, the movement of his neck limited by a cocoon that covered his body. Whatever it was made of, it was clearly strong and sticky, his attempts to free himself proved fruitless

He stopped, eyes narrowing as they began to adjust to the lack of light, and it soon became all too apparent where he was—he'd recognise those cocooned bodies anywhere.

Oh, great, he thought. I'm back in the bloody library with all the other half-eaten ready meals. "Then am I a happy fly..." he muttered, quoting his favourite poet whilst closing his eyes in resignation.

The last he remembered was being held aloft by a black, besieging mass, and then he'd been thrown from the park into the plummet beyond. He'd screamed, convinced that was it—he was dead. But then he had the briefest sensation of something hitting him in the back, between the shoulder blades, something sticky and strong that arrested his fall and then he'd woken up here. Christ knew how long he'd been unconscious.

Then he heard a scuttling sound, like that of many legs on wood, and his skin crawled. He craned to his neck to look above him, and his blood ran cold as he caught the briefest impression of something moving swiftly across the ceiling—something white and arachnid.

Despite years as a soldier of fortune and gun-for-hire, Boyd was still only human, and he still had a human's primal fears. His mind screamed as he shuddered and began to struggle with renewed vigour.

Then the darkness spoke in a whisper. "You shouldn't struggle so," it said. Moments later Portia was beside him, suspended upside down from a strand of silk. She was close, very close, and Boyd was convinced her head was changing shape as she appeared, like water boiling in slow motion reverse.

"Portia," Boyd said in a low growl, his distrust of this creature helping him regain focus, "I knew we couldn't trust you." It was difficult to decipher the way she was looking at him. Eyes narrowed, head cocked to one side and mouth stretched into a thin line, she seemed to be trying to assess her captive.

"That's not true," she said after a long pause. "I followed you. I saved you. I saw you being thrown from the park by those creatures. I caught you. I brought you back here."

"All the way back to your pantry? Oh, well, that's just great."

Again she didn't reply straight away, but merely looked him in the same way she'd assessed both he and Tatiana the first time they'd met.

Wait a minute? he thought. What's that smell? Oranges and lemons?

"You're safe here," Portia said, her voice earnest, forthright. "The mutants never come here. They're too afraid of me."

She smiled again, and Boyd found himself captivated. *She really did look a lot like Tatiana.*

Wait a minute! Tatiana! he thought. I've got to help her! Those creatures! They might have her! He renewed his struggle against the cocoon, heaving against it. "Let me out of here!" he shouted. "If you want to help me, what's with the bloody cocoon?"

"There's a lotion on the silk—a medicine. You absorb it through the skin and it makes you strong again, healthy—"

"Well, Doctor Portia, any chance you can discharge me? Only, I've an appointment to keep, and as comfy as Charlotte's Web is—"

Portia sneered and lunging forward, mouth open and teeth glinting as she went for his throat.

He cried out again in reflex, eyes squeezed shut as he expected her to ravage his neck, but her open mouth merely bit at the collar of the cocoon, and within moments, she tore it from him with nimble fingers and strong arms. Naked, he fell a good few feet to the floor.

"Oops! Sorry!" Portia called down as Boyd swore at her. He wasn't sure she was being sincere.

He rubbed his head and closed his eyes for a short moment. When he opened them again, she was stood beside him once again in uncomfortable proximity, smiling. He took a moment to look at her. Why had Tatiana said Portia was only five foot tall? Boyd Wondered. She was easily a six footer—and regal with it. Just like Tatiana. She smelt good as well. Like fresh pine and satumas—the smell from Boyd's fondest remembrance of a childhood. His head became cloudy and dull, and his senses seemed sluggish and drunken.

That smell. It reminded him of the Christmas he got an Action Man and the *Lord of the Rings* books.

He squeezed his eyes shut again, forcing himself to focus. No, Boyd! he told himself. Think! What do you need to do? Rescue Tatiana. Now. And what do you need to rescue her?

"Clothes? Guns?" Boyd said, tearing his mind back to the present as best he could. Acutely aware of his nakedness, he was suddenly uncomfortable with the thought of being undressed by this... thing.

Portia took his hand. "This way." Her skin felt smooth and warm. He felt her squeeze, betraying an alien strength. "You get dressed, and then we find Tatiana."

He stopped. "You know where she is?"

"Of course I know. I've hunted in this city for years."

"And you'll help me find her?"

"Of course," Portia smiled. "Tatiana's my friend. My only friend."

Something about that unsettled Boyd. Friend? She'd known Tatiana, what? Five minutes?

"So you help me find her, what do you get out of it?"

"I help you save Tatiana, and you take me with you, on your shuttle." Portia said. Every bit as feisty as Tatiana, she was glaring at him, chin stuck out in defiance.

"Why should I trust you?"

“Why shouldn’t you? I help you save Tatiana and I get off this horrid planet. It’s a simple enough deal.”

Again that smell of pines and satsumas. He closed his eyes and breathed in the heady scent.

He hadn’t even taken the Action Man out of the box, he ruminated, mind wandering again, but he read those books to death—as best he could... He opened his eyes again. Now fully adjusted to the darkness, he could see the shelves that lined the walls with greater clarity.

“But... all these books. Why do you want to leave?”

“Because I’ve read them. All of them. Ten times over. And I’m lonely. And I’m sick of eating fish.”

“Okay, okay, I believe you.” He suddenly felt a little mean spirited. Poor kid. It must have been hard stuck here all these years on her own. He tried to think of Tatiana in a similar situation, but found the concept unbearable. “Okay, let’s go find Tatiana.”

She turned to look at him, her pretty face breaking out into a bright smile, and then she scampered off, running like an excited kid. “Follow me, then!”

He set off after her.

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Tatiana started to mewl like a baby. Boyd. She’d left him. The same way she’d left Matinee. And her own parents. “Father.” Her voice was thick with distress and tears. “Father—please help me...”

She was in pain. She was lying on something metal and sharp. The shuttle’s ceiling.

The shuttle. Why is it upside down? She remembered trying to get it out of the city, only to hit something. Then blackness.

She opened her eyes. It was cold, and the darkness was punctuated only by the epileptic static of dead monitors and the sparks from severed cables as they writhed and hissed.

Her breath shortened and her ice ran cold. She hated the dark. She always had. She tried to get up. She had to get out of there. She had to get back to the Troika. Maybe even find Boyd. Her hands slipped on something sticky and she slumped down again, lapsing into unconsciousness.

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Boyd and Portia tore hell-for-leather through hidden gutters and sewage pipes which bore them swiftly into the bowels of the city. In complete contrast to the faded beauty of the spires above, this place was born ugly. Like Blake’s dark and satanic mills, the bowels of the city were just a congested and claustrophobic mess of ugly, windowless industrial units.

Featureless and purely functional, they were built into the gargantuan foundations of the mammoth city’s towers. The pedestrian gantries and walkways were choked with trash and flooded with stagnant, foul water that stank of shit. The only sound was the incessant pissing of condensation.

It was awful down here. Worse than anything Boyd had ever seen before. Even Vettel Alpha. God only knew how Tatiana was coping—if she was still...

He pushed the morbid notion out of his mind and forced his attention back to Portia. She seemed to be indefatigable, showing no signs of physical stress or strain as she eagerly bade Boyd follow her. For his part, the Scotsman wheezed and sweated and cursed as he pushed onward, pushed beyond the limits of his fading fitness to reach Tatiana.

“Hurry up!” Portia said. “Those mutants are bound to find the shuttle. We’ve to get there first.”

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Tatiana’s eyes flickered open. What was that noise?

It was a scratching noise, like bone on metal. No—not bone. Enamel. Teeth. Claws. Fangs. Her skin crawled, and she began to grope about in the dark, fingers flitting across the deck like a blind-man would read brail. Where was that damned torch!

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“We’re close now,” whispered Portia, crouching low as she pointed even further down into the darkness below. “Tatiana will be down there. Another few storeys.”

“Another few storeys...” wheezed Boyd as he propped himself up against a dirty wall. “Is that all? Oh, good...”

“Quickly,” Portia said as she grabbed Boyd’s arm. “We can’t stop now.”

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Tatiana finally found the torch, and—with trembling fingers—clicked it on.

The beam fell upon the face that peered in through the smashed bulkhead.

Tatiana screamed.

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The sound of the scream lunged out of the darkness, stabbing at Boyd. “That’s her. That’s Tatiana!” he said.

“Quickly! *Quickly!*” Portia said. “They’ve found her!”

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The creature drew back, shrieking as the torch beam hurt its eyes.

Tatiana scrambled back as best she could, the traction impaired by her own blood beneath her fingers and feet.

“Oh... Oh, God!” she said. “Oh, God!”

Then it was back, bursting in through the ruined bulkhead in a burst of savage speed.

Once it might have been bipedal and straight, but now it was an irregular, bent amalgamation of the city’s amphibious natives, and a black, hairy spider. Legs, hairs, mandibles and staring, lidless eyes sprouted out of its body, and it moved with an arachnid speed and intent.

It fell upon the weakened Tatiana, and she screamed again, hands going over her bloodied eyes.

To be continued...

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